

**'SO I SING FOR MY KEEP':
J.M. COETZEE AND CONFESSIONAL NARRATIVE**

MARIA MICHELLE KELLY

PHD

THE UNIVERSITY OF YORK

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH & RELATED LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

The thesis traces Coetzee's career-long interest in confessional narrative in order to deepen and expand understanding of the scope of his engagement with the form. This involves mapping the reach of his engagement with confession across his career as writer, translator and teacher, and drawing on previously unexplored archive material from the National English Literary Museum in Grahamstown, South Africa. In a series of chapters which cover his writing up to the autobiographical volumes *Boyhood* and *Youth*, as well as the recent *Diary of a Bad Year*, the thesis explores Coetzee's relationship to the literary history within which he self-consciously positions himself, the extent to which his relationship to the context in which he was writing is mediated through confessional narrative, and the intimate connection between the dynamics of confession and the writing process itself.

The thesis argues that there is a fundamental discontinuity in Coetzee's thinking on confession as the conditions, rituals, forms, genres and conventions through which confession must proceed – and which he describes and stages in great detail in his essays, fiction and memoirs – cannot by definition deliver the truth and absolution that is the ideal end for all confession. Instead, we have repeated and varied attempts to stage successful confessions or indeed to make successful confessions, almost all of which fail.

Confessional narrative is normally taken to represent a potentially shameful truth avowed in the presence of another person which will lead to absolution, forgiveness or transformation – and it represents all of these things in Coetzee. However, the desire for successful confession also lends itself to a goal-oriented, instrumental narrative that is characterised by self-interest. This is irreconcilable with the secular versions of absolution and forgiveness which Coetzee describes in terms of grace and which seem to indicate an ethical orientation toward the other. So while confession is described as part of a teleology leading from transgression to absolution, there is a fundamental discontinuity in this teleology suggesting that the desire or will for truth cannot in itself lead to a successful confession.

This discontinuity resonates with the reconception of speech act theory that takes place across a range of texts by Jacques Derrida. In 'Composing *Circumfession*,' Derrida admits that while he had always been sceptical about the processes of speech act theory, his interest in the field emerged from a belief that performative speech acts can produce events. But his parallel thinking on the aneconomic gift is a reconception of this model, to the extent that confession shifts from being emblematic of a certain kind of performative utterance to being structured along the lines of the gift – with the aleatory, contingent qualities that this implies. But if the event of a successful confession cannot by definition be brought about by the conditions governing performative utterances, similar to the discontinuity in Coetzee's thinking on confession, the rituals of confession – the avowal of responsibility and expression of remorse – remain the only way to prepare oneself and open oneself to the possibility of the event.

This discontinuity translates in Coetzee's fiction into a desire for forgiveness and transformation enacted through repeated willed encounters with marginalised figures, which are very often failed confessions. These repeated, failed transformations indicate the desire for truth, absolution and forgiveness – the end of the episode of confession – but also the inadequacy or the disingenuousness of the

desire for truth in the face of powerful competing interests. This has particular repercussions for Coetzee the writer: if confession is inherently self-interested, then it brings his interests as a writer into direct conflict with the seemingly ethical demands of the confession.

Few places have experienced the need for performative speech acts to produce events more keenly than South Africa and the urgency of this need informs Coetzee's engagement with confession – both the desire for truth and absolution and the scepticism about this desire that is evident in his work. The thesis traces the way in which Coetzee's engagement with confession responds to the changing demands of this context. It describes Coetzee's influential 1985 essay 'Confession and Double Thoughts' as an 'interregnum' text and its teleology of confession as an attempt to navigate through the constraints of a current crisis to the promise of an imagined future; its scepticism reflects the difficulties of such a task. But in the post-apartheid context, when 'transformation' is a matter of government policy, attempts to engineer reconciliation by limiting the scope of what justice is available – while continuous with the always instrumental bent of confessional discourse – are the focus of critique by Coetzee.

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INTRODUCTION

Approaching “the idea of the truth”: Coetzee and Confession

I

In the closing interview of *Doubling the Point*, J. M. Coetzee describes his 1985 essay ‘Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky’¹ as ‘pivotal’ insofar as it marks ‘the beginning of a more broadly philosophical engagement with a situation in the world’ (394). Suggesting that the essay be read alongside *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), Coetzee comments:

The novel asks the question: Why does one choose the side of justice when it is not in one’s material interest to do so? The Magistrate gives the rather Platonic answer: because we are born with the idea of justice. The essay, if only implicitly, asks the question: Why should I be interested in the truth about myself when the truth may not be in my interest? To which, I suppose, I continue to give a Platonic answer: because we are born with the idea of the truth. (394-95)

In setting transcendent notions of justice and truth against self-interest, Coetzee is pointing to a certain idealism in his work. Yet in spite of the rhetoric of conversion evident in the above comments, Coetzee’s idealism, such as it is, is not underpinned by the illumination of the converted self. In the interview, the opposing positions are identified with Tikhon and Stavrogin, confessor and confessant in the excluded chapter of Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed*, which is central to ‘Double Thoughts.’² As

¹ From here I will refer to the essay as ‘Double Thoughts’ and to *Doubling the Point* as *Doubling*. I will also abbreviate the titles of some of the novels, referring to *In the Heart of the Country* as *Heart*, *Waiting for the Barbarians* as *Barbarians*, *Life & Times of Michael K* as *Michael K*, *The Master of Petersburg* as *Petersburg* and *Diary of a Bad Year* as *Diary*.

² I follow Coetzee in using the term *confessor* for the person hearing the confession and *confessant* for the person confessing.

Coetzee sees it: 'One is a person I desired to be and was feeling my way toward. The other is more shadowy: let us call him the person I then was, though he may be the person I still am' (392). In other words, though 'pivotal,' the essay is not quite *transformative*. The route from cynicism to grace, to use the terms that he associates with Stavrogin and Tikhon respectively, is not a direct one.

Considered in its Christian context, grace may be associated with the authority and finality of divine intervention, but the relationship that Coetzee describes between cynicism and grace in this essay and, implicitly, in his work, is not subject to conversion or transformation, neither position can be spoken of with certainty or authority and the dialogue set in motion between them has no obvious endpoint. Following Coetzee's lead, critics have taken up these terms in their reading of his fiction, pointing to the terminal scepticism of his attitude to confessional narrative, for example, or to the way in which grace comes to act in his novels. But few manage to account for the uneasy and uneven dialogue between the two. To be more precise, while critics have retained the concept of grace as the ideal end of confession, to the extent that this teleology has come to structure their understanding of Coetzee's fiction more generally, they cannot and have not attempted to account for his simultaneous and persisting interest in the form and conventions of the confessional narrative itself. This thesis is an attempt to do so by describing the relationship between cynicism and grace, or confession and absolution, in terms of a fundamental discontinuity. The relationship between the terms, I will argue, is not transformative, but iterative, and I will show how this is played out time and again in Coetzee's repeated staging of and acts of confession across the *oeuvre*.

II

According to the interview cited above, the dialogue initiated in 'Double Thoughts' between cynicism and grace, or Stavrogin and Tikhon, is an ongoing one. The debate is over the existence and availability of truth to the autobiographical or confessing subject. According to the position identified with Stavrogin: 'the only sure truth in autobiography is that one's self-interest will be located at one's blind spot' (392). The position associated with Tikhon is closer to 'the idea of the truth' mentioned above but, crucially, stands for the *availability* of that truth. Coetzee comes to define this position as 'Grace: a condition in which the truth can be told clearly, without blindness' (392).

The 'double thought' of the title which Coetzee takes from Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, and which he further describes as the 'doubling back of thought,' the characteristic motion of self-consciousness, captures the paradoxical coexistence of these two positions as it describes the simultaneous desire for truth and doubt about the stability of any one truth that he finds in the texts by Tolstoy, Rousseau and Dostoevsky, and which also characterises the essay. As the essay is devoted almost entirely to exposing the self-interest that lies between the desire for truth and the achievement of it, such that the truth comes to seem unattainable through confessional narrative, it is more readily identifiable with the scepticism of Stavrogin than the grace of Tikhon. This has led most critics to conclude that Coetzee's attitude to confessional narrative is marked by scepticism alone.³ Indeed, it would appear that the essay's only concession to the position represented by Tikhon is that it undertakes such an analysis in the first place. But in this way the position of Tikhon, like the idea

³ Among the critics who find Coetzee's engagement with confession marked by scepticism are Boehmer, Hayes, Lawlan and Sanders.

of the truth, functions as a kind of horizon of possibility in the essay, a position towards which one might strive, aware that one cannot reach this position through will alone, and which must finally remain unarticulated so that, unlike so many of the other limits described in the essay, it cannot be taken into account in the calculations of rational self-interest that motivate the exploration of truth. Of course, the limit against which the position of Tikhon can be brought into focus is the Christian faith of his creator, Dostoevsky, but Coetzee's insistence on the secular nature of his inquiry in the essay, and in the encounter between Tikhon and Stavrogin in particular, means that Tikhon becomes a more powerfully symbolic figure than even Dostoevsky would allow.⁴

In the terms of the essay, the horizon offered by Tikhon, and by confession, is not just identified with truth but with absolution. 'Double Thoughts' sets up confession as part of a teleology, one element of the sequence 'transgression, confession, penitence, and absolution' (251). The question that Coetzee poses in the essay, and in its earlier incarnation as 'Truth in Autobiography,' his inaugural lecture at the University of Cape Town, is how to tell the truth in autobiography. But in the context of this teleology, the question is gradually reframed as a question about completion: how does one emerge from confession to the true end of confession, which is absolution. Absolution, of course, belongs to a religious register, but it is refigured in 'Double Thoughts' in a secular and, indeed, literary context: 'Absolution means the end of the episode, the closing of the chapter, liberation from the oppression of the memory. Absolution in this sense is the indispensable goal of all

⁴ In the essay Coetzee claims: 'Dostoevsky takes his next, and last, steps in the exploration of the limits of secular confession in *The Possessed* (1871-72)' (287). This might explain the omission of *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov* from the essay, as confession in these novels is arguably no longer secular.

confession, sacramental or secular' (252). This is described in more secular terms towards the end of the essay as self-forgiveness, which also means 'the closing of the chapter, the end of the downward spiral of self-accusation whose depths can never be plumbed' (290).

The position represented by Tikhon, the possibility of self-forgiveness, is as close as one gets to the secular equivalent of absolution sought in 'Double Thoughts.' For this reason, he is usually thought of as resolving the problem of the end of confession, albeit without prescription or explanation. His significance is as an interlocutor, but while the reader of 'Stavrogin's Confession' is privy to their encounter, the precise mechanism which allows the confession to come to a close for so cynical and self-interested a confessant as Stavrogin remains mysterious. Indeed, this is the crucial point: if absolution is only available through grace (represented by Tikhon), then it is not reducible to or achievable by prescription, calculation or will. Grace, as defined by the OED, is 'a matter of favour not of right.' But if absolution is 'the indispensable goal of all confession,' then the horizon offered by Tikhon – the possibility of absolution and self-forgiveness, the end of the episode – is the condition of possibility for all confessional narrative. It is a limit which offers not just an end to confession but which allows the search for truth to begin, that is to say, it allows writing to begin – even if it necessarily leaves the question of the ending in abeyance.

To the extent that absolution, grace or Tikhon offer a kind of illimitable limit, they provide an unspoken and unknowable horizon that gives meaning and *purpose* to confessional narrative. But while this provides a *goal* for confessional narrative, the act of confessing does not necessarily achieve it. Indeed, its orientation towards this goal is potentially an obstacle to successful confession, structuring the confession to achieve the goal of absolution. Coetzee's analysis of the fictional and

autobiographical confessions in the essay points to various conventions and conditions which have evolved in an attempt to guarantee the truthfulness and hence the completion of the confession.

Rousseau's *Confessions* open with an attempt to guarantee their truth: 'I am commencing an undertaking, hitherto without precedent, and which will never find an imitator. I desire to set before my fellows the likeness of a man in all the truth of nature, and that man myself' (3). Rousseau's authority as a confessant rests on his claim to sincerity and authenticity. But most of the confessants discussed in 'Double Thoughts' attempt to put in place a guarantee of truthfulness that does not merely involve taking them at their word; in fact, the guarantees generally take the form of creating conditions that appear to circumvent the self-interestedness of the confession. In Tolstoy, this is evident in the illumination of the converted self in *The Kreutzer Sonata* and the spiritual crisis and conversion of *A Confession*. In Dostoevsky, the absence of an audience functions as a guarantee of truthfulness in *Notes from Underground* and both *The Idiot* and *The Possessed* are marked by attempts to install death itself as the guarantee of truth. And across the range of works by all three authors, the very shamefulness of the transgression confessed – and, significantly, of the confession – presents itself as a guarantee of sincerity. One after another, however, Coetzee finds that these confessions fail to meet the standards they have set down as guarantees of truth, often occasioning more confession, and by the time he reaches *The Possessed*, the final text under discussion, he finds that the attempt to create the conditions in which the truth can be told is a kind of game: 'Stavrogin's confession becomes a game whose essence is that certain limits will not be transgressed, though the contestants will pretend to each other and to themselves

that there are no limits. It is thus a game of deception and self-deception, a game of limited truth. Tikhon ends the game by breaking the rules' (289).

The idea of observing certain limits is not unique to these confessions. Coetzee himself is careful to observe the limits of the kind of analysis he can pursue, rejecting, for example, Paul de Man's claim to find moments of inauthenticity in Rousseau's text, instead pursuing the confessants in the gaps and inconsistencies in their narratives.⁵ As a result, his analysis keeps alive the possibility that, in the absence of such inconsistencies, a confession which observes the conditions that appear to circumvent self-interest might be successful. At the same time, he is adamant that his 'second readings' do not constitute a final 'truth'; rather, his readings serve to undermine the claim to a final truth in the cases in question, itself a devastating critique for those authors and characters whose identity has come to be defined by the authority of their confessions. As he points out: 'the possibility of reading the truth 'behind' a true confession has implications peculiar to the genre of confession' (273).

Interestingly, this statement too is framed in terms of the limits on what a given discourse can know about its own motives. In 'Truth in Autobiography' he questions the presumption of literary criticism itself to tell the truth about literary texts, pointing out that critical discourse cannot afford to fully understand its relationship to literary texts. He concludes that 'all discourses may have secrets, of no great consequence, which they nonetheless cannot afford to reveal' (6). In other words, the primary interest served by confessional narrative might be narrative itself. This includes, in the case of autobiography, texts that proceed beyond what they can, strictly speaking, afford to reveal, but in these cases the principle of risk or excess

⁵ He is referring here to Paul de Man's 'Excuses (*Confessions*)' which I will discuss in chapter one.

enhances the confessional currency, and therefore serves the interest of the narrative. Also, because confession depends on the presence of an interlocutor there is a lot at stake in how confession is read, giving rise to anxieties about reading and being read in the essay and across Coetzee's fictional treatment of confession.

If 'the idea of the truth' and grace, the condition in which it can be told clearly, are at odds with the sceptical questioning of the motives behind the desire for truth that we find in the essay, then Coetzee's observation of certain limits in the pursuit of that truth, underpinned by the suggestion that not all secrets *should* be revealed, represents a further complication of his position on confession. The essay analyses *and enacts* in this analysis precisely the kind of instrumentalism and calculation that is set aside in the operation of grace. True absolution might rely on the unwilled operation of grace in the sacrament of confession, but if it is sought – and in Coetzee's novels it invariably is – then it is through the kind of narrative to which he devotes most of his attention in the confession essay and which he stages time and again in his own work. So while confessional narrative never seems to be capable of producing the ideal end of confession and might not be adequate to certain kinds of truth, Coetzee still devotes his considerable creative resources to staging and restaging the conditions in which confession can supposedly be successfully performed and we also, occasionally, find him negotiating these conditions and limits *in the act of confession*. But this negotiation of conditions and limits goes hand in hand with the suggestion that for confession to take place, certain conditions and limits might have to be transgressed and exceeded.

III

Since the appearance of *Doubling the Point* in 1992, which collects most of Coetzee's early academic writing, including 'Double Thoughts,' and is punctuated by a series of revealing interviews with David Attwell, among them the interview in which he places the confession essay as the (not quite) turning point in his intellectual autobiography, the model of confession that emerges in the essay has increasingly been a lens through which his work has been read. This has resulted in greater attention to the role of confession in Coetzee's fiction, but more frequently has seen critics take the prominent terms of the essay – cynicism and grace, its concern with closure – and read them back into the fiction. This is not to say that critics are in agreement on the significance of the essay. Rather, the discontinuity that I describe at the centre of Coetzee's writing on confession has given rise to distinct approaches to confession in his work: those critics who demonstrate that aspects of the novel in question meet the conditions and limits required for successful confession or those who, accepting the terminal scepticism of Coetzee's attitude to confession, illustrate that grace (and therefore absolution) is available in some other register.

Critical responses to confession in *Age of Iron* are typical in this regard; taking the form of Mrs Curren's letter to her daughter to be delivered by Verceuil after her death, the novel is frequently described in confessional terms. Sheila Collingwood-Whittick takes up Coetzee's chosen definition of confession as 'a motive to tell an essential truth about the self' (252), highlighting Mrs Curren's 'explicit commitment to truth-telling' which is accompanied by 'the author's "underwriting" of the credibility of that intention by placing it within the context of Mrs. Curren's imminent death' ('In the Shadow of Last Things' 44). Dominic Head reiterates the significance of the limit imposed by her imminent death, pointing out that it 'makes self-interest irrelevant' (138-9). But for Head it is the role of Verceuil

as the confessor figure that allows *Age of Iron* to satisfy the requirements of a 'true confession': 'Mrs. Curren's is true *because* it is not directly heard: the truth, the self-knowledge, is produced by Verceuil's uselessness as a confessor and his likely unreliability as a messenger' (140). Michael Neill, on the other hand, proposes that absolution and grace are not achievable through confession but that Mrs Curren's salvation lies in the novel's play with the Christian virtue of charity and particularly with her own ability to experience gratitude, a cognate of grace: 'it is, I think, through a secular version of Calvinist grace that Coetzee imagines Elizabeth Curren's release from the "state of ugliness" and the endless labyrinth of confession without absolution' (34). It is clear that in each case the critics are working within the confessional paradigm outlined in 'Double Thoughts,' and readings of confession in the other novels follow a similar pattern: Dick Penner finds that double thought is transcended in *Barbarians* by the magistrate's 'overriding will to the truth' (38) and Elke D'hoker claims that the end of confession is available through acceptance and authority in *Foe* and the memoirs (37-38).

Notably, most critical discussions of confession in Coetzee's fiction focus on the later novels, in part because in chronological terms they lend themselves more obviously to comparison with the confession essay and in part because in these novels, as Coetzee says of Dostoevsky, 'one can no longer think of confession as a mere expository device: confession itself, with all its attendant psychological, moral, epistemological, and finally metaphysical problems, moves to the centre of the stage' (275). But part of my claim will be that Coetzee's engagement with confessional narrative is in evidence much earlier than this; 'Double Thoughts' is the culmination of years of engagement with confession in translations, teaching, research and writing.

Ironically, given the prominence of confessional models in the later novels, most critics have adopted Coetzee's presumed scepticism towards the form and turned away from confession itself as offering the desired end of closure or completion. This has serious implications for how Coetzee is read. In the case of *Disgrace*, which perhaps amounts to the most exacting critique of confessional narrative in the Coetzee oeuvre, critics point to the novel's concerns with artistic creativity in the form of David Lurie's opera and the care and attention given to dogs as offering the possibility of absolution and closure. Jane Poyner, for example, describes the end of confession in terms of reconciliation and healing and finds that this becomes available through what she calls the novel's 'Wordsworthian ethic' and its engagement with dogs ('Truth and Reconciliation'). Elleke Boehmer finds that the novel offers the possibility of closure and redemption by transcending self-consciousness in acts of 'secular atonement' ('Not Saying Sorry'). But Boehmer's essay is an excellent example of the dangers of absorbing and applying the teleology of confession too closely. The central problem that she addresses becomes the equivalence suggested in the novel between the redemption offered to David Lurie by 'secular atonement' and the physical abjection and humiliation of his daughter Lucy, an equivalence that she finds repeated in their respective refusals to confess and to testify. To my mind the equivalence Boehmer finds is produced by the dominance of the confessional teleology which suggests that Coetzee's novels inevitably tend towards grace. But if grace is to remain a useful concept in reading Coetzee, then it must be as a condition of possibility rather than the logical endpoint of his fiction generally. In *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, Derek Attridge too finds the possibility of grace in *Disgrace*'s concern with creativity and dogs, but grace in this reading emerges in tandem with the novel's critique of instrumentalism. Attridge's

reading of grace suggests that it is not reducible to the reckoning of equivalences that Boehmer finds so problematic: 'It's this experience of finding oneself personally commanded by an inexplicable, unjustifiable, impractical commitment to an idea of the world that has room for the inconvenient, the non-processable, that I'm calling *grace*' (187).⁶ Neill's discussion of confession as 'heart speech' similarly finds the operation of grace in the expression of gratitude. As I have pointed out, Neill's reading is sceptical about the processes of confession itself, but his essay is helpful in foregrounding the recurring relationship in Coetzee's fiction between the desire for successful confession and the desire for a kind of unmediated, pure expression that is also played out in *Disgrace*.⁷

It is clear that insofar as critics have engaged with confession in Coetzee and taken up the model of confession that comes from 'Double Thoughts,' the teleology of confession has been the most influential aspect of that model, whether in emphasising the relentless tendency towards closure or the necessary open-endedness of grace. For this reason, a consideration of confessional narrative in Coetzee can be situated in the context of discussions of temporality in his work. Critics like Rachel Lawlan and Patrick Hayes who are most sceptical about the role of confession in Coetzee's fiction, and about the confession essay in particular, correctly point to the obsession with closure as authoritative, stifling and contrary to values upheld in other aspects of the fiction. Drawing on readings of temporality in Dostoevsky, Lawlan points to the radical contingency and mutability of the human world as opposed to what she describes as the apocalyptic closure of grace (142-43). Hayes, on the other

⁶ The break with economic exchange that I will describe in chapter three creates a space in which something like grace might act.

⁷ See Vermeulen on *Disgrace* in 'Dogged Silences.' I will explore the tensions in this relationship in my analysis of *Youth* in chapter 6.

hand, is dismissive of Coetzee's academic foray into confessional narrative, describing 'Double Thoughts' as 'an essay that seems only to churn old ground' (276). This ground, according to Hayes, is Lukacs's description of the novel as the 'affirmation of a dissonance' (276). But Hayes is interested in Coetzee's challenge to the form of the novel rather than in the distinctiveness of confessional narrative. This is evident in his reading of *Foe*, which seeks to undermine the closure suggested by the teleology of the essay by emphasising the values of 'the novel' that are represented by Susan Barton, whose interests are otherwise sacrificed to the authoritarian Cruso and the immanence of Friday in the closing section (282). But, like Boehmer's essay on *Disgrace*, this risks setting in motion a reckoning of interests and equivalences that is fundamentally at odds with the possibility that grace seems to offer Coetzee.

While these critiques of 'grace' offer a certain freshness to the way 'Double Thoughts' has been read, it is in the work of critics who question the logic of closure and propose more radical temporal models that, paradoxically, the *possibility* offered by the potential closure of grace becomes clearer. In *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, Attwell correctly identifies the problem of the final section of *Foe* with the problem of the end of confession, but his study more generally focuses on Coetzee's radical disorganization of historical time (86).⁸ Attridge, similarly, describing the role of trust in the confessional contract that emerges in *Age of Iron*, notes that trust involves 'a relation to the future that is based on no rational grounds' (98); in other words, this is no ordinary contract. His relation of Derrida's *arrivant* to *The Master of Petersburg* emphasises a similar unconditional openness to the future. And in contrast to those who find only closure in *Disgrace*, Zoe Wicomb and Mark

⁸ References to Attridge and Attwell are to their books on Coetzee, unless specified otherwise.

Sanders note its insistence on repetition and incompleteness ('Translations' and *Ambiguities*).⁹ For Wicomb repetition takes the form of a problematic escalation of violence but Sanders emphasises the necessity of a kind of 'traumatic repetition' (184). This *lack of finality*, I believe, is not contrary to confession but produced by confession.

As is evident in many considerations of confession in psychoanalytic and literary discourses, Sanders points out that a lack of finality is not necessarily something to be celebrated in opposition to the authority of closure: 'an inveterate inveighing against the idea of bringing a chapter to a close may, equally, reveal a guilt-ridden fear of retribution that one would prefer never to have to acknowledge' (184). But against this he says that 'a certain level of traumatic repetition' is 'how human beings wounded in history make their time' (184). While Sanders points to confession as typical of the instrumental uses of language that *Disgrace* sets out to critique, confession could itself be an example of traumatic repetition: a traumatic repetition that is the necessary living-out of a particular kind of history, a repeated search for 'the end of the episode' offered by the possibility of grace, or, as Sanders suggests, a more pathological fear of retribution.

It seems to me that Coetzee's repeated engagement with confession is as alive to the psychic implications of repetition as to the potential self-interestedness of the enterprise. This, after all, is the nature of double thought. My interest in confession in Coetzee is in the relentlessness with which he engages it, notwithstanding its seeming impossibility. By placing his repeated engagement with confession in the context of Jacques Derrida's rethinking of speech act theory and the aneconomic gift – which I will outline in chapter one – I hope to demonstrate that this repetition offers the

⁹ References to Sanders are to *Ambiguities of Witnessing*, unless specified otherwise.

possibility of 'the idea of the truth.' But if confession also occurs in a spirit of risk – as I claim in chapters four and six – this might be the risk of engaging and repeating the psychic history that Sanders describes.

IV

As I have already indicated, the 1985 essay on confession is the fulcrum around which the thesis develops. But the unresolved tensions at the heart of the essay and the incomplete conversion narrative that it gives rise to some years later, mean that the discontinuity that I find characteristic of the essay is evident throughout Coetzee's engagement with confession. My intention is to broaden the discussion of confession in Coetzee beyond the essay, demonstrating that the concerns of the essay emerged from his early engagement with confession in translations and other professional activities. Papers held at the National English Literary Museum in Grahamstown (NELM) are helpful in providing a fuller (albeit still limited) picture of Coetzee's interests as reflected in teaching notes and letters. By describing the essay as an 'interregnum'¹⁰ text I hope to demonstrate the immediate relevance of confessional narrative to the South African context, but also to question the usefulness of the model of confession provided in the essay, with its emphasis on the irresolvable tension between double thought and absolution, to the post-apartheid context. For these reasons the thesis will proceed more or less chronologically through the Coetzee oeuvre. Pairing *Dusklands* and *In the Heart of the Country* allows me to relate the problem of confession to Coetzee's early experiments with literary form. I examine how Coetzee takes up the history of confessional narrative at a very early

¹⁰ 'Interregnum' refers to Nadine Gordimer's use of Gramsci's term in her essay 'Living in the Interregnum,' which I will discuss at greater length in chapter 1.

stage in his writing career by translating Emants' *A Posthumous Confession*, and demonstrate how the confessional genre came to have a strong determining influence on his first two novels. In *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life and Times of Michael K* confession emerges as a response to the respective historical crises staged within the novels, taking the form of a desire for transformation that foreshadows the confessional teleology Coetzee would describe in 1985. In both novels this desired transformation is undermined by the vivid material suffering depicted, particularly the physical suffering that informs judicial confession in *Barbarians*. I will argue that the limitations of transformation as a model emerge alongside an alternative temporality that emphasises the possibility of ethical action in the present. This presents the possibility of a confession unmoored from the determining teleology of transformation. In chapter four, my attention shifts to the relationship between confession and writing as I discuss Coetzee's reinvention of the authorship of Defoe and Dostoevsky in *Foe* and *Petersburg*. I will argue that confession acts as a figure for authorship in both novels, negotiating the boundary between private and public life, and exploring the necessity and the risk of transgressing this boundary. In chapter five I contrast the apparent availability of confession in *Age of Iron* – still an 'interregnum' text – with the drastic critique of confession that emerges in *Disgrace*. In particular, I address the limits and conditions under which the performative speech act of confession can take place, and relate it to the material conditions governing Mrs Curren's confession in the earlier novel, and the limited legal conditions under which confession is possible in *Disgrace*.

While my interest is primarily in Coetzee's fictional staging of confession, his deployment of confessional forms and his engagement with the history of confessional literature, these recurring patterns also clearly invoke the *act* of

confession. As my argument will claim that Coetzee's engagement with confessional narrative is to a significant degree the result of the historical context which has imposed itself so forcefully on his writing life, I am implicitly claiming that engagement with the form of confessional literature is intimately bound up with the act of confession. My final chapter, which discusses Coetzee's 'fictionalized memoirs,' *Boyhood* and *Youth*, brings these concerns together to address the question of whether these texts do more than *stage* the negotiation of the limits and conditions for confession to take place – after all the scepticism and questioning, does Coetzee attempt to confess?

Notably, I omit only *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) and *Slow Man* (2005) from my survey of confession across the Coetzee oeuvre. While many of the issues that I address in my discussion of the other novels are also in evidence here, insofar as they display no explicit engagement with the form of the confessional narrative and move beyond the South African context that I relate to the confessional teleology of the essay, they do not lend themselves to the over-arching framework that I have constructed. On the other hand, *Diary of a Bad Year*, with which I conclude, while not overtly confessional, explicitly engages the structural problems and conditions of confession that Coetzee has been negotiating since his earliest work: the question of speaking in one's own voice in the first person, the problem of reconciling the need for an interlocutor with the compromising presence of an audience, the risk of transgressing the boundary between private and public life in autobiography, and writing in general as a way of positioning oneself between the private and the public.

But I begin with a brief survey of the history of confession and some key interventions in the history of confessional literature in order to position Coetzee's

engagement with the form in terms of literary history and the context in which most of the works under discussion were produced.

CHAPTER ONE

The Limits of Confessional Discourse

I

To confess, according to the OED, is to acknowledge, own or avow – either a crime, fault or weakness, or one's belief that something is the case, an article of faith. This confluence of meanings has its origin in the Roman Catholic Church's Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 which instituted annual auricular confession and laid out a doctrine of orthodox belief for Catholics, accompanied by the establishment of an inquisition to investigate heresy, which the offender had to avow in his or her own words even if that could only be achieved by torture. In *Troubling Confessions*, Peter Brooks points to this coincidence of factors as the originating moment of the extraordinary power confessional discourse has acquired in Western culture:

When one considers how the requirement of confession intersects with the definition of orthodox belief and the war on heresy, it begins to be apparent that confession plays a crucial role in moral cleansing and also in moral discipline: it works both to console and to police. It offers articulation of hidden acts and thoughts in a form that reveals – perhaps in a sense creates – the inwardness of the person confessing, and allows the person's punishment, absolution, rehabilitation, reintegration. (2)

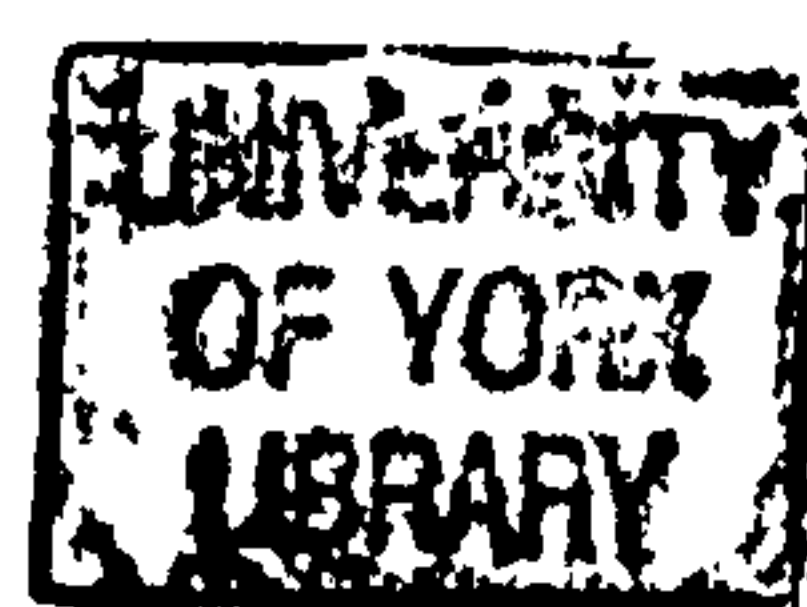
So confession as an avowal of wrong-doing and as an avowal of belief are both in the service of some kind of group cohesion, the former facilitating the transgressor's reintegration into the community and the latter affirming a collectively held set of beliefs. Private auricular confession gradually came to replace public acts of penance

as the means of remitting one's sins and being reassimilated into the community. As church historian Thomas N. Tentler notes: 'From a penance of shame and expiation, the church, through centuries of development, had turned to a penance of shame and remorse' (cited in Brooks 90-91 [Tentler 52]). But just as the remission of sins had been associated with the performance of certain actions, absolution came to be tied to the *act of confessing*, rather than the item confessed; with Lateran IV 'the essential transaction of confession becomes verbal' as the sacrament is completed in the avowal of wrong-doing by the confessant and the spoken absolution of the confessor (Brooks 94). We can therefore understand the sacrament of confession as a kind of speech act:

In the performative quality of confession and absolution, we grasp the continuing power, and problematic, of confession: it depends entirely on the confessant's verbal act, what issues from his or her lips, in an interlocutory situation in which a response is expected from the confessor, a response which acknowledges that the confession has taken place, and judges it to have been efficacious. (95)¹¹

Brooks maps out this history of confession in order to describe in greater detail the work that confessions do within the American legal system, a role that has its origins in the religious tradition of confession and leads to the 'fiction' of the free man in legal discourse. The way in which confession works within the limits of the legal system will be important for my argument. But the reach of the confessional model has been much wider and more fundamental than this. While the power of language and speech to act – to accuse, to plea, to confess, to pass judgement, to sentence – is codified within the operations of the law, the idea that language can *act*, that the subject can somehow act through language, can be found in all areas of public discourse and in many ways both creates and maintains the distinction between

¹¹ Of course, it also depends on one's religious faith.



public and private on which social life depends. Confession is central to Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection in *Powers of Horror*, for example, which explores the relationship between bodily acts and speech acts in psychoanalytic terms. She finds that 'the practice of confession, upon the whole, does nothing else but weigh down discourse with sin. By having it bear that load, which alone grants it the intensity of full communication, avowal absolves from sin and, by the same stroke, founds the power of discourse' (*Powers of Horror* 130). The abject, in her account, is a kind of bodily intensification of the power of discourse: 'The body's inside, in that case, shows up in order to compensate for the collapse of the border between inside and outside (53).

Other accounts single out the move away from auricular confession towards the self-examination ushered in by the Reformation as key to the interiority of the western subject. In *The Decline of the West* Oswald Spengler points to this as the key development in the history of the western subject, noting that Goethe lamented its loss as 'over the lands in which it had died out, a heavy earnestness spread itself (295).¹² Spengler finds that in the move toward self-examination and the increasing secularization of the confessional impulse, confession's policing function remains but in the absence of a priest its power to absolve is lost:

No man confesses himself with the inward certainty of absolution. And as the need of the soul to be relieved of its past and to be redirected remained as urgent as ever, all the higher forms of communication were transmuted, and in Protestant countries music and painting, letter-writing and memoirs, from being modes of description became modes of self-denunciation, penance, and unbounded confession. (295)

So while the religious framework whereby confession would lead to absolution falls away, confession itself remains, seemingly motivated by a desire for absolution – 'the

¹² Attwell notes the significance of Spengler for *Dusklands*; the title comes from *The Decline of the West* (38-39).

need of the soul to be relieved of its past' – but now channelled into various cultural productions. Spengler's is a compelling account of the development of confessional literary forms and an account that has influenced Coetzee's thinking on the form. He cites the above passage in a note to 'Double Thoughts' but the passage is also recorded in seminar notes for a course on confessional poetry that he taught at Buffalo in 1970 (NELM 2002. 13. 1. 8).

II

'Western man has become a confessing animal,' according to Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* (59). Tracing the production of sexuality as truth in the immense proliferation of confessional discourse since the eighteenth century, Foucault shifts the focus of the debate about confession from the power available to confessional discourse, to power exerting itself through confessional discourse in its many incarnations:

... one goes about telling, with the greatest of precision, whatever is most difficult to tell. One confesses in public and in private, to one's parents, one's educators, one's doctor, to those one loves; one admits to oneself, in pleasure and in pain, things it would be impossible to tell anyone else, the things people write books about. One confesses – or is forced to confess. When it is not spontaneous or dictated by some internal imperative, the confession is wrung from a person by violence or threat; it is driven from its hiding place in the soul, or extracted from the body. Since the Middle Ages, torture has accompanied it like a shadow, and supported it when it could go no further: the dark twins. (59)

Foucault's analysis allows us to see confession as instituting a culture of disclosure which has produced sexuality as a scientific discourse and as truth; in other words, that which must be disclosed acquires the status of truth. In this way, what appears to

be held back becomes part of the confession, a practice which can accommodate even what refuses to be confessed. Confession is 'a ritual in which the truth is corroborated by the obstacles and resistances it has had to surmount in order to be formulated' (62). Psychoanalysis is in this sense the logical endpoint of many discussions of confession, evident in the work of Foucault, Kristeva and Brooks. It is, in Foucault's formulation, 'yet another round of whispering on a bed' (5). Freud himself describes the similarities between the two: 'In confession the sinner tells what he knows; in analysis the neurotic has to tell more' (*History of Sexuality* 116), though in the pattern that Foucault describes the 'sinner' too will always tell more. The similarities are also evident in the apparent instrumentalism of both: the commonplace of the 'talking cure' places the therapeutic burden on the discourse itself, much like the power of the confession to achieve absolution. Though just as secular confession runs the risk of endlessness in the absence of guaranteed absolution, a certain anxiety about the potential endlessness of psychoanalytic therapy is evident in Freud's 'Analysis Terminable and Interminable.' In this way psychoanalysis is very much the contemporary embodiment of the *perceived* power of confessional discourse: it seems to be motivated by the desire for cure, even if the availability of the cure is in doubt, as is abundantly clear in the popular confessional culture that it has inspired.

While the history of confession within the Catholic Church makes clear its social function in policing and controlling belief, behaviour and desire – functions which were internalised in the post-reformation period – Foucault's attention to the 'ruse' of repression and disclosure (rather than absolution) as the key dynamic of confessional discourse, including psychoanalytic practices, allows us to understand confession in a much broader context. In pointing to the continuities between discourse and silence, its apparent opposite, as intrinsic to the confessional dynamic,

Foucault focuses attention not just on what is confessed, but on the *various silences* around the confession. According to this view, the obligation to confess is so deeply ingrained in our society that we no longer experience it as an obligation, but as a liberation: 'Confession frees, but power reduces one to silence; truth does not belong to the order of power but shares an original affinity with freedom' (60). For Foucault, this is the great deception of confessional discourse, but it also allows him to identify this dynamic at work in discourse more generally:

One has to be completely taken in by this internal ruse of confession in order to attribute a fundamental role to censorship, to taboos regarding speaking and thinking; one has to have an inverted image of power in order to believe that all these voices which have spoken so long in our civilization – repeating the formidable injunction to tell what one is and what one does, what one recollects and what one has forgotten, what one is thinking and what one thinks he is not thinking – are speaking to us of freedom. (60)

The liberation associated with the performative role of confession in delivering absolution has become associated more generally with the notion of speaking out as an expression of freedom, indeed, as an expression of one's innermost self. This is in contrast with the history of confessional discourse which suggests that it has always been policing rather than liberating.¹³

This is evident in the treatment of confession within the law itself. In describing the traffic between the religious and legal functions and conceptions of confession, Brooks describes a persistent suspicion of confessional discourse that migrated from the religious context of the inquisition to modern legal discourse. He describes how under Elizabethan and Stuart courts the phrase '*nemo tenetur seipsum prodere* ('no one is required to bear witness against himself')' became increasingly common, eventually becoming part of the Fifth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution

¹³ Foucault finds opportunities for agency in the sheer multiplicity of confessional discourses and also in the multiplicity of silences that surround these discourses.

which resulted in the famous Miranda warnings that those under arrest have the right to remain silent (Brooks, 16). While confession continues to occupy a privileged position in legal contexts, it does so on the basis that it is voluntary and uncoerced. However, the nature of the truth that must be revealed, a truth that is shameful and self-incriminating, places the validity of these categories in doubt:

Even the most indisputably 'voluntary' confession may arise from a state of dependency, shame, and the need for punishment, a condition that casts some doubt on the law's language of autonomy and free choice. Thus the act of confessing may in its very nature undercut the notion of human agency that the law wishes to – and must – promote. (74)

Thus the autonomous subject must be protected by mechanisms built into the law, though Brooks' book also explores threats to these mechanisms from law enforcement and the judiciary. Published in 2000, Brooks' book largely limits itself to criminal law in the U.S. but one suspects that it would have had a very different focus had it appeared a couple of years later. I will address the suspension of the normal rule of law, and hence legal mechanisms to protect confessants, in my discussion of Philip Glass's opera adaptation of *Barbarians* in chapter three. Nonetheless, it is important to note that wariness about the authority and reliability of confession has gone hand in hand with its deployment in legal contexts and is not just related to the climate of impunity ushered in by emergency anti-terror measures in the U.S. since 2001.

Either way, there is a fundamental paradox at the heart of confessional discourse: under the guise of a desire for absolution or cure, or for a reduction in sentence, a confessant acts as if it is in his or her interest to disclose shameful secrets. This means that confession is fundamentally an instrumental use of language. But while there are definite limits to the benefits offered by confession, there is no limit to

the desire to confess, no inhibiting factor as a result of the shame of confession, and a conflation of the potential power of confessional discourse to absolve with the power to speak per se.

III

The 'metamorphosis in literature' described by Foucault, the move towards 'a literature ordered according to the infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself, in between the words, a truth which the very form of the confession holds out like a shimmering mirage' (59), is exemplified in the *Confessions* of Jean Jacques Rousseau and the form of secular, literary confession and autobiography that they initiated. Undoubtedly influenced by earlier autobiographers like Augustine and Montaigne, the innovation of Rousseau's text, as I've already noted, is nonetheless its claim to uniqueness:

I am commencing an undertaking, hitherto without precedent, and which will never find an imitator. I desire to set before my fellows the likeness of a man in all the truth of nature, and that man myself.

Myself alone! I know that feelings of my heart, and I know men. I am not made like any of those I have seen; I venture to believe that I am not made like any of those who are in existence. If I am not better, at least I am different. Whether Nature has acted rightly or wrongly in destroying the mould in which she cast me, can only be decided after I have been read. (3)

Rousseau's uniqueness, like 'the feelings of my own heart,' can be verified only by his word. While he invites the judgement of the reader, it is judgement as recognition

rather than ethical evaluation, and the act of reading itself is the only way one might reach such a judgement.¹⁴

Rousseau's *Confessions* is a text whose claim to truth rests on its authenticity as the word of the author about himself and not on its relation to an external, verifiable reality. But while he appears to guarantee the truthfulness of his claims by discounting the ethical content of his actions ('If I am not better, at least I am different') the account that follows restores ethical criteria in the self-justification which attempts to show that he was never really as bad as his actions indicated – his intentions, at least, were good. So, not only do we have to take Rousseau at his word – accepting his sincerity and authenticity – but we must do so with the suspicion that his word is shaped by other interests: justifying unbecoming actions and behaviour, appearing better than he is, highlighting his unique character, having a good story to tell. For Bernard Williams, the problem for Rousseau and, by implication, the problem for his imitators and critics, is the irreconcilable gap between his stated intentions and the works he produced: 'He never found a way of reconciling in good faith the consequences of his publishing his writings with what he claimed were the conditions of his producing them' (178). While Rousseau's stated claim to present himself truthfully in the *Confessions* is superficially at least without any real goal, the instrumental tendency of the confession is evident throughout his text and essential to any critical evaluation of it. The question of what exactly the *Confessions* are *doing* is therefore central to many critical considerations of them.

Sincerity, especially as it is experienced by the writer who must serve the interests of narrative, is central to Coetzee's critique of Rousseau in particular and confessional discourse generally, a critique that has been in large part mediated

¹⁴ See Starobinski on Rousseau's desire for recognition.

through his reading of Dostoevsky and the Russian author's own critique of Rousseau. In 'Truth in Autobiography,' which focuses almost exclusively on Rousseau, Coetzee is concerned with 'the *cost* of telling the truth' in autobiographical writing and the possibility that it might be too high a price to bear, that it might not be in the interests of the autobiographical subject to tell the truth (1). Sincerity, the guarantee of truth in Rousseau's *Confessions*, is singled out for particular criticism: 'The questions (*sic*) that we, as post-Dostoevskians, are entitled to ask of the inventors of sincerity is: *cui bono?*' (5)

Confession, in the endless secular form that Coetzee describes in 'Double Thoughts,' is a type of narrative that negotiates between the desire for truth and the self-interest that lies behind this desire; confession polices the boundary between what can be considered for public airing in the form of confession (disclosure) and what must, in the best interests of the confessing self, remain private (withholding). This boundary is redrawn with each new revelation in anticipation of further confession as the 'best interests of the confessing self' – the subject who confesses, or writes – are served by continuing the confession, which gives rise to its potential endlessness. This idea, that the primary interest served by the confessional text is the text itself, informs 'A Fiction of the Truth,' a later essay on autobiography. In this case sincerity is challenged by the need to publish an interesting book, that is, by the need to be different: 'If being different from everyone else is the justification you produce for publishing a book about yourself, then does the idea of publishing oneself to the world not put pressure on one to be different, or exaggerate one's differences?' This suggests that confession might be a uniquely compromising activity for the writer.

At the beginning of his essay on Rousseau's *Confessions*, Paul de Man focuses on the instrumental dimension of confession by noting that Rousseau singles out 'the desire to free' himself from the burden of guilt arising from his bad treatment of the servant Marion as one of his main motives in writing the *Confessions* ('Excuses (*Confessions*)' 278). The source of Rousseau's guilt is an incident in which he steals a ribbon in the home of Madame de Vercellis but blames Marion, leading to her dismissal from her post and, we are to believe, years of regret for the perpetrator of the double crime. De Man's essay deals with Rousseau's *failure* to free himself from the guilt generated by the incident, a failure that is evident in his return to the same episode in his later *Reveries* but which de Man also finds in the *Confessions* themselves, as the narrative switches from confession to excuse. In de Man's analysis, Rousseau does not stop at the confessional disclosure of the events that occurred but seeks to reveal the motives and 'inner sentiments' behind his actions, thus attempting to justify or excuse them. For this reason, de Man finds that the text shifts from the cognitive (or constative) mode of the confession, with a verifiable referent, to the performative dimension of the excuse, which only has a verbal referent. In the gap opened up between these two different uses of language, de Man finds a fundamental loss of certainty and embarks on alternative readings of Rousseau's account.

In the first set of rereadings, he accounts for the theft by way of desire: a displaced desire to possess Marion and a desire for exposure that is intensified and prolonged in the act of confessing itself. The latter desire is undoubtedly the more shameful, '... for it suggests that Marion was destroyed, not for the sake of Rousseau's saving face, nor for the sake of his desire for her, but merely in order to provide him with a stage on which to parade his disgrace or, what amounts to the

same thing, to furnish him with a good ending for Book II of his *Confessions*' (286). As Coetzee says, Rousseau prioritises being different.¹⁵ De Man's reading bears comparison to Foucault's analysis of the dynamics of concealing and revealing as the key to confession. Indeed, like Foucault, de Man describes this dynamic as a ruse: 'The excuse is a ruse which permits exposure in the name of hiding... Or, put differently, shame used as excuse permits repression to function as revelation and thus to make pleasure and guilt become interchangeable. Guilt is forgiven because it allows for the pleasure of revealing its repression. It follows that repression is in fact an excuse, one speech act among others' (286). Presented as such, the desire, shame and performative excuses of the *Confessions* are rendered transparent, 'epistemologically as well as ethically grounded and therefore available as meaning, in the mode of understanding' (287). This apparent transparency, meaning and understanding should therefore lead to the 'the restoration of justice' and Rousseau's freedom from guilt (288).

But this is clearly not the case as the episode arises once again in the *Reveries*. Re-examining Rousseau's account of the incident in the *Confessions*, de Man finds another excuse at work – the accidental nature of Rousseau's accusation of Marion, illustrated by his admission that 'I excused myself upon the first thing that offered itself' (cited in de Man, 288). This avowed arbitrariness has the effect of undoing the coherence of de Man's earlier explanation: '... if [Marion's] nominal presence is a mere coincidence, then we are entering an entirely different system in which such terms as desire, shame, guilt, exposure, and repression no longer have any place' (289). Instead of offering desire as an excuse, '... the total arbitrariness of the action

¹⁵ I will discuss a similar dynamic in chapter two with reference to Peter Brooks' *Reading for the Plot* and *A Posthumous Confession*.

becomes the most effective, the most efficaciously performative excuse of all' (289). De Man finds that the contingency this introduces undermines all intentional or desiring elements in the text, all autobiographical agency, in fact, in favour of the radical machine-like arbitrariness of the performative excuse, of language and of the text. In this reading, guilt becomes the effect rather than the cause of the mechanical operation of the performative excuse.

One of the major theoretical points of de Man's essay is an attempt to reinforce the disjunction between the constative and performative dimensions of language described in speech act theory. For de Man, the 'cognitive' mode of the confession is verifiable by empirical means, whereas the performative mode of the excuse 'is verbal in its utterance, in its effect and in its authority: its purpose is not to state but to convince, itself an "inner" process to which only words can bear witness' (281). On this basis he can assert that the *Confessions* 'are not primarily a confessional text' (279). But to my mind, the implication of de Man's argument is not that the *Confessions* are not confessional, but that confession itself is inherently performative.¹⁶

In J.L. Austin's theory of speech acts, a constative utterance is a statement of fact, descriptive and potentially verifiable. His solution to the problem of language which seems to do other than state or describe is not to sideline it as nonsense (though he occasionally does this), but to find a method to describe what language might be doing other than stating or describing. To this end he develops the idea of a performative speech act, an utterance which does not describe or report, which cannot be said to be true or false, and in which 'the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of,

¹⁶ This is partly a problem of genre: Rousseau's *Confessions* have been so influential that texts which follow them are *confessional* to the extent that they follow the *Confessions*.

the doing of an action,' besides just the action of saying something (*How to Do Things with Words* 5). To the extent that confession can indeed be said to describe or report, and to be true or false, it has all the elements of a constative utterance, and it is this understanding of confession which underpins de Man's distinction. The verbal dimension of the excuse, on the other hand, makes it impossible to verify what it claims to describe or report, or to ascertain whether it is true or false. For these reasons, de Man holds that its purpose is to persuade or convince, and that it is therefore a performative utterance, distinct from the purely cognitive dimension of the confession.

The history of confessional discourse that I have sketched out above, however, suggests that the power available to the verbal act of confessing in both a religious and legal context, and in the cultural forms that it has given rise to, is not just reliant on the verifiability of the statement, but is intimately connected to the act of speaking or confessing itself. To follow de Man's analysis, it would be necessary to ascribe this power to aspects of language other than confession, but it seems to me that these performative dimensions of language are constitutive of confession itself.

Although Austin does not discuss confession directly, his model of speech acts suggests that its successful completion relies on its observance of certain conditions, conventions and limits. Indeed, in the paradigmatic examples of the operation of confession in religious or legal contexts, a 'good' confession is subject to the strict observance of certain rituals and conventions but its successful completion is also underpinned by a transcendent authority: God or the authority of the law. Austin's theory and method constantly circle around and reassess the conditions and limits for successful performative utterances, opening up the possibility of developing a formula for the successful completion of the speech act of confession, a felicitously

performative confession. Equally, Austin's writings demonstrate – knowingly – that this is something of a fool's game; his attempts at exhaustiveness invariably leave him pondering the numerous failures that dog performative utterances, which are susceptible to infelicities, misfires, abuses, etc. In addition, there is a sense that the rigour of Austin's analysis of the felicitous conditions for performative utterances is ultimately trumped by the power of convention or authority to bring the performative speech act to a successful conclusion.

Some of Jacques Derrida's writings could be described as conducting a sustained critique or at least rethinking of speech act theory as it is described by Austin. His discussion of de Man's 'Excuses (Confessions)' in 'Typewriter Ribbon: Limited Ink 2' is one example of this strand of his thinking, but it stretches from his early essay 'Signature, Event, Context,' through a polemical exchange with John Searle, to his writings on the aneconomic gift in *Given Time* and *The Gift of Death*, to his conception of the event and discussions of speech acts like forgiveness, perjury and pardon. Derrida's writings cut to the core problem of speech acts: the demand that they are both spontaneous, free-willed expressions of the specific intentions of a singular speaking subject and the need for them to be recognisable, verifiable and repeatable – iterable, in his terminology. Across the range of texts that I have mentioned, he takes the demand for the satisfactory, felicitous completion of the speech act and the highly conventional forms that such speech acts must therefore take, and subjects the *limits* within which they operate to a rigorous ethical critique. The result is that the apparent loss of agency experienced by the confessing subject in the face of a discourse which seems to dominate any attempt to speak through it – as evidenced in the immense proliferation of confessional narratives described by Foucault or, in a very different vein, the confessing machine that characterises de

Man's discussion of Rousseau – paradoxically becomes the condition in which confession can take place.

De Man's essay, with its insistence on the distinction between constative and performative speech acts, its attempt to trace the failure of Rousseau's attempt to liberate himself from his sense of guilt and its emphasis on the machine-like qualities of the performative excuse, provides an excellent point of departure for a further development of Derrida's thinking on speech acts and dovetails with his interest in the act of forgiveness in particular. Perhaps the crucial distinction between the two is, as Derrida points out in 'Limited Ink 2,' de Man's focus on the excuse whereas Derrida's essay is informed by the possibility of forgiveness and pardon that seems to go hand in hand with confession.

Rather than following de Man's distinction between the confession and the excuse, Derrida proposes not just that confession is inherently performative, but that the constative dimension of language is always to some extent performative. For Derrida, confession is an avowal rather than just a statement:

... I can inform someone that I have killed, stolen, or lied without that being at all an admission or a confession. Confession is not of the order of knowledge or making known. That is why Augustine wonders why he must confess to God, who already knows everything. Answer: confession does not consist in making known, informing, apprising the other, but in excusing oneself, repenting, asking forgiveness, converting the fault into love, and so forth. For there to be a confessional declaration or avowal, it is necessary, indissociably, that I recognize that I am guilty in a mode of recognition that is not of the order of cognition, and also that, at least implicitly, I begin to accuse myself – and thus to excuse myself or to present my apologies, or even to ask for forgiveness. There is doubtless an irreducible element of 'truth' in this process but this truth, precisely, is not a truth to be known or, as de Man puts it so frequently, revealed. Rather, as Augustine says, it is a truth to be 'made,' to be 'verified,' if you will, and this order of truth is not of a cognitive order. (108-9)¹⁷

¹⁷ In *Given Time* he describes confession in almost identical terms (168).

For this reason he wonders 'if the confession mode is not already, always, an apologetic mode' and notes that 'every avowal begins by offering apologies or by excusing itself' (110). Indeed, by finding a testimonial aspect in all constative utterances, avowals insofar as they rely to some extent on one's word, Derrida demonstrates that they are already performative: 'Every theoretical, cognitive utterance, every truth to be revealed, and so forth, assumes a testimonial form, an "I myself think," "I myself say," "I myself believe," or "I myself have the inner feeling that," and so forth; "I have a relation to myself to which you never have immediate access and for which you must believe me by taking my word for it"' (111). In this context every utterance must, to a greater or lesser degree, be taken on trust. There is always the possibility of lying and therefore always the need to ask forgiveness:

It is also the only possibility of speaking to the other, of blessing, saying, or making the truth. Since I can always lie and since the other can always be the victim of this lie, since he or she never has the same access that I do to what I myself think or mean to say, I always begin, at least implicitly, by confessing a possible fault, abuse, or violence, an elementary perjury, an ordinary betrayal. I always begin by asking forgiveness when I address myself to the other and precisely this equivocal mode, even if it is in order to say to him or her things that are as constative as, for example: "You know, it's raining." (112)

In the case of confession, one is not just taken at one's word, but one's *final word*; confession, when it is successful, brings an end to narrative: 'forgiveness or pardon, the excuse, and the remission of sin, absolute absolution, are always proposed in the figure, so to speak, of the "last word"' (100). For Derrida, forgiveness in this sense is an event: '*I forgive you* has the structure of the last word, hence its apocalyptic and millenarian aura; hence the sign it makes in the direction of the end of time and the end of history' (100). In this way Derrida addresses the fundamental problem of the repetition of confession, the problem of de Man's excusing machine

which cannot be reconciled with the *necessity* of confession as a *last word*: 'This machinelike operation of the excuse divides and multiplies at the same time. A calculating machine, a multiplication – and division – table, it leads into error and drags the guilty one into the repetition of the "last word."' Does not eschatology then become a genre, an inexhaustible eschatology of final words, a last word, a litany?' (98)

But Derrida is interested in confession as the last word, in the possibility of forgiveness and pardon (as event).¹⁸ The central concept of the essay, therefore, emerges from this problem: how to think of the performative both as a machine *and* as an event. But the machine comes into direct conflict with the performative as described by Austin:

But a machine as such, however *performante* it may be, could never, according to the strict Austinian orthodoxy of speech acts, produce an event of the *performative* type. Performativity will never be reduced to technical performance. Pure performativity implies the presence of a living being, and of a living being speaking one time only, in its own name, in the first person. And speaking in a manner that is at once spontaneous, intentional, free, and irreplaceable. Performativity, therefore, excludes in principle, in its own moment, any machinelike [*machinale*] technicity. (74)

In this context, the machine-like operation of the excuse threatens the very possibility of a performative speech act:

If, then, some machinality (repetition, calculability, *inorganic* matter of the body) intervenes in a performative event, it is always as an accidental, extrinsic, and parasitical element, in truth a pathological, mutilating, or even mortal element. Here again, to think *both* machine *and* the performative event together remains a monstrosity to come, an *impossible* event. Therefore the only possible event. (74)

¹⁸A subtext of the essay is an attempt to understand why de Man did not address the question of forgiveness and pardon more directly; it is an attempt to read a confession – or the absence of a confession – in de Man's essay, given the information about his wartime writings that came to light in the intervening period. Even writings on confession (and I include Derrida's among these) invite questions about motives and truthfulness characteristic of the genre.

What Derrida is attempting to think through in this idea of the machine-event is something which inadvertently 'allies chance to necessity, contingency to obligation, machinelike association to the internal, intentional, organic link' (76). The necessity for such an unimaginable hybrid is evident in the current appetite for public apologies: 'their present-day mutation on a geo-juridico-political scale in a world where scenes of public repentance happen more and more frequently' (75). In this context the problem of the machine-event becomes a problem of the law and its ability to mediate between the particular and the universal, which is also the unique quality of the first person, 'I': 'Nothing is in fact more irreducibly singular than "I," and yet nothing is more universal, anonymous, and substitutable' (125). But the problem remains, as forgiveness cannot be reduced to a question of law:

A terrifying aporia because this fatal necessity engenders automatically a situation in which forgiveness and excuse are both automatic (they cannot not take place, in some way independently of the presumed living 'subjects' that they are supposed to involve) and therefore null and void, since they are in contradiction with what we, as inheritors of these values, either Abrahamic or not, think about forgiveness and excuse: automatic and mechanical pardons or excuses cannot have the value of pardon and excuse. (134)

In clarifying the nature of the aporia, the idea of the confession or excuse as a performative speech act is no longer entirely useful, particularly in Austin's formulation of performative utterances:

It is often said, quite rightly, that a performative utterance produces the event of which it speaks. But one should also know that wherever there is some performative, that is, in the strict Austinian sense of the term, the mastery in the first person present of an 'I can,' 'I may' guaranteed and legitimated by conventions, well, then, all pure eventness is neutralized, muffled, suspended. What happens, by definition, what comes about in an unforeseeable and singular manner, couldn't care less about the performative. [...] The vulnerability, the finitude of a body and of a corpus is precisely the limit of all performative power, thus of all assurance. (146-47)

Here we reach the limitations of the goal-oriented conventions of performative speech acts as formulated by Austin. Confession conceived on this model – confession designed to bring about absolution, reconciliation or redemption – is subject to a calculation, which takes the form of the conditions for a performative speech act. But if the successful completion of the confession is to be possible – resulting in the event of forgiveness or pardon – then it cannot be subject to such a calculation. In this way confession in Derrida's writings comes to have a similar structure to the aneconomic gift: somehow, the event of forgiveness or pardon comes about (perhaps through the operation of the machine of the performative speech act), but those elements conventionally associated with performative utterances are fundamentally incompatible with the event. So while Derrida's thinking about confession emerges from his interest in speech act theory and particularly his insistence on the coexistence of the constative and performative dimensions of language in performative utterances, confession, pardon or forgiveness cannot be conditioned by the conventions of speech act theory. Rather they are events which defy all attempts at calculation, even if they are necessarily conceived in instrumental terms.

In the Foreword to a collection of papers discussing *Circumfession*, a text that might be considered Derrida's own confession, he notes the change that has occurred in his thinking on performative speech acts: '... I assumed for a long time, despite a number of reservations I had about Austin's theory of constative and performative speech acts, that the performative speech act was a way of producing an event. I now think that the performative is in fact a subtle way of neutralizing the event' (20). The confession is rather much closer to the structure of the gift:

A confession must remain meaningless. If a confession is meaningful, it's nothing. It means that it's a confession in order to reconcile, to reach some reconciliation, some

redemption, to improve myself, to change myself, so there's a teleology of confession. If confession is guided by a teleology, it is not confession. It's just an economy, it's a therapy, it's whatever you want' (25).

This meaninglessness and unverifiability might be the condition of possibility of the confession but confession on this model is terrible rather than consoling: 'What is terrible in confession is that I'm not sure that I am the one who can claim the mastery of or the responsibility for what has been done, and I am not the one who can claim to be improving and to be good enough to repent' (25).

IV

Derrida's admission (confession?) that his critique of speech act theory was nonetheless informed by the idea that performative speech acts could produce events is helpful in analysing Coetzee's engagement with confession for two reasons. In the context of an essay on *Circumfession*, it seems to me to be an attempt to explain – and perhaps excuse – his recurring interest in the confessional form, a form whose repetition (and calculation), *as he notes*, has a neutralizing effect on any event that it might produce. To this extent, there is a radical discontinuity in Derrida's thinking on confession between confession as performative utterance and confession as event which is comparable to the irreconcilable desire for confession and scepticism about its availability that we find in Coetzee. Of particular significance is the fact that in the case of both writers confession proceeds in spite of this discontinuity. But Derrida's admission also betrays a more common desire for speech acts to produce events, that is to say, for the speaking subject to somehow influence the circumstances in which

he or she finds himself or herself. In 'Composing *Circumfession*' he notes (but doesn't endorse) that: 'The interest we are taking in speech act theory in the academy perhaps has to do with the illusion that, by using performative utterances, we produce events, *that we are mastering history*' (21 emphasis added). The critique of speech act theory and of confession in particular places this ability in doubt, underlining the extent to which the speaking subject – the confessing subject – is susceptible to external factors, to the words and acts of the other and, indeed, to his or her own conflicting desires and interests (the other in oneself). In what follows I outline the significance of this desire for speech acts to produce events to the form confession takes in Coetzee's fiction and non-fiction.

Few places have experienced the need for performative speech acts to produce events more keenly than South Africa. Indeed, this is evident even in Derrida's thinking on the subject: his paper 'On Forgiveness' was first delivered in South Africa in 1998 and much of his writing on the issue of confession and forgiveness occurs in the context of global trends towards public rituals of truth-telling and reconciliation.¹⁹ But in Derrida's thinking this need is matched by the impossibility of such a demand: 'One cannot, or should not, forgive; there is only the forgiveness, if there is any, where there is the unforgivable. That is to say that forgiveness must announce itself as impossibility itself' (33). In Coetzee's work we find the structural impossibility of confession that he finds in the history of confessional narrative amplified by the limits imposed by the historical and political situation in which he writes. In this context the desire for confession, absolution and forgiveness is intensified because politically, socially and economically there is so much at stake,

¹⁹ 'Typewriter Ribbon' was also first delivered at a conference in 1998 (see Peggy Kamuf's Preface to *Without Alibi*).

and it is undermined by conditions which seem to place its meaning and successful completion in doubt.

Coetzee's engagement with confessional narrative, informed both by the need for confession and an awareness of its impossibility, occurs in the context of the changing demands of the historical and political situation in South Africa and globally. If the challenge to make a successful confession in apartheid South Africa seemed to offer the promise of future absolution in an imagined community (and, therefore, a possible route out of the present), the work of negotiating the conditions in which this imagined future might take place seemed to be a worthwhile enterprise, even if it was impossible in the short term. But in the post-apartheid period, when 'transformation' is a matter of government policy, speech acts acquire a renewed urgency with the result that the emphasis is now understandably on their successful and quantifiable completion rather than on altering and perfecting the form they might take. While Coetzee's non-fiction writing is helpful in mapping out the territory of confession, it is in his fiction that he has responded most powerfully to the changing demands of these circumstances.

David Attwell describes *Barbarians* and *Michael K*, published in 1980 and 1983, as variations on the 'interregnum' novel (Coetzee 70-71). *Barbarians*, like Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*, examines the present 'through the perspectives made possible by imagining the future,' whereas in *Michael K*, Coetzee is 'not projecting a future so much as examining the present as it is lived by many of those who anticipate its imminent collapse' (70, 71). Either way, both novels deal with a present conditioned by future events. With this in mind, it seems to me that 'Double Thoughts' is the quintessential 'interregnum' text in the Coetzee *oeuvre*. Published in 1985, three years after Gordimer's 'Living in the Interregnum,' Coetzee's essay, like

Gordimer's, is an attempt to be 'free of the past' by imagining a future. Gordimer imagines an explicitly political route to the future though this is elaborated in the context of a confessional narrative; Coetzee's essay posits a route to the future through confession but analyses in painstaking detail the difficulties that must be overcome to achieve this, to the extent that it seems to be desirable but impossible. The structural impossibility of confession that Coetzee describes as double thought is staged repeatedly in his fiction of this period and comes to seem emblematic of the historical condition described in Gordimer's essay.

Gordimer follows Gramsci's description of a state in which 'the old is dying, and the new cannot be born' (263). The condition she describes is one 'imposed by history' (268), 'a place of shifting ground' (280), a state which exists 'not only between two social orders but also between two identities, one known and discarded, the other unknown and undetermined' (269-70). But the desire to shake off the past and be born into the future drives the essay; its power derives from Gordimer's dedication to: a 'new collective life within new structures' (264). She identifies herself with a segment of white society concerned with having 'something to offer the future. *How* to offer it is our preoccupation' (264). This is nothing less than the question of 'how to offer *one's self*' (264).

For all the political urgency of Gordimer's essay, however, it is also a self-consciously autobiographical text. Her emphasis is on forging a new collective identity but in order to do this she must embark on a kind of confession (and a renunciation of an old identity): 'Now I am going to break the inhibition or destroy the privilege of privacy, whichever way you look at it. I have to offer you myself as my most closely observed specimen from the interregnum; yet I remain a writer, not a public speaker: nothing I say here will be as true as my fiction' (264). This

autobiographical interlude is central to the essay as she addresses the unique demands the future makes on the writer, particularly the white writer: 'He has to try to find a way to reconcile the irreconcilable within himself, establish his relation to the culture of a new kind of posited community, non-racial but conceived with and led by blacks' (278). Gordimer's essay is not just a confession of the personal challenges and compromises she believes she faces in bringing this new state into being, but a demand that others make similar compromises, and even a suggestion that what is required is a kind of confessional renunciation of one community in order to be assimilated into a 'new collective life'.

The confessional teleology rehearsed in 'Double Thoughts' – transgression, confession, penitence, absolution – is a future-directed progression concerned with breaking out of a current impasse to reach 'the end of the episode, the closing of the chapter, liberation from the oppression of the memory' (252). But if Gordimer's essay conveys the urgency of preparing for an imagined future in order to progress through the current crisis and move beyond the injustices of the past (which is at this point not quite past), Coetzee's essay stages the difficulty of achieving this. This difficulty, more than anything else, seems the defining condition of the interregnum.

In analysing the flawed confessions of Tolstoy, Rousseau and Dostoevsky, Coetzee inadvertently posits a set of conditions in which confession can successfully take place. These are not conditions invented by Coetzee, but a set of conventions that emerge from the way in which these influential confessional texts attempt to guarantee their truth, conventions that derive from the discourses on which confessional narratives draw, such as the death bed apologia. In this way the confessions fail to meet the conditions within which they operate, though the essay also posits a broader horizon of truth which these conditions can never meet. But the

seriousness of Coetzee's approach to confession in the essay indicates that this structural impossibility is not reason enough *not to confess*. Among the conditions required for confession to occur, the essay focuses on the issue of address (who does one confess to and how does this impact on the confession), the issue of how to know if or when one is telling the truth (and is not merely self-deceived) and whether or not there are situations which compel the truth to emerge (for example, imminent death). So, for example, installing death as a limit to guarantee that a confession is indeed a 'last word' and therefore true, could disguise a desire to postpone one's death by confessing or a desire to live on beyond one's death. An attempt to confess without an auditor or confessor in order to avoid the distorting influence of an audience might just be a self-serving lie. And the impulse to reevaluate one's confession, replacing it with a more sincere truth or getting behind one's motive in confessing, might just be a way of spinning the confession out endlessly, telling a good story, creating an interesting persona for one's self. What Coetzee finds in Dostoevsky's *Underground Man*, for example, is the 'helplessness of confession before the desire of the self to construct its own truth' ('Double Thoughts' 279). The scepticism of the essay emerges from the sense that attempts to meet or orchestrate these conditions are calculated to do something other than confess the truth, but Coetzee's writing on confession also offers the hope that if one can meet these conditions *and* avoid such calculation, confession might be possible.

What Coetzee describes as double thought, the simultaneous will to confess and doubt about the validity of the confession, is similar to the in-between place described by Gordimer, but at odds with the political prescriptions that she proposes to overcome the crisis and perhaps implicitly with the confidence of her confession and her claim that such a position is available to the white writer. The desire for some

kind of transformation is equally strong in both essays, but the seeming inevitability of double thought seems to condemn Coetzee's would-be confessant to terminal bad faith.

This is brought into sharper focus by the perspective afforded by the end of apartheid and the 'shifting ground' of the interregnum. The demands of the future that are articulated so clearly by Gordimer and Coetzee lose the quality that structures the experience of the interregnum – its future-directedness. Instead, the demands acquire greater urgency as they are so clearly the needs of the present and articulated now by a new constituency. In this context Gordimer's idealism and Coetzee's scepticism are superseded by political expediency. Political discourse is full of the terminology of change – transition, interim, transformation – with efforts directed at creating the conditions in which this change can be facilitated, but also managed and quantified. So, to focus on Coetzee's essay, the promise offered in the most general sense by the desire for absolution becomes a state that must be negotiated in the present. And the conditions which had seemed to make this goal unattainable must be subject to even greater limitations because of the urgent need to reach 'the end of the episode, the closing of the chapter, liberation from the oppression of the memory' (252).

'Double Thoughts' maps the conditions for a successful confession by exploring the failures of various literary texts to meet them, but variations on these conditions take on a certain particularity in Coetzee's fiction, both in the apartheid and post-apartheid period, that marks his engagement with confession as uniquely South African. I will briefly outline the impact of the historical context on three key elements of confessional narrative: address, judicial confession and public repentance.

From his earliest fiction Coetzee has staged the problem of address as central to confessional narrative. The creation of a 'new collective' that motivates Gordimer's thinking through the interregnum presents a specific set of problems in the case of confession. If confession, as Brooks says, expresses a desire to be rehabilitated into the community, then the South African context necessitates the creation of a community to be rehabilitated into. One of the elementary problems of confession in Coetzee's fiction comes to be the problem of a suitable addressee or confessor. Coetzee explores these problems in relation to the Dutch poet, Gerrit Achterberg, in his essay about the sonnet sequence 'Ballade van de Gasfitter,' but the struggle to find an adequate mode of address is played out time and again in the fiction and can be seen as fundamental to any understanding of confession as an expression of a desire for the future. The problem of address becomes a problem of how to create the conditions in which one can address the other, confess to the other, and in which the other will have the power to grant absolution – all factors that are fundamental to any understanding of confession as an expression of desire for the future.

The repressive security measures deployed by the apartheid state against opponents, particularly during the 1970s and 80s, brought the actions of the police, military, judicial, prison and state officials under scrutiny for their brutality and willingness to act in excess of due process in their treatment of detainees. Police brutality was a factor in the deaths and disappearances of numerous individuals but also seemed to indicate a systemic disregard for the law they claimed to uphold. Coetzee's 1986 essay 'Into the Dark Chamber' gives some indication of the manner in which these circumstances imposed themselves on the imagination of writers and ordinary individuals (as well as the attempts to disguise endemic state repression and

lawlessness) but it is without doubt most vividly portrayed in the disruption of normal modes of signification in *Barbarians*. In this novel the power of violence to determine the outcome of an interrogation redefines the significance of confession in the face of death that is a commonplace of confessional discourse and installs pain as the final determinant of truth. This terrible limit, represented through the recurring image of the tortured body, imposes itself on all other attempts at confession in the novel, undermining claims to authority and unravelling meaning to the extent that even time and place have lost the ability to signify. Pain (and the threat of death) as the limit against which confession occurs recurs throughout Coetzee's engagement with confessional discourse, undermining the authority of confession and testimony and establishing the desperately high stakes that attach to confessional discourse in his work.

The practice of torture in extracting judicial confessions makes the terminology of speech act theory redundant in the face of violent acts. If speech acts can be described as an instrumental use of language – focused relentlessly on the successful completion of certain actions – then judicial confession is the ultimate in instrumental language as it is produced with the single aim of bringing the interrogation to an end. One of the major casualties of this terrible standard that the realities of apartheid South Africa impose on confessional narrative, therefore, is the desire for absolution and transformation that is expressed through the willingness to confess. If the repression exercised by the state intensifies the need for Gordimer's 'segment' of the population to distance themselves from the actions of the state, it also undermines confessional narrative as a vehicle with which to achieve this. In spite of the most *sincere* intentions, the 'man of conscience,' like Coetzee's magistrate, seems to act only in bad faith. Confession comes to seem like a strategy to

legitimise the structures of the past rather than inventing a community for the future.

What is required instead is an understanding of the limits – physical and otherwise – within which confession can take place.

While confession can be seen to relate generally to the problem of how to transcend the coerced separation of apartheid, this takes on a startling specificity in the post-apartheid period as the confession and testimony solicited by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was conceived, and described in a Constitutional Court Judgement, as a bridge between apartheid and the democracy (Dugard 90). Established by a clause in the Interim Constitution, the promise of the TRC was first and foremost a political one – it enabled the political process to advance to the first democratic elections in 1994. It aimed to do this not by installing the successful completion of the speech acts of confession and testimony in their most general sense as the standard for reparative justice, but by placing specific limits on the kind of confession and testimony that would be required, thereby limiting the scope of the justice that was on offer and allowing ‘reconciliation’ to take place within these limited conditions. Literary stagings of confession and enactments of confession in autobiographical writing obviously take place in the shadow of this national institution of confession and testimony, which inadvertently imposes itself as the standard which confessions must meet or exceed. The enormous critical response to the TRC, across a range of disciplines, reflects an attempt to balance its role in the political transition with its claim to be an agent of truth and reconciliation (which are of course not necessarily the same thing). At its best, this response is also an attempt to understand the nature of the limitations of the commission and therefore develop strategies to maximise its performative effects within these conditions and explore methods of exceeding them.

As I have pointed out, Coetzee's writings on confession are particularly concerned with limits – the limited conditions in which confession might take place, the limitations of his own critical discourse, the notion of a pact that might limit the kind of reading and the kind of truth that a reader would look for in a confessional text. But this concern with the limitations of confession occurs against the horizon offered by 'the idea of the truth' that acknowledges no limits, is not subject to calculation or interests, offers the hope of a successful completion to confession and therefore allows confession to begin. If the history of confessional literature as analysed in 'Double Thoughts' provides ample evidence of the difficulties that beset the attempt to 'tell the truth clearly, without blindness,' then the context in which Coetzee was writing (and, arguably, continues to write) intensifies both the demand for successful confession and the limitations within which it must take place.

CHAPTER TWO

'Character is fate': The Confessional Genre in *Dusklands* and *In the Heart of the Country*

I

In the closing pages of *In the Heart of the Country* Magda weighs up the options available to her: 'To die an enigma with a full soul or to die emptied of my secrets, that is how I picturesquely put the question to myself' (138). Magda conceives of her options in terms of narrative and in the terms of the confessional dynamic of disclosure and concealment in particular. But while this narrative is figured as the disclosure of inner secrets, or the potential expression of a 'full soul,' it is also artfully – 'picturesquely' – constructed. The options she describes are two ways of categorising her monologue: the narrative of the female hysteric on the one hand and the confessional narrative on the other. They are distinguished on the basis of their relation to reason: 'Will I find the courage to die a crazy old queen in the middle of nowhere, unexplained by and inexplicable to the archaeologists, her tomb full of *naïf* whitewash paintings of sky-gods; or am I going to yield to the spectre of reason and explain myself to myself in the only kind of confession we protestants know?' (138) The narrative of the female hysteric would cast her outside the boundaries of normal society and consign her acts to the domain of delusion or insanity. Confession, on the other hand, is an instrument to rehabilitate the confessant into society. Brooks, for example, opens his book on confession by noting: 'Confession of wrong-doing is considered fundamental to morality because it constitutes a verbal act of self-

recognition as wrongdoer and hence provides the basis of rehabilitation. It is the precondition of the end to ostracism, reentry into one's desired place in the human community' (2). Brooks is describing the social function of confession, exemplified by its role in religion and the law. Confessional narrative, however, is a kind of story in which this is the main conceit. To the extent that confession creates some continuity between the 'soul' and society it might be, as Magda intimates, *reasonable*. But, approaching *Heart* as a confessional narrative, it is precisely her failure to achieve such continuity that marks out her confession as *unreasonable*: 'To explain is to forgive, to be explained is to be forgiven, but I, I hope and fear, am inexplicable, unforgivable' (5).

Dusklands teems with explanations, some of which are more reasonable than others. Structurally, both novellas juxtapose narratives that function to explain one another: Eugene Dawn's attack on his son is placed in the context of the military research we read in his report; the historical import of Jacobus Coetzee's adventures is explained by scholarly material framing his narratives, especially S. J. Coetzee's Afterword which is made available by the translation of his son, J. M. Coetzee.²⁰ Dawn's report, addressed to his supervisor, Coetzee, presents a 'mythographic' rationale for ongoing U.S. military actions in Vietnam and he seeks a psychological explanation for his own violent actions by way of the therapy offered in the mental institution in which he ends the novella. While there is little in the account of Jacobus Coetzee to explain the motives and intentions behind his actions, the historical significance of the account is borne out in S.J.'s project to 'restore' it to the historical

²⁰ For clarity I will risk over-familiarity and refer to the various Coetzees of the second part of *Dusklands* (which I will refer to as 'Narrative') by their first names: Jacobus, S.J. and J.M. I will refer to their author as simply Coetzee, distinguishing him from Eugene Dawn's supervisor (also Coetzee) where necessary.

record. According to S.J.'s Afterword – supposedly the 1970s English translation of an Afrikaans edition published in 1951 – Jacobus's narrative is 'a work which offers the evidence of history to correct certain of the anti-heroic distortions that have been creeping into our conception of the great age of exploration' (108). S.J. offers nothing to explain the especially violent and disturbing 'Second journey into the land of the Great Namaqua.' He merely asserts its insignificance, dismissing it as 'an historical irrelevance' which 'belongs to anecdote, the evening by the hearthfire' (121).

By rearticulating the violence of these episodes in terms of myth, psychology and history – by allowing them to appear to be conditioned by myth, psychology and history – they seem to be brought inside rational discourse and made acceptable to their respective audiences. To this end, Coetzee goes to considerable lengths to differentiate the occasions of writing and, therefore, the imagined reader in each case. In this way they are similar to the model of confession described by Brooks – explaining deviant behaviour to a specific community – which is clearly an instrument of rational discourse. The fact remains, however, that the transgressions of Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee – which, like confessions, have the air of hidden truths exposed – are not easily accommodated to any historical moment. The two novellas have all the trappings of rational discourse – scholarly research, reports, commentaries, footnotes – but this is not a rational discourse that can adequately account for the transgressions avowed. In fact, rational discourse comes to seem more like disavowal than avowal.

Both *Heart* and *Dusklands* are poised between the discourse of reason – which would *explain away*²¹ the transgressions of the characters and facilitate their reintegration into the community – and a discourse that is less tractable, which cannot

²¹ Attwell uses this phrase to describe how the violence of 'Narrative' cannot be *explained away*.

be marginalised as mad but is nonetheless unreasonable in the contexts in which it is articulated. The genre of confessional literature is unique in staging the negotiation of this boundary, establishing a relationship between the individual who confesses and society but structuring this relationship as oppositional unless certain conditions can be met. These conditions are primarily a question of appropriate address: making one's case in the appropriate terminology to the appropriate person. Writing about *Heart*, Attwell comments on the apparent absence of 'action' in the novel: 'For the most part, what happens is an act of consciousness and an act of language; what historicizes this act, however, is that it is deeply transgressive' (60). In 'Double Thoughts' Coetzee would go on to describe the pattern to which confession belongs as 'transgression, confession, penitence, absolution.' If Magda's acts can be historicized by way of their transgressiveness, then perhaps her narrative, and the narrative of *Dusklands*, can be historicized to the extent that they meet – or fail to meet – the conditions of confession.

Taking as my model of the confessional novel Marcellus Emants's *A Posthumous Confession*, which was translated into English by Coetzee in the early 1970s, I will describe some of the generic conventions of confessional narrative and point to the ways in which *Dusklands* and *Heart* engage with these conventions. Specifically, taking up Magda's claim that 'character is fate,' I will explore the implications of reading these novels within the confessional paradigm. Although confession in these early novels has not acquired the full force of the desire for absolution that emerges in the later work and relies for its force on its proximity to different discourses of rationality, their engagement with confession as a set of generic conventions provides a useful way to introduce the idea of confession as a speech act that occurs within particular limits and conditions. In addition, by

exploring the determining effect of these generic conventions I hope to introduce several threads in my consideration of confessional narrative that will be carried throughout the thesis: confession as unmediated expression, the agency available to the confessing subject, and the determining effect of the confessional teleology that Coetzee describes in 'Double Thoughts.' Drawing on Coetzee's early interest in confession in his professional activities as a translator and professor of literature, I will also show how these early writings lay the ground for the intense engagement with confession in the later novels.

II

Coetzee's translation of Marcellus Emants's *Een nagelaten bekentenis* (1894), *A Posthumous Confession*, first appeared in 1975 between the publication of *Dusklands* (1974) and *Heart* (1977).²² In his introduction to a UK edition published ten years later in 1986 – roughly contemporaneous with his other major essays on confession – Coetzee places the novel in the tradition of Rousseau, describing it as a 'singularly pure example' of the genre of the confessional novel. The introduction is deeply informed by Coetzee's research and writing on confession in the intervening period, emphasising as it does both the debt to Rousseau and the essentially Rousseauian nature of the problems the novel struggles to overcome, problems that by that stage Coetzee finds resolved only in the later Dostoevsky.²³

The translation of the novel however marks an earlier stage in Coetzee's interest in confessional discourse. It is the product of a period of engagement with

²² Coetzee's translation first appeared in a US edition under the same title (Boston: Twayne, 1975) and introduced by Egbert Krispyn.

²³ There are no page numbers in the Introduction to the Quartet edition.

Dutch literature in the early 1970s in which, Coetzee admits, he might have been considered ‘a translator of professional standard’ (*Doubling* 57). Yet, by his own account his two most significant projects – translating Emants’ novel and Gerrit Achterberg’s sonnet sequence, ‘Ballade van de gasfitter’ – were undertaken without prior publishing arrangements (*Doubling* 58). The translations are therefore better seen as an extension of his literary and academic projects than mere publishing opportunism.²⁴ Coetzee’s 1977 essay on Achterberg reenacts in some detail the hermeneutic struggle from which the translation of ‘Ballade van de gasfitter’ emerged. In an interview in *Doubling* he admits ‘I began to translate it into English sonnets in 1969 in an effort to understand it, then found that I couldn’t translate it till I had understood it’ (58). One may speculate that his interest in Emants can be attributed to a similar intellectual engagement which would eventually find fruition in the essays on confession ten years later. Given the timescale indicated in *Doubling*, it seems likely that his translation of Emants’ novel dates from the period in the early 70s when he was writing *Dusklands*. As I will show, the impact of Coetzee’s choice of material for his first major translation is already evident in the novels he was writing in this period.²⁵

A Posthumous Confession is Willem Termeer’s account of the circumstances leading to the murder of his wife, Anna. Termeer’s crime is revealed approximately half way through a portentous autobiographical account of his misspent youth and miserable marriage: ‘In this house I killed Anna and in this house I am now sitting and writing’ (86). The confession is therefore the occasion for writing. This has the

²⁴ Coetzee’s is the only translation of *Een nagelaten bekentenis* or any other work by Emants listed on either the British Library or the Library of Congress catalogue.

²⁵ While my focus in this section is on *A Posthumous Confession*, I also see Coetzee’s essay on Achterberg as continuous with his interest in confession, particularly in its concern with pronouns and scenes of address.

effect of making the murder appear to be the culminating act of a doomed man after a lifetime of frustration and allows the novel to tend inevitably towards this act. In other words, the novel is plotted around the violent acts of Anna's murder. In this way, the casual cruelty with which Termeer conducted himself in his youth becomes a symptom of the more profound criminal nature that would reveal itself in his murderous acts. But equally central to the plot of *A Posthumous Confession* is the act of confessing itself; the confession is a calculated intervention in Termeer's most recent love affair with a prostitute called Caroline and the culmination of his literary ambitions, frustrated until now because of the 'trivial' nature of his subject. Termeer's ideas about art and specifically about writing are inseparable from his own autobiography. The reading experience he describes is a quest to find a reflection of his own temperament in the work before him (60) and in his earlier attempts at writing he had created 'a faithful counterfeit of myself. The story had become an unadorned revelation of my most secret feelings' (55). The story was of course a failure, the necessity to 'make the facts of my shoddy history much more interesting' proved more difficult than he thought (53-54). Yet Termeer (and Emants) is clearly revisiting the motifs of his confessional precursors, Augustine and Rousseau. In an early meditation on the value of lying and stealing Termeer comments: 'a marble doubled its value to me if it was stolen... what enticed me was the stimulation of sudden illogical aggrandizement' (11). This echoes the unaccounted for thefts in Augustine and Rousseau (pears and a ribbon respectively). Later, his insistence on ruthless self-scrutiny echoes the equally confident Rousseau: 'My gaze inward soon cleared again: in myself I had my severest, most pitiless judge' (39).

Confessional narrative is central to Peter Brooks's *Reading for the Plot*; indeed, he goes so far as to describe Rousseau of the *Confessions* as 'symbolically the

incipit of modern narrative' (33). Developing his theory in relation to *Great Expectations* he claims to have uncovered a narratological law – 'the true plot will be the most deviant' – and he explains why: 'Deviance is the very condition for life to be 'narratable': the state of normality is devoid of interest, energy, and the possibility for narration' (130, 139). Emants' book is informed by this principle, but so is Termeer's. Indeed this discovery in itself might be the most deviant plot of *A Posthumous Confession* as it seems that Termeer has killed his wife not out of mere malice but as a narrative strategy. In addition, he wonders if, by confessing his wife's murder to Caroline, his new female companion, he might not possess her completely: 'If I were to admit everything to her, and at the same time offer her the disposition over my entire fortune [...] would she not ... not find it in her to ... love me?'(193) For these reasons, confession and writing become another way of acting. It is not difficult, therefore, to understand the importance of confession as a plot device, a set of generic conventions that amount to 'a powerful narrative machine' (Brooks, 33).

But it is not just the requirements of genre that determine Termeer's criminal propensities. *A Posthumous Confession* is also freighted with the sociological, biological and psychological determinants of Termeer's actions, which he asks the reader to accept in mitigation: 'How senseless, after all, to condemn a person for physical and spiritual failings for which he is not at all responsible!'(10) Termeer considers himself to be a degenerate and his actions to be the inevitable consequences of his pathology:

I do not know how many generations of forebears had to have lived exclusively for their egotistical pleasure before a being like myself could see the light of day, but I do know that in each and every case they would have done better not to have propagated the species long enough to have a creature eventually spring from it which would recognize its ineradicable misery and thereby pay the price for one and all. (81)

Emants's interest in the sciences of heredity and psychopathology has led to his association with the naturalism of Zola.²⁶ As Coetzee sees it in 1986, however, Emants is interested less in the descriptive force of these new sciences than in the manner in which the individual experiences them. His emphasis, according to Coetzee, is on 'the powerlessness of the individual before unconscious inner forces' and the disappointment of realising how far these forces take one from one's ideal self. In the context of *A Posthumous Confession* the loss of the ideal self forms the substance of the confessional narrative, with the 'unconscious inner forces' acting to excuse the deviancy and brutality Termeer describes. For these reasons Coetzee places the novel in the tradition of Rousseau: 'Quite as much as it is a piece of self-rendering analysis and sly exhibitionism, his confession is an agonized plea for pity.' To this extent we can also reconceive the perceived naturalism of the novel in the light of the instrumentalism of the confession: if Termeer's deviancy is no more than an intensification of the values of his society then he can surely be accepted back into that society. The fact that he articulates his confession in the terms of the scientific discourses of his time indicates that he is seeking the understanding (and absolution?) of a specific audience.

But in emphasising the forces that determined his actions Termeer makes an even more compelling appeal to his imagined reader: 'Respected, honoured, decent, high-minded reader, if you think you have become so excellent by free will, why then are you not even better? Is it because you have not wanted to be, or because you could not' (157)? In his appeal to 'free will' Termeer acknowledges the extent to

²⁶ Zola is also central to Coetzee's 1974 essay 'Man's Fate in the Novels of Alex La Guma' (*Doubling*).

which the factors that determine his behaviour deprive him of agency and consequently of responsibility. In other words, they function as an excuse. But if, as the novel suggests, confession is another way of acting, then it too is determined by the forces acting on the individual subject. If this is the case, with what authority can Termeer be considered to confess?

In truth, Termeer possesses little authority as a confessant. He is so repellent a character – uncaring, misogynistic, self-obsessed, violent – that one fails to be convinced his actions are recuperable within the narrative or, indeed, that he wishes them to be. The confession is an opportunity to plead mitigating factors for his actions, but it is also (quite self-consciously) a narrative performance of deviancy. Coetzee notes in his introduction that Emants defended the novel on the basis that it allows an insight into what is hidden from view in normal life because the deviant ‘is characterized above all by an inability to censor and repress the forces at work within him.’ This uncensored quality is described by Coetzee as Termeer’s ‘gabble’: ‘so frank, so perceptive, yet so mad.’ This is part of the conceit of confession as unmediated expression, a mark of its sincerity and authenticity, but because this is a fictional staging of confession, the irony should allow us to measure the distance between Termeer and Emants. The difficulty for the reader, however, lies in reconciling the highly self-conscious and strategic deployment of confessional tropes by Termeer (and Emants) with the exposure of true deviancy claimed by the latter. In a surprising move that implicates the author in the confessional spiral of the novel, Coetzee notes: ‘Marcellus Emants is not disjunct from Willem Termeer: the author is implicated in his creature’s devious project to transmute the base metal of his self into gold.’ Emants’ novel comes to resemble Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground*, where the relentless self-unmasking of confession is a ‘self-serving fiction’ driven not

by 'a desire for the truth but a desire to *be a particular way*' ('Double Thoughts' 280).²⁷ Coetzee's disappointment with Emants is that, in spite of his claims to the contrary, his fictional confession is finally just another performance of deviancy. For those writers who have followed in the tracks of Rousseau – Emants, Dostoevsky, Coetzee – sincerity is the first casualty of his model of confession and this alone is reason enough to confess.

In *A Posthumous Confession* many of the problems of confessional narrative that come to prominence in Coetzee's later writings are already in evidence. The tension between the apparently uncensored qualities of Termeer's 'gabble' and the self-conscious plotting of the confessional form point to the competing demands that confession be a sincere expression of culpability and remorse and yet take a recognisable and highly conventional form. While the confessional form instituted by Rousseau privileges the notion of difference and the singularity of the confessant, the fact that Emants' novel follows this form and attempts to explain this difference with reference to the determining social discourses of the day makes Termeer seem more representative than exceptional. In order to retain its social function confession must be articulated in a rational language that will facilitate rehabilitation into the community and it must be addressed to that community. But this too is at odds with the supposed transgressiveness and deviancy that it describes. These problems are not articulated explicitly until the later introduction to the UK edition of the novel, at which point they seem to be utterly of a piece with Coetzee's writings on Tolstoy, Rousseau and Dostoevsky. But they are already being played out in the early fiction. The novels I discuss in this chapter engage with the generic conventions of the

²⁷ In Coetzee's introduction to *A Posthumous Confession* Emants is compared unfavourably with Dostoevsky: 'Emants, a lesser thinker, a lesser artist, a lesser psychologist (and who is not?), remains bound in Rousseau's toils.'

confessional narrative in a highly self-conscious manner. Sincerity, in these novels, is replaced by a lack of prudent self-censorship that would be virtually indistinguishable from madness were it not framed within a highly self-conscious confessional narrative. But if anything it is the relentlessly ironic deployment of confession in these novels that marks them out as *early novels*. Although Magda's longing for reciprocal relations shapes *Heart*, it is not until later that Coetzee's engagement with confession comes to be structured more seriously by the goal of absolution.

In 'The Politics of Translation' Spivak's claims for the act of translating go much further than the hermeneutic concerns expressed by Coetzee in *Doubling*. She comments that 'one of the ways to get around the confines of one's "identity" as one produces expository prose is to work at someone else's title, as one works with a language that belongs to many others. This, after all, is one of the seductions of translating. It is a simple miming of the responsibility to the trace of the other in the self' (*Outside* 179). Translating *A Posthumous Confession* afforded Coetzee an opportunity to inhabit, briefly, the Rousseauian confession that would preoccupy him for at least the next ten years. This early interest in confession is also evident in Coetzee's other professional activities of the period. Papers held at NELM show that confessional poetry was a significant part of a course he taught on Contemporary American Poetry at the State University of New York, Buffalo in summer 1970. Preparatory notes for the course show him ruminating on the significance of the writer's biography to the work of T.S. Eliot, a subject he approaches by way of Eliot's 'London Letter' on Dostoevsky from *The Dial* in 1922.²⁸ Elsewhere the notes record his interest in Spengler's writings on the significance of the reformation to the

²⁸ I will return to Eliot's consideration of Dostoevsky in chapter 4. Eliot – and Eliot's life – is also important for John, the aspiring author of *Youth*, which I discuss in chapter 6.

development of confessional literary forms and mentioned among the notes on confessional poetry is John Berryman's 'Dreamsong 29,' phrases from which are quoted almost verbatim in 'The Vietnam Project.' It is possible that his interest in other confessional literary forms emerged from his translation of Emants' novel but, one way or another, Coetzee's writing and professional activities of the early 1970s point to a concern with the form and history of confession that is earlier, more consistent and more rigorous than has previously been recognised.

Jumping forward thirty years, one finds similar concerns with the distinctiveness and singularity of the confessant in Coetzee's memoirs *Boyhood* and *Youth*. *Youth* in particular contains echoes of the self-lacerating ironies and shame-filled encounters with women evident in Emants' novel, all the more noticeable as it prepares the ground for John to write the novel with the 'aura of truth' that would become *Dusklands*.

III

The genre of the confessional narrative, at least according to the 'singular example' of *A Posthumous Confession*, requires first and foremost an avowal of guilt for a serious crime: 'a crime is a crime: I am not ashamed to name things by their names' ('Vietnam Project' 44). This in turn provides the impetus for a ready-made plot – 'I have broken a commandment, and the guilty cannot be bored' (*Heart* 11) – a compelling performance of deviancy – 'I screamed with rage, snapped my teeth, and heaved erect with a mouth full of hair and a human ear ('Narrative' 90) – and the excuse of powerful determining forces: 'I am a tool in the hands of history'

(‘Narrative’ 106). As these quotations indicate, *Dusklands* and *Heart* are perhaps the clearest examples of the genre of the confessional novel within the Coetzee *oeuvre*. The two novels together present three first person narratives recounting the events and fallout from violent crimes: Eugene Dawn’s attack on his son, Jacobus Coetzee’s vicious treatment of the members of the indigenous Southern African population, particularly the ‘Second journey,’ and Magda’s patricide. Unlike the confessants in Coetzee’s later novels, all three unambiguously avow their intention to act and the violence of their actions. Equally, they all acknowledge the potentially transgressive qualities of their actions and are to some degree conscious of its value as narrative. While they all manifest qualities of the confessional narrative it is clear from the quotations juxtaposed above that the conventions of the genre are deployed and framed in very different ways in each case.

But what is at stake in refracting *Dusklands* and *Heart* – novels that self-consciously move between genres – through the specific lens of the confessional novel? Much has been written about the specific generic qualities of these novels: adventure stories, travel narratives, quests, pastoral, farm novel, domestic novel, narrative of hysteria. In her book on Coetzee, Teresa Dovey adopts Magda’s metaphor of the hermit crab to describe her sense of Coetzee inhabiting different genres. She likens his shifting between genres *in different novels* to the crab ‘that as it grows migrates from one empty shell to another.’ Indeed this is the epigraph of her book and Dovey gives a compelling account of the various examples. Magda, however, goes on to describe the shells of the hermit crab in terms of a disguise, or even an excuse – an explanation that doesn’t so much have to be true, as serve a particular purpose at a given moment: ‘Whose shell I presently skulk in does not matter, it is the shell of a dead creature. What matters is that my anxious soft-bodied

self should have a refuge from the predators of the deep, the squid, the shark, the baleen whale, and whatever else it is that preys on the hermit crab...' (43-44). The metaphor of the hermit crab, as Dovey uses it, suggests that there is some quality of narrative, 'my anxious soft-bodied self,' that wilfully chooses and moves between shells and between genres, that is to say, it is a kind of narrative that is independent of genre. But in 'The Law of Genre' Derrida asserts that there is no genreless text anymore than there is a text that belongs to only one genre. Genre, in his account 'is precisely a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy' (227). As he sees it: 'Every text *participates* in one or several genres, there is no genreless text, there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging' (230). In this context, it is conceivable that the illusion of selecting and choosing that Dovey takes from the metaphor of the crab is simply another arm of the 'law of genre.'

To my mind, a far more powerful and apposite metaphor for the operation of genre runs through *Heart* as Magda imagines her body playing host to a range of figures, most notably, the law through which she is spoken:

The law has gripped my throat, I say and do not say, it invades my larynx, its one hand on my tongue, its other hand on my lips. How can I say, I say, that these are not the eyes of the law that stare from behind my eyes, or that the mind of the law does not occupy my skull, leaving me only enough intellection to utter these doubting words, if it is I uttering them, and see their fallaciousness? How can I say that the law does not stand fullgrown inside my shell, its feet in my feet, its hands in my hands, its sex drooping through my hole; or that when I have had my chance to make this utterance, the lips and teeth of the law will not begin to gnaw their way out of this shell, until there it stands before you, the law grinning and triumphant again, its soft skin hardening in the air, while I lie sloughed, crumpled, abandoned on the floor?
(84)

If we adapt Magda's invasion by the law to invasion by the 'law of genre,' we have a clearer picture of how Magda (and the characters in *Dusklands*) are spoken through by genre rather than selecting and choosing which genre to disguise themselves in.

Yet this model of genre has implications particular to confessional narrative. Confession as I have described it is an avowal of guilt in the first person by someone in full possession of themselves and the facts. The genre of confession, according to the model of *A Posthumous Confession*, is a carefully plotted and highly self-conscious performance of deviancy mitigated by a set of convenient determining circumstances. As I outlined above, both *Dusklands* and *Heart* in many ways fulfil these requirements, yet both novels also present specific threats to the apparent self-possession of the protagonists. In *Dusklands* the danger to the protagonists is primarily the threat posed by writing. In 'The Vietnam Project' Eugene Dawn's narrative is threatened by the report that he writes for his supervisor Coetzee and the negative response he receives. His highly self-conscious confession also risks being undermined by the confessional discourses of psychology and psychoanalysis that he believes himself to be manipulating. 'Narrative,' on the other hand, is structured by the threat of textual instability and mutilation as each participant is acutely aware of the changing and varied demands of readers in different contexts, thus manipulating the narrative to these ends. And in *Heart*, Magda's assumption of narrative control in choosing whether or not to confess ('to die an enigma with a full soul or to die emptied of my secrets...') is undermined by the apparent determining power of genre, especially as it is figured through metaphors of invasion and possession. So while these early novels explicitly engage with the genre of confessional narrative, to the extent that the crimes perpetrated by Eugene Dawn and Magda, at least, seem to be calculated to facilitate a confessional narrative, the integrity and authority of the

confessing subjects is undermined by the very form of the confessional genre. It would appear that the form of the confessional genre stages confession as a struggle between the desire for narrative control – or confessional agency – and the highly conventional, ritualised form through which it must proceed.

IV

Eugene Dawn's narrative in 'The Vietnam Project' is deeply informed by the compulsion to reveal and expose, whether it is the sordid details of his dysfunctional marriage, his adolescent poetry, the true intentions behind US military actions in Vietnam, his attack on his son or even his dreams:

I have merely told the truth. I am not afraid to tell the truth. I have never been a coward. All my life, I have found, I have been prepared to expose myself where other people would not. As a younger man I exposed myself in poetry, derivative, but not shamefully bad. Then I moved nearer the centres of power and found other ways of expressing myself. (31)

Nothing is left to the imagination with Eugene Dawn, but neither is anything disclosed that might contradict his self-presentation as dedicated to self-revelation and the victim of powerful determining forces that will be explicated by this process. In contrast to Magda's image of being possessed and spoken through by the law, Dawn believes that he can distinguish the forces that determine and explain his actions from the form of his highly self-conscious confession. He does not deny that he attacked his son, but neither does he accept final responsibility for his actions:

I know longer knew what I was doing. How else can one explain injuring one's own child, one's own flesh and blood? I was not myself. In the profoundest of senses, it was not the real I who stabbed Martin. My doctors, I think, agree with me, or can be

brought to agree with me; but their argument is that my treatment ought to start at my beginnings far in the past and work up gradually toward the present. I can see the reasonableness of this argument. All faults of character are faults of upbringing. (44)

The echoes of Emants's shameless disavowal of culpability are unmistakable – 'But whose was the fault, the original fault?' (139) Indeed, the novella (and consequently the novel) opens with a disavowal: 'My name is Eugene Dawn. I cannot help that' (1). Dawn rather cynically subscribes to the therapeutic framework of the novella: 'Before I can be allowed to leave I must come to terms with my crime' (44). But this is merely a question of displacing responsibility for his actions elsewhere as 'The Vietnam Project' ends inconclusively with his intention to pursue the confessional project: 'I have high hopes of finding whose fault I am' (49).

Behind the echoes of Emants that are evident in 'The Vietnam Project' the novella clearly has another important confessional model in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*. The similarities can be seen in the metaphor of the labyrinth (one of the metaphors that gives continuity to the two novellas and allows them to be read as a novel), the arbitrary drawing to a close of the narrative and Dawn's bookish assurance to himself of the similarity: 'There is no doubt that I am a sick man' (32) echoing the opening lines of Dostoevsky's novel: 'I am a sick man ... I am a wicked man' (3). While *Notes from Underground* is taken to be a critique of the 'sickness' of nihilism in nineteenth century Russia, and Termeer's sickness a version of the theory of degeneration, 'The Vietnam Project' is addressed to the crisis of the Vietnam War and the twentieth century popularisation of psychotherapy which in purporting to provide a cure seems to diagnose an illness.

As the institutional and psychotherapeutic context indicates, the most powerful of the determining forces experienced by Dawn are psychic forces. He

ridicules Marilyn's need for therapy, describing it as just another product on the shelves of American consumerism: 'I do not disapprove and gladly pay. If she will return to being a smiling honey-blonde with long brown legs, I do not mind by what unsound route she gets there' (11). But despite his obvious scepticism about the possibility of a cure Dawn submits himself to the readings and narratives of psychologists. Indeed, such is the power of the psychoanalytic paradigm to elicit confession and stage revelations that he conspires in his own institutionalisation: 'so if, as we pick our slow way through the labyrinth of my history, I spy an alley with all the signs of light, freedom, and glory at the end of it, I stifle my eager doubts and plod on after the good blind doctors' (47). Like the readers of his confessional narrative, the psychologists are interested in him as long as there remains something to expose: 'My secret is what makes me desirable to you, my secret is what makes me strong' (48). Eugene Dawn is clearly more interested in talking than in cure, a problem that Freud acknowledged as inherent to psychoanalysis (see chapter 1), or as Coetzee sees it in 'Confession', the problem of bringing the confession and the novel to an end.

Yet, while the novella is framed by the highly conventional narrative of Eugene Dawn's confession of the crime against his son, one has the impression that this is merely a subplot to the more serious though less easily quantifiable crime of his role as military strategist for the US army in Vietnam. Unlike the lucid description of the knife entering his son's body, Dawn can find no evidence of transgression in his professional life. But this disavowal takes an interestingly allusive form as Dawn refers to Huffy Henry, John Berryman's confessing subject in *Dreamsongs*, citing

'Dreamsong 29': 'But the truth is that like Huffy Henry I never did hack anyone up: I often reckon, in the dawn, them up: nobody is ever missing' (10).²⁹

In contrast to the highly strategic revelations of the framing material so typical of the confessional genre, Dawn's report on US military strategy in Vietnam displays an uncensored and shameless quality in its advocacy of violence and brutality against the Vietnamese with no acknowledged psychic or legal repercussions for him or other Americans involved in the campaign. He is insistent on the necessity to expose military strategy for what it is – a campaign of murder and humiliation designed to subdue the Vietnamese at any cost – devoid of the comforting fictions and statistics of justification because such consolations betray feelings of guilt: 'Until we reveal to ourselves and revel in the true meaning of our acts we will go on suffering the double penalty of guilt and ineffectualness' (29). This is not revelation as expiation of guilt that we have come to associate with confession; it is not about confronting the worst in oneself but confronting oneself with no moral or ethical barometer whatsoever. In addition, his 'mythographic' science purports to analyse the structures of Vietnamese society with the implication that the US military can exploit and undermine these structures. But as Attwell points out, this mythography relies to a large extent on psychoanalytic models of social relations like the primal horde myth of Freud's *Totem and Taboo*. This is of course part of the same psychoanalytic discourse that Dawn attempts to manipulate later in the novella. In other words, Dawn the academic has embraced Freud's founding myth as the scientific underpinning of his military propaganda in Vietnam, but in his strategic confession and renunciation of 'atavistic

²⁹ This is an almost direct quotation from John Berryman's 'Dreamsong 29,' first published in 1964: 'But never did Henry, as he thought he did,/ end anyone and hacks her body up/ and hide the pieces, where they may be found./ He knows: he went over everyone, & nobody's missing./ Often he reckons, in the dawn, them up. Nobody is ever missing.' As I note earlier, 'Dreamsong 29' was listed among material for a course on confessional poetry that Coetzee taught at Buffalo in summer 1970.

guilt' ('guilt is a black poison' [48]) he somehow believes that he – and other Americans – are not subject to the same psychic laws.

Dawn's tendency to conflate knowledge of psychology with control of his own psyche is apparent from an episode early in the novella. Concerned about his habit of clenching his fist, particularly as it is described as a symptom of depression in a book called *The Psychology of Gesture*, Dawn addresses the problem by attempting to control the gesture, which of course is simply displaced into other parts of his body (4-5). Likewise, his insistent renunciation of guilt is undermined by the language of disease and invasion that seems to describe an out-of-control super-ego:

I know and I know and I know what it is that has eaten away at my manhood from inside, devoured the food that should have nourished me. It is a thing, a child not mine, once a baby squat and yellow whelmed in the dead center of my body, sucking my blood, growing by my waste, now, 1973, a hideous mongol boy who stretches his limbs inside my hollow bones, gnaws my liver with his smiling teeth, voids his bilious filth into my systems, and will not go. (38-39)

The similarities to Magda's image of possession by the law are pointed, but Dawn's narrative is not marked by the uncertainties that destabilise Magda's narrative ('how can I say, I say...'). Instead of the image of the law, we have the image of the war internalised as a parasite, feeding on him and strengthening its hold over him – a more vivid embodiment of the super-ego than even Freud could come up with, yet Dawn believes that he retains control ('I know...'). But while psychoanalysis clearly has great descriptive power in *Dusklands*, description alone does not account for or ameliorate what is most disturbing in the novel. Psychoanalysis appears to be productive in descriptive and narrative terms for Dawn, but it has no ethical weight as he retains the illusion of narrative control. 'The Vietnam Project' clearly works within the generic conventions of the confessional narrative as I described them in the

case of *A Posthumous Confession*, particularly in its deployment of the excuse of powerful determining forces.

As I have mentioned, the sincerity that guaranteed the truthfulness of Rousseau's *Confessions* is replaced in *Dusklands* by an absence of prudent self-censorship (with respect to everything except confession, though this could be another symptom), so that in its apparent lack of shame and blindness with respect to its own motives Eugene Dawn's highly rational narrative comes to seem deeply unreasonable and unamenable to rehabilitation into the community. While the discourse of popular psychology, which is after all a variety of confession, allows the America of 'The Vietnam Project' to 'contain its deviants'³⁰ as *deviant because...* it can only account for Eugene Dawn's report if we accept it as another symptom of his madness.

V

The issue of how a society accounts for deviant behaviour, or decides what constitutes deviant behaviour, is the central preoccupation of 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee,' the companion story to 'The Vietnam Project' in *Dusklands*. The deviant in question is the eighteenth century hunter/explorer Jacobus Coetzee whose supposedly autobiographical account of his adventures in southern Africa constitutes the major part of the novella. In the course of his narrative Jacobus openly avows his part in numerous murders, most notably a brutal raid on a camp in the Great Namaquas. However, while he accepts responsibility for the deaths in the manner required of a confession, his narrative displays no hint of remorse or fear of censure:

³⁰ 'In my cell in the heart of America, with my private toilet in the corner, I ponder and ponder' (49).

‘No more than any other man do I enjoy killing; but I have taken it upon myself to be the one to pull the trigger’ (106).

‘The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee’ – the first person account which makes up the greater part of the novella and the accompanying paratextual material – purports to recreate the dissemination and reception of Jacobus’s account of his travels. For this reason we have three different versions of his adventures – the autobiographical account, a scholarly Afterword by S.J. Coetzee and an appendix claiming to be the deposition of Jacobus Coetzee to an official of the Dutch East India Company in 1760. These different versions reinvent the historical Jacobus Coetsé Jansz, whose journal was published by the Van Riebeeck Society in Cape Town in 1935,³¹ for different readerships in different historical moments: the bureaucrats of the Dutch East India Company in Cape Town in 1760, readers of scholarly Afrikaans texts in South Africa in the 1930s and 40s, and readers of English translations of those texts in South Africa in the 1970s. Not to mention readers of South African literature written in English since the 1970s. The consensus of the latter – by far the easiest to establish! – is that in Jacobus J.M. Coetzee has created a character of true savagery, equal to the brutal devastation wrought on indigenous populations in the name of colonial expansion. ‘Second journey,’ a description of Jacobus’s revenge attack on his servants, is singled out for its brutality. Attridge notes that the attack is carried out with ‘the utmost savagery’ (15); for Castillo it is an ‘unleashed homicidal frenzy’ (116); Dovey calls it ‘a pornography of violence’ (114) while Peter Knox-Shaw intensifies his general disapproval at the novel, commenting that ‘the writing itself furthers the claims of true savagery’ (114). Attwell has no doubt that the novella is

³¹ The ‘Appendix: Deposition of Jacobus Coetzee’ follows this document quite closely though, as Attwell points out, it deviates in some crucial respects.

calculated to provoke the reader: 'Such writing is surely transgressive, not in a theoretical manner that enables one to *explain it away*, but in an aggressive mode that is aimed at readers' sensibilities' (55 emphasis added).

If the violence and the *writing* of 'Narrative' cannot be explained away, as these readings attest, how is it possible to consider the manner in which the novel accounts for the deviancy of Jacobus, or indeed, how might it be read, alongside 'The Vietnam Project,' as a confessional text? The idea of being able to 'explain it away' is crucial: as an instrument of rational discourse, this is essentially the function of confessional narrative; the significance of the confessions of *Dusklands* and *Heart* is the failure to 'explain away' their respective transgressions, and the reasons for this failure.

In 'The Vietnam Project' the causal relationship between Dawn's report and his confession is clearly marked for the reader in his move from library to mental institution and in the change of (fictional) addressee from military strategist to psychiatrist. In 'Narrative' what explanation comes to us is a result of the narrative being located in three different subjects addressing different audiences at different times. The travel accounts of Jacobus take up the greater part of the narrative and contain the most shocking avowals of violent conduct but S.J.'s 'Afterword' is also deeply disturbing in its attempt to efface the violence of the earlier account, and one must subscribe to the fiction that the final authority to present and position the material lies with J.M. as translator. So where in the cracks between these three potential confessing subjects might a confessional narrative emerge? And what kind of confessional narrative might it be if it fails to explain away the transgressions?

The model of the confessional genre that I have taken from Emants and applied to 'The Vietnam Project' is only remotely applicable to Jacobus's first-person

account of his adventures. It is unquestionably a performance of deviancy, as critics of *Dusklands* acknowledge, but to my mind it lacks the self-conscious quality of the confessional narratives of Termeer or Dostoevsky's underground man that mark their deviancy first and foremost as *performance*. Jacobus's account of his transgressions does not give rise to the kind of gratuitous self-reproach we have come to associate with confession, but instead lapses into an utterly unconvincing performance of the sentimental but macho code of honour between foes, soldiers or hunters. For example, Jacobus describes the botched killing of Plaatje: 'I fired and lowered my gun. Plaatje was still standing. "Fall, damn you!" I said. Plaatje took two steps forward. "You, kill him, he's not dead!" I shouted, pointing at the Griqua who stood nearest him. "Yes, yes you: use your sword: in the neck!" I slashed the air with [the] edge of my hand' (104-5). We are told that Scheffer, his accomplice, walks away before Plaatje dies but Jacobus, supposedly observing a more noble code between foes, muses on best practice when killing a bird and then turns his attention to Plaatje: 'I cuddled his head and shoulders and raised him a little. My arms were lapped in blood. ... He was dying fast. "Courage", I said, "we admire you"' (105). The 'narrative machine' of the confession is driven by relentless self-unveiling, self-reproach and excuses but insofar as there is a gratuitous quality to Jacobus's account it is in the gruesome detail of the violent acts he commits and the awkward shift of register to a thoroughly unconvincing display of sentimentality mired in cliché.³² This is not inflected with any hint of regret; rather, in its self-affirmation it is continuous with the violence of the episode.

³² This is what Attridge terms 'Coetzee's 'modernism': 'a different literary practice, willing to reveal its own dependence on convention and its own part in the exercise of power' (17).

There is some attempt to explain the crimes committed by Jacobus, albeit a half-hearted one. To justify the vengeful nature of his mission in 'Second journey' Jacobus invokes the story of the sparrow: 'There are acts of justice I tell them (I told them), and acts of injustice, and all bear their place in the economy of the whole. Have faith, be comforted, like the sparrow you are not forgotten' (101). Jacobus, however, fails to notice that the sparrow is not remembered in a spirit of vengeance, but of charity and love. Following the gruesome descriptions of the deaths of his servants, as illustrated in the above example, Jacobus speculates about the need to provide an explanation: 'if any expiation, explanation, palinode be needed' (106). Needless to say, he offers little by way of consolation for his actions, attributing the deaths to the 'economy of the whole' with which he patronised his victims: 'I have taken it upon myself to be the one to pull the trigger ... committing upon the dark folk the murders we have all wished. All are guilty, without exception. I include the Hottentots. Who knows for what unimaginable crimes of the spirit they died, through me? God's judgement is just, irreprehensible, and incomprehensible. His mercy pays no heed to merit. I am a tool in the hands of history.'(101 & 106) In imagining himself as the agent of greater forces – God, history – Jacobus is disavowing his role in the violent events he records. At the same time, in the 'desolate infinity' of his power Jacobus is inventing and enacting 'God's judgement,' creating the 'evidence of history.' God and history may be presented as determining forces, but they can be made to determine everything and anything.

Eugene Dawn's report in 'The Vietnam Project,' unhinged as it is, is nominally addressed to his supervisor Coetzee and its sense of disclosure is informed by a refusal to be contained by the consoling fictions of rational discourse (though paradoxically in the name of rational discourse). Taken as a whole 'Narrative' is also

informed by such an ethic of disclosure, but in Jacobus's account of his adventures no inhibiting factors seem to apply. Jacobus's first person account – whether autobiographical or the product of S.J.'s imagination – has no discernable addressee, no awareness of itself as transgressive and no apparent obstacles that needed to be overcome in order for it to be articulated. Taken in isolation from the rest of 'Narrative' it is not a confession but a display of violence and deviancy without shame.

Dovey has shown how the gruesome details which drive Jacobus's account belong to the adventure story or exploration narrative (111) but the gratuitous detail in which the violence is recorded can only be understood in the context of the framing material. S.J.'s 'Afterword' purports to 'restore' these elements as the 'truth' of colonial exploration: 'Mere circumstances, notably the truncated account of Coetzee's explorations hitherto current, have conspired to maintain the stereotype ['credulous hunter'] and hide from us the true stature of the man' (108). So in S.J.'s 'Afterword' we finally have those elements of the confession absent from Jacobus's account: information to reveal, an audience to persuade, obstacles to be overcome and the overall necessity for disclosure. The startling omission from S.J.'s account, however, is the element of transgression; there is no overt acknowledgement in the afterword of the brutality and aggression which Attwell calls 'a social fact' of the reader's experience of *Dusklands* (55). In fact, what occurs in the afterword is completely at odds with the declared intention to 'present a more complete and therefore more just view of Jacobus Coetzee' (108). It is not simply a disavowal of the violence of Jacobus's account, but an effacement of the gratuitous detail that is so painstakingly, and painfully, recorded: 'His journey and sojourn north of the Great River, his return, his second expedition with Hendrik Hop, full of incident though

they are, are nevertheless somewhat of an historical irrelevance' (121). Implicit in this omission is an acknowledgement of the inconvenient nature of this aspect of the material for the story, or history, that he is attempting to restore to 'the annals of exploration' as they stand in the early twentieth century. There is of course much at stake in the history and historiography of this period and 'Narrative' inserts itself into this historiography. *The Journals of Jacobus Coetsé Jansz* were published by the Van Riebeeck Society in Cape Town in 1935; within the fiction of *Dusklands*, S.J. delivered the lectures that form the substance of the afterword at the University of Stellenbosch between 1934 and 1948, that is, until the coming to power of the National Party; his Afrikaans edition of the text would be published in 1951. As Attwell has pointed out, in this novella Coetzee is 'largely concerned with the discursive resources and the legacy of that achievement' (44).

In this context, S.J.'s repackaging of the exploration narrative is a confession of the most disingenuous kind. In erasing from his historical evaluation the violence and excess of Jacobus's actions in 'second journey' ('an historical irrelevance') he is acknowledging the shocking and deviant nature of Jacobus's actions. At the same time, in allowing them to be published under his editorship he is clearly satisfying his readers' desire for the performance of deviancy we find in the account. His disingenuousness is underlined in his treatment of hunting. In the 'Afterword' he laments the absence of hunting adventures in Jacobus's narrative: 'Hunting adventures lend excitement, however spurious, to history. Their structure is dramatically satisfying: complacency (I have a gun), discomfiture (my gun is not loaded, you have teeth/tusks/horns), relief (you jump the wrong one and/or I shoot you despite all)' (116). To compensate for this omission S.J. presumes to augment the passing detail that Jacobus managed to kill two elephants with a vivid account of his

struggle to kill an elephant cow, concluding: 'I trust you have enjoyed this adventure' (117). In spite of the confused and blurred metaphorical framework whereby the Bushman (San) is described as a beast and must be treated like one – 'Heartless as baboons they are, and the only way to treat them is like beasts' (58) – S.J. chooses not to read Jacobus's three-page account of hunting the Bushman as a 'hunting adventure' (58-60). The basic elements of the hunting adventure that account for the narrative pleasure that S.J. describes – complacency, discomfiture, relief – are glossed over in his description of the threat posed by Bushmen to the farmers of the frontier (113-14). He admits that the farmers implemented a campaign of terror in order to protect the land they seized from the Bushmen from revenge attacks, but carefully notes: 'The commando expeditions were thus in no sense genocidal' (114). If, as Attwell claims of Magda's acts in *Heart*, they are historicized by being deeply transgressive, then S.J.'s acts are historicized by their complete effacement of transgression.³³

By this account, we must assume that the acts of J.M. as translator and editor of the 1970s edition can similarly be accounted for by the period (and language) in which he worked. If this is the case, then J.M. alone carries the entire confessional burden of the novella. This is a significant problem given that our potential confessant speaks in his own voice only to introduce the three accounts of Jacobus's adventures, claiming responsibility solely for the translations from Dutch and Afrikaans and the minor detail of restoring 'two or three brief passages omitted from my father's edition' (55). It is of course entirely possible to read this admission as

³³ In his essay on Geoffrey Cronjé, Coetzee finds a covert warning to the reader that the text has been self-censored: 'To read Cronjé fully, then, to join those of his readers who are *in the know*, the aspirant reader must put back into the text the hostility whose overt expression has been euphemized or elided' (*Giving Offense* 170). Coetzee also remarks on the way in which Cronjé himself was eventually written out of the history of the Broederbond, speculating that it was 'perhaps because his language was too crude by the standards of the ethnic-pluralist Newspeak of the late 1970s' (261n9).

less than ingenuous. There are many problematic details in the three accounts of Jacobus's adventures that might be explained by the intervention of a malicious translator, among them, the anomalous accounts of Klawer's death, anachronisms like Jacobus's citation of Blake, the interpolation of surreal lists of bodily matter at the end of S.J.'s afterword, described as '*Scripta manent*' (119) and the subtle deviations of the 'Deposition' from the original *Journals of Jacobus Coetsé Jansz*. As author, J.M. Coetzee's exploitation of actual historical documents and published materials which are parodied, amplified and rewritten for inclusion in *Dusklands* creates a traceable material archive beyond the novel against which his reworkings can be measured and analysed (setting in motion a critique that has far-reaching consequences for these materials). However, no such archive or original exists against which the potentially devious translation of J.M. can be measured. So is it possible to apply the model of the confessional genre – with its guilt, plotting, deviancy and excuses – to 'Narrative?'

Taken as a whole, 'Narrative' supplies all the elements of a confessional narrative, but not in the form that we might expect: the avowals of Jacobus and S.J. are remorseless and unapologetic, the narrative is plotted around gross acts of violence but in the name of adventure rather than self-reproach, the deviancy is attested by readers if ignored by the narrating subjects, and the excuses – 'history' for Jacobus and 'anecdote' for S.J. – ring particularly hollow. In spite of S.J.'s claims to present a 'complete' picture of Jacobus – which he does insofar as he makes Jacobus's narrative available – he disavows the most objectionable aspects of the narrative. If disavowal is the characteristic motion of the confession, then S.J. is an apologist of sorts for Jacobus. J.M., on the other hand, makes no claims except to translate and restore; he makes no comment, gives no excuses and takes no obvious

pleasure (or displeasure) in the task at hand. He is, historically, in a comparable position to some of Coetzee's later confessants, but if he experiences this as guilt or complicity it remains unarticulated.

The rebellion of the son, J.M., against the father, S.J., would fit very nicely into Eugene Dawn's primal horde myth. But is it asking too much of the force of South African history in the 1970s that it might have provided the conditions where the son must rebel against the father? That is to say, is J.M.'s translation historicizable as a confession? *Dusklands* opens with the compulsive revelations of Eugene Dawn in 'The Vietnam Project,' neatly setting up the framework of the confessional genre at the beginning of the novel and foregrounding its status as an essentially self-serving tool of rational discourse. Following this, the first person narratives of 'Narrative' have a relentlessly shameless quality that defies categorisation as confession. However, the most complete act of disclosure staged in *Dusklands* is undoubtedly J.M.'s act of translating, publishing and disseminating his father's edition of *Het relaas van Jacobus Coetzee, Janszoon* into English to a potentially unsympathetic readership in the 1970s. It brings to mind the dedication of John's Aunt Annie to her father's manuscript in *Boyhood*, which appears to be carried out in a spirit of unyielding loyalty but which is recounted alongside figures and accounts of mutilation in the memoir. J.M.'s actions reflect that 'the challenge was to undergo the history' (105, see Attwell 57) And not alone that. J.M.'s act of disclosure is an act of filiation which acknowledges complicity in the colonial project that continues to play itself out in South Africa in the 1970s. He is assuming the shame of his ancestors' actions and omissions without recourse to the performance or excuse typical of the confessional genre. Making no pleas on behalf of Jacobus or S.J., neither is he expressing the desire to be rehabilitated into the community typical of

the confession in a legal or religious context. If it is a confession, it is a confession of complicity rather than a confession that seeks to 'explain away' the transgressions it recounts.

V

In *Heart* Magda murders her father, twice:

The axe sweeps up over my shoulder. All kinds of people have done this before me, wives, sons, lovers, heirs, rivals, I am not alone. Like a ball on a string it floats down at the end of my arm, sinks into the throat below me, and all is suddenly tumult. (11)

I slide the barrel of the rifle between the curtains. Resting the stock on the windowsill I elevate the gun until it points very definitely toward the far ceiling of the room and, closing my eyes, pull the trigger. [...] there is simply the jerk of the butt against my shoulder, the concussion, flat, unremarkable, and then a moment of silence before the first of the screams. (61)

The descriptions are realistic even if the effect (death) is somewhat estranged from the cause (axe, gun) and from the action (Magda's action) in both cases. Yet the combined effect of these descriptions is to place both accounts in doubt. At the very least, the second version of events annuls the first in a movement that in one sense is characteristic of the dynamic of reassessment one finds in confession. But there is no real suggestion of a revised position or 'truer' version of events in the novel, thereby forcing the reader to reassess the nature of the narrative itself – it may not be the account of an unreliable narrator (already established in the opening lines), or even a delusional narrator, but a sign of a fundamental rupture between 'I' and the reality of the events described.³⁴ As long as there is 'I' there can be anything.

³⁴ For a discussion of the kinds of reading such passages invite see Attridge (23-29).

The continuity of the 'I' creates the fiction of immersion in Magda's first person narration, so there is no point of view external to Magda's from which to verify that either murder actually took place. 'I' grants a continuity and coherence to *In the Heart of the Country* that is at odds with the events described. Emile Benveniste defines 'I' as: 'the individual who utters the present instance of discourse containing the linguistic instance *I*,' thus explaining the continuity achieved by Coetzee's use of the first person throughout the novel (218). But one might argue that Coetzee's decision to break the narrative into 266 numbered sections undermines the coherence of the 'I' by fragmenting the 'instance of discourse.' This incoherence is not a symptom of madness but a property of narrative. But while this might provide some logical force to the otherwise irreconcilable confessions, like the confessional discourses of 'The Vietnam Project,' the threat of textual mutilation in 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' and the determining effects of genre, the fragmented 'I' undermines the authority and self-possession of the confessing subject.

But such is the power of the narrative machine of transgression and confession that the novel is nonetheless sustained by the aftermath of both crimes. Murder provides an immediate (if short-lived) resolution to the problems of inactivity and torpor that Magda may have had to face in other genres:

For no longer need I fret about how to fill my days. I have broken a commandment, and the guilty cannot be bored. I have two full-grown bodies to get rid of besides many other traces of my violence. I have a face to compose, a story to invent, and all before dawn when Hendrik comes for the milking-pail! (11-12)

The crime sets in motion a whole array of activities that drive the novel forward from tending the wound and moving the body to the logistics of burial. Equally significant for the ongoing viability of the narrative is the introspection that it occasions: 'Is it

possible that there is an explanation for all the things I do, and that that explanation lies inside me, like a key rattling in a can, waiting to be taken out and used to unlock the mystery' (62)? The confession that the crime occasions both creates the 'interior' that must be expressed and situates it within rational discourse.

Yet, Magda's is not just any crime. Patricide is singularly transgressive, the breaking of a fundamental taboo and, like the other crimes in the novel (incest, miscegenation), it has been chosen because of the specific nature of the transgression. As already indicated, Attwell notes that Magda's actions are historicized by their transgressiveness. The Ravan Press archive at NELM contains several letters from Coetzee to his publisher Peter Randall, written while he would have been working on *Heart*, inquiring about Ravan's position on publishing books that might be banned (NELM 98.8.1.87). The letters show that Coetzee was making these inquiries as early as 1975, demonstrating the presence of the censorship apparatus in the consciousness of writers and publishers in South Africa in the 1970s and perhaps indicating his awareness that the book he was writing posed a specific challenge to the 1974 Act. Closer to publication, Coetzee suggested to Randall that in the event of banning the book might be published with certain sections blanked out. Transgressive as it is, Coetzee was not concerned with Magda's patricide, but with the passages describing Magda's rape by Hendrik (sections 206, 209 and 221). Peter D. McDonald's research in the archive of the Publications Control Board shows that Coetzee was correct in his assessment of potentially offensive material as all three readers of the embargoed novel drew attention to sections 206-211 as 'potentially undesirable' (*TLS Online*). What Coetzee could not have foreseen, however, is the manner in which all three readers manage to *explain away* material that they deem potentially offensive. According to McDonald one reader 'all but ignored it,' another was more matter of

fact but optimistic about it and the third found it continuous with Magda's role as tragic heroine. The unlikely outcome of McDonald's research – which also takes into account readers' reports on *Barbarians* and *Michael K* – is to point to the individuals who sat on censorship committees – a source of great anxiety and speculation in Coetzee's letters to Randall and other writers – as his allies. So while Magda's actions seem to be selected for their uniquely transgressive status, which in my reading initiates a confessional narrative, it is clear that, in keeping with Attwell's assertion, transgressiveness is not universal or ahistorical as psychoanalysis, for example, might claim but, like the censors' own guidelines, it depends for its effect on its average or likely reception.

As a result of the specific nature of her crime, the introspection initiated by the murder is bound up with Magda's self-presentation as a transgressor: 'I ask myself: What is it in me that lures me into forbidden bedrooms and makes me commit forbidden acts' (12)? And she reaches for the same drawer to explain these highly determined violations, echoing Emants: 'Original sin, degeneracy of the line: there are two fine, bold hypotheses for my ugly face and my dark desires, and for my disinclination to leap out of bed this instant and cure myself' (23). After the second murder, she feels similar determining pressures: 'A crime has been committed. There must be a criminal. Who is the guilty one? I am at a terrible disadvantage. Forces within me belonging to the psychology I so abhor will take possession of me and drive me to believe that I willed the crime, that I desired my father's death' (70). *Heart* quickly establishes itself within the conventions of the confessional genre and Magda, self-conscious narrator that she is, proceeds through the characteristics of this genre (and others) with the certainty of one who has read the books and knows the formula. Yet, like Dawn's knowledge of psychology, this does not grant her control

of events. Magda is working from the script of a confessional novel but attempting to alter the narrative in crucial ways. Also, if the reception of the novel outlined above is a reminder of the specific limits within which actions are transgressive, we come to realise that Magda's confession also has a very specific focus.

The trigger for Magda's murderous rage toward her father on both occasions is the entry into his life of another woman: in the first instance, 'the new wife' who is introduced in the opening line and secondly the new wife of Hendrik, one of the workers on the farm, who is quickly installed in her father's bed as mistress. We might say that Magda's rebellion is a typical oedipal conflict, but it is more accurately described as a rebellion against the social order precipitated by both unions. The new wife promises to reinstate the ideal farm family: "I want to make a happy household," she croons, circling, "the three of us together. I want you to think of me as a sister, not an enemy." (4) Accordingly, the seemingly transgressive union with Klein-Anna is the other side of this happy family: a desire all the more intense and all the more satisfying for being prohibited but facilitated utterly by the social structures that obtain on the farm: 'The truth is that he needs our opposition, our several oppositions, to hold the girl away from him, to confirm his desire for her, as much as he needs our opposition to be powerless against that desire. It is not privacy that he truly wants, but the helpless complicity of watchers' (34). In both cases, a social order is instigated and maintained by the father for his pleasure and with the intention of consolidating his position of authority. Magda's patricide is therefore an ambitious attack on this social order that seeks not merely to change it but to replace it. After the first murder she must calm herself 'in preparation for what must be a whole new phase of my life' (11).

But acts alone are not sufficient to rebuild the social order. The narrative precipitated by her violent acts is to be the means whereby a social order is constructed which will offer her real reciprocal relations. This must be a narrative that observes the rituals of confession and penitence, atonement and reparation, reconciliation. It is the kind of confession that is made, according to Susan Van Zanten Gallagher in *Truth and Reconciliation*, 'in order to construct, or reconstruct, a 'self' within a particular community' (17). But just as transgression requires certain limits, here the specificity of confession becomes visible. The problem for Magda is that she does not wish to be reintegrated into her existing community – the typical family of the South African farm novel and the wider rural community of neighbours – she wishes to construct for herself a social unit with the servants,³⁵ 'the brown people' among whom she has always lived:

I grew up with the servants' children. I spoke like one of them before I learned to speak like this. I played their stick and stone games before I knew I could have a dolls' house with Father and Mother and Peter and Jane asleep in their own beds and clean clothes ready in the chest whose drawers slid in and out while Nan the dog and Felix the cat snoozed before the kitchen coals. [...] How am I to endure the ache of whatever it is that is lost without a dream of a pristine age, tinged perhaps with the violet of melancholy, and a myth of expulsion to interpret my ache to me? (6-7)

For this reason she renounces the tendency of the confessional narrative to explain, to place her crimes in a context that will make them comprehensible and consequently forgivable which is the basic premise of the rehabilitative model of confession described by Gallagher. Instead Magda wishes to remain isolated and ostracized from the old social order: 'To explain is to forgive, to be explained is to be forgiven, but I, I hope and fear, am inexplicable, unforgivable' (5).

³⁵ Attwell notes that Magda is 'to the very end seeking transfiguration through recognition' (68). I am to some extent rearticulating this in terms of confessional narrative.

However, two problems immediately present themselves: the inadequacy of the confession to this kind of project and, moreover, the absence of any other kind of narrative that might achieve it. Firstly, she is restricted by the laws and conventions of her chosen medium, the confessional narrative, so that as soon as she declares her 'true' intention to resist 'explanation' the next logical step, according to the conventions of the genre, is to undermine this intention:

(Yet what is it in me that shrinks from the light? Do I really have a secret or is this bafflement before myself only a way of mystifying my better, questing half? Do I truly believe that stuffed in a crack between my soft mother and my baby self lies the key to this black bored spinster? Prolong yourself, prolong yourself, that is the whisper I hear in my inmost.) (5)

This is an early example in Coetzee of the classic motion of confessional narrative, what he would go on to call 'double thought.' Located in parentheses and built from interrogatives, it undermines the previous sentiments in a devastating fashion and all, finally, in the name of narrative. If, as Magda comments a couple of paragraphs earlier, 'character is fate' then her fate as a character in a confessional narrative is for her consciousness to circle continuously back upon itself. In this way we can see that Magda's intentions of finding release from the existing social order through transgression and then confession might be defeated by the limits of the confessional narrative itself: 'What automatism is this, what liberation is it going to bring me, and without liberation what is the point of my story?' (4) The problems that Magda encounters are those presented by the form of the confessional narrative – its conventionality, its machine-like qualities and its failure to deliver a satisfactory resolution. But while the liberation Magda seeks is clearly a foreshadowing of the importance of absolution in Coetzee's later writings on confession, this liberation points to a key quality of Coetzee's later fictional confessions and the kind of

absolution they seek. Confession in Coetzee is almost always addressed to a figure that might be described as marginal, disadvantaged or other. Where confession is addressed to figures of authority or the confessant's peers (the magistrate addressing Joll, Mrs Curren addressing the police, David Lurie addressing the university committee) it is in a spirit of outrage or deliberate refusal to participate in the conventions of the encounter. Starting with Magda, therefore, and continuing through his writings on confession in the mid-80s, confession in Coetzee is always made with the desire to be accepted into a *new* community rather than rehabilitated into the existing one. This is structurally an impossible task and leads to confession that seems only to excuse and exonerate and propagate itself. But what other means are available to Magda to construct an alternative social order based on reciprocal relations?

If deterministic master narratives have been at the heart of the confessional narratives that I have discussed so far – heredity, psychology, history – genre itself becomes the determining force in *Heart*. Magda is, in a sense, locked in a struggle between the determining power of the confessional narrative and the pastoral. At the same time, this struggle allows us to measure the distance between Magda and, say, Eugene Dawn: she does not capitulate easily to either genre. In the final lines she claims to have resisted the pastoral (as a hymn) 'because (I thought) it was too easy' (139) as well as the lure of explanations typical of the confession: 'Have I ever fully explained to myself why I do not run away from the farm and die in civilization in one of the asylums I am sure must abound there...' (138) The novel is full of such assertions of defiance and she demonstrates a similar perseverance in trying to create her ideal community in spite of the overwhelming forces that determine social relations.

Although Magda's crime, strictly speaking, transgresses the laws that single her out as part of a community, as I have already pointed out, her reparative actions are largely directed at Hendrik and Klein-Anna, who are excluded from Magda's community by those same laws. Indeed, at least in the case of the second murder, there is a sense that Magda is acting on behalf of Hendrik and Klein-Anna who have been the victims of her father's desires. However such acting-on-behalf-of implicates rather than exonerates Hendrik. Her unapologetic refusal to hide her murderous intentions from Hendrik, which is one way of confessing, also implicates him deeply in the crime. In this way Magda's community-forming strategy has two aspects: constructing a community through transgression and confession and constructing a community through complicity. These two strategies coincide in Magda's obsession with cleaning, a task performed by servants but the territory on which Magda will attempt to demonstrate her good intentions. After the first murder she recognises the necessity of purification, cleaning up her bloody mess and avoiding the defilement of the dead body: 'How fortunate at times like these that there is only one problem, a problem of cleanliness. Until this bloody afterbirth is gone there can be no new life for me' (15). The shooting gives rise to a similar crisis of hygiene. In the immediate aftermath Magda tries to enlist Hendrik's help to dispose of the body in her imagined spirit of companionship or complicity. Hendrik is less than compliant, however, so she must resort to violence and finally ends up threatening him with a gun: 'Hendrik, get up at once or I shoot' (66, 68). The basis on which Hendrik will 'help' Magda is not what she had envisaged. But carrying out the task, Hendrik's role as servant and accomplice diverge even further: he will help to prepare the ground but he stops short of burying his master in spite of Magda's pleas.

In the days and weeks after the murder Magda occupies herself increasingly with domestic chores. On the one hand she imagines this as penitence for her crime: 'With the dark subtle figures of Hendrik and Klein-Anna wagging their fingers behind me I shall find my days turned into a round of penitence. I shall find myself licking my father's wounds, bathing Klein-Anna and bringing her to his bed, serving Hendrik hand and foot' (70). But as she invites them to stay with her in the house and shares the domestic chores with them, she is trying to create a new domestic order. As part of this fantasy of harmonious life between them she attempts to cultivate a sisterly bond with Klein-Anna and enters into sexual relations with Hendrik. But in spite of her momentous act of rebellion in killing her father, and the apparent power deficit as a result of his absence, the conditions in which she might form a community with Hendrik and Klein-Anna do not prevail. Her attempts at sisterly bonding with Klein-Anna falter on the unavailability of a language of sisterhood and the sexual relations she imagined with Hendrik come unstuck on another determining literary motif: the rape of the white woman by the black man.

The narrative of 'life on the farm' disintegrates completely as the novel progresses: Hendrik and Klein-Anna leave, the sheep become wild, the farm ceases to be a source of income (a process which has always been mysterious to Magda) and Magda comes closer to the role of hysteric. Her mania for cleaning and purification persists: 'the dust of ages ... has been swept out of doors' but her fastidiousness does not stretch to the farm (95). Her irrationality is underlined in the complete absence of economic self-interest with respect to the farm. She seems to subsist but turns her back on the farm as an economic enterprise: 'For the rest, the rye can die, the lucerne can die. The cow is drying up, the cow can die' (96). Her bizarre communications with the sky-gods seems to seal her fate as insane. In the sky-gods she has invented a

divinity to confess to and improvised a language in which to do it. Her impression that she possesses innate knowledge of Spanish is not all that far removed from her myths of self-invention elsewhere in the novel or, indeed, the notion of confession as unmediated expression. She understands their universal meanings by 'mechanisms I cannot detect, so deeply embedded in me do they lie' (124).

If genre itself is the determining force in *Heart*, Magda is, in a sense, locked in a struggle between the determining power of the confessional narrative (the narrative of the female hysteric being a variation on this) and the pastoral. In the context of a discussion about *Heart* as a pastoral novel in *Doubling*, Coetzee seems to suggest an explanation for Magda's much-touted madness. Magda, he says, 'is an anomalous figure' because 'her passion doesn't belong in the genre in which she finds herself' (62). But is there any more a place for Magda's passion in the confessional genre than in the pastoral? In addition to satisfying generic conventions, confession must meet certain performative conditions in order to attain its presumed goal of absolution or rehabilitation into the community, the most important of which is that it be addressed to someone, a confessor, with the power to in some way validate the confession (by absolving, by passing sentence). Confession is therefore fundamentally a problem of address, that is, *appropriate address*. In the staged confession of 'The Vietnam Project' Eugene Dawn is ostensibly addressing his supervisor and psychologists. Much of 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' is similarly structured by an awareness of a particular readership. Magda's madness in *Heart*, much like that of Eugene Dawn, arises in her failure to observe the conventions of address appropriate to her society. This can be seen in her relations with her father and stepmother, with the servants, her neighbours, even in her struggle to communicate with the sky gods. But this merely highlights that there is no

available mode of address for the kinds of social relations Magda wishes to form. Coetzee has recreated some of the restraining forces that act on Magda in the form of the generic conventions both she and the reader struggle to negotiate, which is once more a question of appropriate address within a shared code. But while the restraining forces and limits become visible in *Heart*, there seems to be no position from which they might be transcended.

Magda's struggle to find an appropriate mode of address to initiate new social relations is, as I pointed out at the start of this section, an effect of the coherence of the first person pronoun 'I.' In his 1977 essay on Gerrit Achterberg Coetzee draws on work by Benveniste and Buber on pronouns to demonstrate the interdependence of 'I' and 'you.' In spite of all her assertions to the contrary, there is more than a hint of desperation in Magda's 'I.' 'I' is an assertion of agency and freedom but by a subject that is spoken and acted through to the end of the novel: 'I have uttered my life in my own voice throughout (what a consolation that is), I have chosen at every moment my own destiny, which is to die here in the petrified garden...' (139). The 'I' of these closing lines is the 'I' of the confession, an avowal of agency and culpability undercut only slightly by doubting voice interpolated in parentheses. These lines equally seem to lapse into a kind of Coetzeean pastoral, but it seems to me that pastoral itself becomes the subject of confession: 'I am corrupted to the bone with the beauty of this forsaken world. If the truth be told, I never wanted to fly away with the sky-gods' (139).

CHAPTER THREE

'...anything was possible': Transformation, Repetition and Contingency in Waiting for the Barbarians and Life & Times of Michael K

I

Waiting for the Barbarians and *Life & Times of Michael K* unfold in times of such profound upheaval and violence as to be considered moments of historical crisis. The first person narrative of the magistrate in *Barbarians* records his bewildered response to the present in which he is immersed and the 'times' of *Michael K* impress themselves on the life of the protagonist in vivid material suffering and deprivation. For Attwell both are 'interregnum novels,' which is to say, they represent a kind of fiction that aims 'to analyse the hidden propensities of the present from the perspective of an *imagined* future' (91).³⁶ The descent into chaos and violence depicted in both novels brings with it a desire for an alternative temporality distinct from the current crisis. The magistrate's confusion in the present is informed by his sense of a past in which activities such as agriculture, labour, hunting and cultural pursuits brought meaning and fullness to one's existence in time. His actions throughout the novel are more or less informed by the wish to restore this imagined stability by attempting to overcome the degradations of the present through a kind of willed ethical transformation.

³⁶ Attwell is referring to Stephen Clingman writing about the novels of Nadine Gordimer.

The attempt to recuperate an alternative to the present is enacted in both novels through direct and often willed encounters with the other, most notably through the respective interactions between the magistrate and the girl and the medical officer and K. Both examples are in a sense reparative – attempts to heal the damaged body of the other – but, like Magda's confession in *Heart*, it is ultimately a strategy that is invested in a route to the future through narrative and specifically testimony and confession. In soliciting testimony, it is an attempt to know or apprehend the other. But as a response to and an address to the figure of 'otherness', it represents the attempted staging of a confession, like *Heart*, in circumstances of extreme inequality. This confessional impulse is evident in the written accounts staged within the novels – the magistrate's attempted histories and the medical officer's diary (and within that, his imaginary letter to K) – but the conviction that narrative can have a transforming effect on the present characterises their interactions more generally.

In chapter 1, I described Coetzee's 1985 essay 'Double Thoughts' as a quintessential interregnum text and the teleological model that it adopts as a future-directed progression concerned with breaking out of a current impasse to reach 'the end of the episode, the closing of the chapter, liberation from the oppression of the memory' (252). It is this teleology that drives the desire for transformation in *Barbarians* and *Michael K*. But just as the essay is distinguished by its scepticism about the possibility of attaining absolution, the novels frustrate the desire for transformation; instead it is characterised, as Attwell points out, by a 'withholding of resolutions' (71). In both novels, the limitations of the desire for transformation emerge in the face of suffering so extreme that it challenges and undoes the teleology of transformation and economy of exchange that it exploits.

In *Barbarians* the challenge to the desire for transformation – and the teleology of confession – is mediated through the novel's thorough-going critique of practices of torture and judicial confession. As the limits normally imposed by the rule of law are suspended under the emergency powers that prevail for most of the novel, the only limit against which confession can produce 'truth' is the limit of pain and even death. What progress the magistrate makes in the novel is therefore not down to transformation, absolution or even self-awareness, but an awareness of the conditions under which these acquire meaning. While the novel repeatedly stages the magistrate's self-awareness as a kind of double thought, in keeping with the critique of transformation, this is shown to be an unprogressive state without any *necessary* ethical content. But I will suggest that the limits imposed by judicial torture lead to a critique of confession as exchange, and that an alternative to this emerges by collapsing the chronology on which the exchange economy relies.

In *Michael K* the desire for transformation and the economy of exchange that underpins it are focused on the marked, suffering body of the protagonist and yet dissolve on this same starving body. I will describe how, against the almost parodic desire for transformation and absolution that we find in the medical officer, the temporality of exchange is fundamentally ruptured by K's immersion in the present, introducing an element of radical contingency into his repeated encounters with other characters in the novel. Immersed in their respective crises, *Barbarians* and *Michael K* privilege the present as the moment in which ethical action is possible – not to usher in a new ethical order in the manner of transformation, but so that one can proceed to the next moment in which an ethical response will be demanded.

II

In 'Dostoevsky's Estrangement', Nancy Ruttenburg describes how the Russian writer's Siberian exile, and especially the mock execution which he endured after months of solitary confinement, initiated a spiritual and moral conversion that could not be realised or consummated. Contrary to the narrative of rebirth which is the critical orthodoxy on this period, Ruttenburg describes an experience which opened up an abyss between Dostoevsky the nobleman and the peasants he wished to champion that could only be approached through intensified and sustained estrangement: 'Before the recuperation of perception can occur ... one must see how very blind one is' (722). This gives rise to the 'obsessively self-referential mode' of the unconsummated state: 'the impasse before which the writer/narrator is compelled to turn back (upon himself).' This is Dostoevsky's response to the central aesthetic and ethical challenge as she presents it: 'the representation of peasant culture as that which could not be fully seen because it had not yet become fully culturally visible to a reform-minded elite' (748). Ruttenburg's metaphors of sight and seeing are particularly relevant to *Barbarians* as the magistrate's tendency to conflate the apparent irrefutability of visual evidence with ethical action, that is to say, equating epistemology and ethics, is subject to persistent critique. It is clear from Coetzee and Ruttenburg that merely looking does not enable one to see.

The idea of the unconsummated conversion resonates with Michael Holquist's view of the dominant pattern of *The Idiot* as 'an inspired moment that subsequently fails to change anything, that fails to usher in an expected new order,' an idea that is embodied most forcefully in the recurring image of the unresurrected Christ of Holbein's painting (104). In what is presumably a reference to Cavafy's poem,

Holquist contends: 'The horror consists ... in the discovery that there *are* no ends that give meaning, just as there are no beginnings. The terror is not that the Barbarians will come, but that they will not' (113). Where Holquist finds an artistic impasse – resolved only in the very late novels – Ruttenburg finds an ethical impasse, that in her reading Dostoevsky approaches through aesthetic estrangement.

Of the limits and conditions within which confession can occur according to 'Double Thoughts,' imminent death is by far the most powerfully evoked. Coetzee's discussion focuses on *The Idiot* and this will be helpful in describing the limit of death in *Barbarians* and eventually in *Age of Iron*. For Coetzee, 'the pervading sense that there is a limit to time' informs *The Idiot*, a novel about 'last things.' The prospect of impending death imposes a singular focus on the unfolding events and on confessional narrative in particular, an urgency that is paralleled in the moments of clarity before the epileptic seizures experienced by Myshkin, moments in which the words 'there shall be time no more' take on particular resonance. In spite of the apparent clarity of these moments, the false death of the seizure passes and normal life is restored until, that is, another seizure occurs.

The intensity of the temporal experience of an imminent end is established early in the novel by the vividly imagined execution stories told by Myshkin. The story of one man who was granted a last-minute reprieve, with its echoes of Dostoevsky's own experience, recreates the special status of the time preceding death only to underscore its failure to usher in a new way of life. Elsewhere in the novel, Ippolit Terentyev seeks the authority of death for his 'Explanation' as he attempts to guarantee the sincerity of his confession with a vow to commit suicide. As Coetzee sees Ippolit's reasoning: 'The moment before death belongs to a different kind of time in which truth has at last the power to appear in the form of revelation' (284).

But this means that Ippolit's planned suicide might be an elaborate ploy to guarantee the sincerity of his confession. What emerges from these examples is the ability of the discursive economy to co-opt, assimilate and then cast aside even a powerful signifier such as death. The only indisputable transformation is the transformation of death, embodied as Holquist points out in Holbein's unresurrected Christ, which circulates in *The Idiot* with an irrefutable power similar to the recurring image of the grandfather's corpse in *Barbarians* or Anna K's ashes in *Michael K*.

Ruttenburg's unconsummated conversion is a helpful way to approach the problematic figure of the magistrate, who Coetzee describes as 'a man of conscience' but whose subjection to sceptical questioning and self-questioning places the ethical content of conscience under scrutiny. The unconsummated conversion is comparable to the initiated but frustrated teleology of confession that emerges from 'Double Thoughts' and that informs the desire of the magistrate (and the medical officer) for a transformative experience.

III

The term *barbarian* means 'a rude, wild, uncivilized person' or, in the original Greek sense of *barbarous*, a speaker of a language other than Greek (OED). Its semantic journey from 'not Greek' to wild and uncivilized points to the manner in which cultural difference is inscribed through language and negotiated by translation and raises the possibility of multiple ironies in Coetzee's adoption of the title of C.P. Cavafy's Greek poem for his novel. In both poem and novel *barbarian* facilitates the Empire's self-definition as civilized while itself being subject to vague speculation, or 'arbitrariness and indeterminacy' in Attwell's terms (71), which is inscribed in the

novel through the problem of language and translation in interrogation, commerce and sexual relations. In a pattern that is reflected in his interactions with the barbarians generally, the magistrate is distinguished by his awareness of language as an obstacle to understanding and his conviction early in the novel that he has resolved it.

If indeterminacy attaches to the term *barbarian*, this is intensified in the novel's setting, an effect that is achieved not by a complete refusal of external referents but paradoxically through a multiplication of incompatible referents. This emerges as a conscious strategy on Coetzee's part in 'Speaking in Tongues': 'I did intend that enough of an association with imperial China should be evoked to balance and complicate, for instance, the association with imperial Russia evoked elsewhere in the book by the phrase Third Bureau.'³⁷ Coetzee describes how his efforts to frustrate a strictly referential reading were complicated by their very specificity (the sack of the Summer Palace) in the process of being translated into Chinese.

Attridge points out that the indeterminacy of the novel has allowed readers to substitute their own allegorical readings – specific or universal – for the unspecific setting Coetzee deliberately draws (41-43). This occurs in spite of the novel's ability to disrupt the process of meaning-making, focusing on the production and value of meaning itself. Yet even this process can be accommodated to a highly specific context. What Attwell calls the novel's 'strategic refusal of specificity' is also particular to the context from which it emerged: 'its very remoteness, its deliberate anachronisms, and its denial of historical plausibility resonate with the somewhat phantasmagoric quality of the state's projections and vocabulary at this time' (73 & 74).

³⁷ Coetzee's strategies are, in a sense, hallmarks of a *bad* translation.

To follow this line of thinking, one can relate the indeterminacy of the novel to the absence or suspension of the rule of law for its duration. This is one way to accommodate the confusion of the magistrate, known only by his role in the administration of law, but redundant in this capacity for the duration of the novel because of the effective suspension of law by Empire's emergency powers. Though Coetzee's essay points to the resulting difficulties of translating *Barbarians*, Philip Glass's recent opera adaptation suggests that its indeterminacy actually contributes to its translatability, but the opera's staging suggests otherwise, as it introduces the now iconic orange jumpsuits associated with detainees at the Guantanamo Bay detention camp into the matrix of incompatible referents in the novel.³⁸ So, it would appear that it is indeterminacy more narrowly conceived as an absence of the rule of law that allows Coetzee's 1980 novel to be translated into a twenty-first century context in which jurisdiction – conceived both geographically and in terms of the reach of national and international law – is disavowed and time and place are denied the power to determine the administration of justice.³⁹

Although confession in a legal context is, at least in theory, held to be a statement of verifiable fact, the violent conditions facilitated by the suspension of the rule of law in *Barbarians* undermines this status. The random nature of Joll's and Mandel's interrogations renders the confessions that bring them to an end equally arbitrary. In the context of judicial torture, confession is no longer a potentially verifiable statement but an item of exchange in a transaction with shifting rules.

³⁸ The opera is not 'set' in Guantanamo Bay, but at the performance I saw in Amsterdam in September 2006 its staging undoubtedly invoked this context.

³⁹ This apparent absence of law and disavowal of jurisdiction is made possible only through the law. In *Diary*, JC recalls a public event where he made connections between 'his novel' *Barbarians* and Australian anti-terror laws: 'I used to think that the people who created these laws [apartheid laws] that effectively suspended the rule of law were moral barbarians. Now I know they were just pioneers, ahead of their time' (*Diary* 171).

Strictly speaking it has no epistemological function; what power it has derives from its power to bring the torture to an end, but this relies entirely on the torturer's authority to determine its status as final truth. Confession that is uttered in such circumstances is therefore the ultimate in instrumental uses of language, as it is calculated entirely to bring the interrogation and torture to an end. But the calculation is not informed by a knowable horizon; the end is either completely random (the torturer decides that the confessant is telling the truth) or entirely predictable (the confessant confesses [rightly or wrongly] to the crime that he or she is accused of, thus fulfilling the pre-existing expectations of the torturer. Early in the novel the magistrate questions Joll about the authority of the torturer:

"Imagine: to be prepared to yield, to yield, to have nothing more to yield, to be broken, yet to be pressed to yield more! And what a responsibility for the interrogator! How do you ever know when a man has told you the truth?"

"There is a certain tone," Joll says. "A certain tone enters the voice of a man who is telling the truth. Training and experience teach us to recognize that tone."

"The tone of truth! Can you pick up this tone in every day speech? Can you hear whether I am telling the truth?"

This is the most intimate moment we have yet had, which he brushes off with a little wave of the hand. "No, you misunderstand me. I am speaking only of a special situation now, I am speaking of a situation in which I am probing for the truth, in which I have to exert pressure to find it. First I get lies, you see – this is what happens – first lies, then pressure, then more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth. That is how you get the truth." (5)

In spite of the careful description of his method, Joll's words merely reinforce the apparent arbitrariness of the relationship between truth and torture. The magistrate learns that: 'Pain is truth, all else is subject to doubt' and this is vindicated in the random acts of violence inflicted on him later in the novel (5).

In a general sense, the torturer's authority is one way to guarantee the successful completion of a confession, the declared aim of confession in 'Double Thoughts,' but the violence that underwrites this authority represents a perversion of

the completion offered by divine grace. For the secular confessant, to whom divine authority is not available, the end of confession is frequently pre-empted by recourse to some external authority. But it is more frequently the shadow of the interrogator that appears to stalk the secular confessant.

The high stakes that confessional narrative accrues in Coetzee's work generally, and in this period in particular, emerges from the outrageous activities of the security services in South Africa at the time. Those held in police custody were subject to judicial torture sufficiently extreme in some instances to result in the death of the prisoner, as in the notorious case of Steve Biko in 1977.⁴⁰ Coetzee has written about the 'dark fascination' exerted by the torture chamber on the South African writer's imagination, describing *Barbarians* as a novel 'about the impact of the torture chamber on the life of a man of conscience' (*Doubling* 363). He notes that this fascination occurs alongside laws that prohibit representations of prisons, and letters from Coetzee to Peter Randall of Ravan Press and the writer Sheila Roberts in the late 1970s indicate that he was aware that representations of the police were particularly targeted by the Publications Control Board (NELM 98.8.1.121, 2005.33.4). In this light, McDonald notes that the unspecific setting of the novel, which informed the censors' benign view of the 'universality' of *Barbarians* ('All is of world-wide significance, not particularized'),⁴¹ opens Coetzee to the charge of self-censorship.

The epistemological and referential failure of confessional narrative imposes a highly charged context on the indeterminacy of the novel more generally, such that the violence required to generate meaning is everywhere apparent. For the magistrate,

⁴⁰ Jean-Philippe Wade has demonstrated that the report on the grandfather's death in the early stages of the novel echoes the wording of statements given to the inquiry into the death of Stephen Biko in 1977 (281).

⁴¹ This is from the report of Reginald Lighton (cited in McDonald 48).

however, immersed in the crisis precipitated by Colonel Joll's arrival, no such perspective is available, at least not at this stage. Early in the novel he overcomes his initial moral torpor to explore the results of Joll's 'investigations' in the makeshift prison. Shining his lantern into the 'dark chamber' he finds a young boy bound and terrified sharing the room with the sewn-up corpse of his grandfather. He proceeds to unpick the stitching and tear open the shroud that hides the results of Joll's attentions: 'The grey beard is caked with blood. The lips are crushed and drawn back, the teeth are broken. One eye is rolled back, the other eye socket is a bloody hole' (7). The marks on the body are a devastating indictment of judicial torture. Yet having witnessed the extremes to which Joll is willing to go in his inquiries, the magistrate encourages the boy to tell the truth: 'Listen: you must tell the officer the truth. That is all he wants to hear from you – the truth. Once he is sure you are telling the truth he will not hurt you. [...] If there is pain, do not lose heart' (7). Some pages later, he questions the veracity of the confession the boy eventually provided: 'Are you telling the truth? Do you understand what this confession of yours will mean?'(11) The boy is so badly hurt that slapping his cheek is 'like slapping dead flesh' (11).

The magistrate has made a virtue of 'going to see' yet failed utterly to understand the nature of the scene before him. It is not clear what significance he finds in the corpse he describes so vividly – it becomes an enduring image in his consciousness and in the novel – but it is not the powerlessness of confessional narrative, 'truth' as he calls it, to halt the violence of the torturer. The magistrate's conviction that the 'truth' can be told mirrors his conviction that the 'truth' of the torture chamber can be apprehended visually: 'But alas, I did not ride away: for a while I stopped my ears to the noises coming from the hut by the granary where the tools are kept, then in the night I took a lantern and went to see for myself' (9). His

actions are informed by the conviction that they will effect a change – in the boy's fate, in his ethical makeup – but it is evident from Coetzee's text that no such transformation is available.

If the magistrate's narrative is often characterized by 'double thought' it is more often than not an attempt to reconcile his desire for the future and for transformation with other desires – his desire for the girl, for an easy life, for a return to things as they were. Much of his attention to the girl is intended to construct a narrative of the events that occurred since she arrived in the town, from an image of her as whole and innocent on arrival, to the details of the torture she endured, and to find a place for himself in this narrative – he seems to believe that her testimony will take the form of an accusation that will allow him to confess. But he also subjects his apparently reparative actions to rigorous scrutiny. In one example, he embarks on a cycle of sceptical questioning following the consummation of their relationship. Rather than allow the magistrate or the reader to identify consummation with his wished-for transformation, the magistrate becomes estranged from the intimacy of the act by subjecting it to relentless and unproductive analysis. Like other examples of double thought staged in Coetzee's fiction the thoughts are frequently parenthetical or introduced with 'I think:' or 'on the other hand,' emphasising the potentially endless chain of tenuously connected propositions. In this case, the thread rolls along from 'Not for an instant do I imagine...' to 'I do not shy at the thought...' to 'Perhaps the truth is...' to '...or is it the case (I am not stupid, let me say these things)' and beyond (64). Not surprisingly, he eventually stumbles on the insight that words 'have lost all meaning' and brings it to a close by embracing the girl.

Towards the end of the novel the magistrate finds himself reduced to the abject status of beggar – a temporary loss of status – moving from house to house,

recounting the story of his captivity in exchange for food, shelter and even sex. He sees in his story only the power to enable his survival – ‘So I sing for my keep’ – a lesson learned from his days in captivity: “Declare your terror, scream when the pain comes! They thrive on stubborn silence: it confirms to them that every soul is a lock they must patiently pick. Bare yourself! Open your heart!” So I shouted and screamed and said whatever came into my head. Insidious rationale! For now what I hear when I loosen my tongue and let it sail free is the subtle whining of a beggar’ (129). This is same the logic that defeats his attempts to construct a history of the frontier, giving it the ring of a ‘plea,’ and most damningly, reduces his interactions with the girl to a series of narrative transactions.

IV

The ‘turning back upon itself’ of the literary text describes a self-referential quality of literature that Coetzee associates with the challenge staged in Achterberg’s ‘Ballade van de gasfitter’: the quest of the *I* to bring *You* into ‘fullness of being’ (73). In the essay this is related to the referential challenge staged in the poem (fixing referents for the signifiers *I* and *You*) and the challenge to him as translator to seek these referents in his reading and find a suitable way of rendering the meaning and the process of meaning-making in a new version. Coetzee uses a similar phrase to describe the metafictional dimension of *Michael K*: ‘the moment when the text turns in upon itself and begins to reflect on its own textuality’ (*Doubling*, 207).

Ruttenburg has illustrated how such ‘turning back upon itself’ of consciousness and of narrative can be a response to rather than evasion of an overwhelming historical situation. Attwell takes this up in his discussion of the novel

and his sense that Coetzee, like Kafka in 'The Burrow,' is staging 'a narrating subject confronting its own limits of possibility, indeed, its own death' (102). He relates this to Foucault's description of the reflexive moment in narrative as 'a kind of "wound," for the process of doubling back is really an attempt on the part of writing to postpone death, to "conceal, that is, betray the relationship that language establishes with death – with this limit to which language addresses itself and against which it is poised"' (102). The figure of 'doubling back' or 'turning back upon itself' is a last resort of sorts, yet one that is intimately bound up with the production of discourse in all its forms.

In *The Psychic Life of Power* Judith Butler identifies the figure of the turn with the description of the formation of the subject and conscience. She describes how diverse thinkers have resorted to a 'rhetorically, performatively spectacular' figure to account for the referential paradox of subject formation: 'that we must refer to something which does not yet exist' (4). The turn is a moment of reflection or more precisely a moment of self-reflexivity which she relates to conscience, 'the means by which a subject becomes an object for itself, reflecting on itself, establishing itself as reflective and reflexive' (22).

Butler's account of subject formation develops across a range of texts that bring together the issue of responsibility with the need for a politics of agency.⁴² She reformulates the problem in slightly different terms in her most recent book, *Giving an Account of Oneself*: 'Given that we are vulnerable to the address of others in ways that we cannot fully control ... does this mean that we are without agency and without responsibility?' (84-85) Examining one's vulnerability to the address of

⁴² See *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997), *Excitable Speech* (1997) and *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2006).

another, Butler locates a (provisional) solution in the work of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas who finds that 'responsibility emerges as a consequence of being subject to the unwilled address of the other'. In other words, the responsible agent emerges by virtue of his subjection to the other. Butler's reading draws on the essay 'Substitution' in which Levinas too resorts to the figure of the turn to describe self-reflection. While Butler's earlier account privileged the turn inwards as the place where the conscience and hence the ethical subject was formed, Levinas describes how responsibility is *prior* to self-reflection, *prior* to the turn: 'the movement of the responsibility of the I for the Other (Autrui) and before the Other (Autrui)' is a 'movement at once spontaneous and critical ... a necessity always to go straight before oneself *without in some way having the time to turn back*' (20 emphasis added).

This is a way of thinking through the figures of self-consciousness to the possibility of ethical action. The idea of collapsing one moment into the next, of somehow refusing the logic of chronology, seems here to facilitate an ethical relation to the other. This is not unlike the logic of the aneconomic gift as Derrida describes it in *Given Time*, where the gift can take place under the guise of exchange by collapsing the chronology of events. Like Coetzee's interest in the temporality of *The Idiot*, it seems that one's experience of time – in particular, the suspension of chronological time – is crucial to the possibility of the ethical. The kind of immediacy suggested in this temporal condition is not related to a transformative trajectory, but finds the possibility of ethical action in one's responsiveness in the present. As I have shown in his reactions to the torture taking place in the town and to the girl, self-consciousness itself does not offer the magistrate a way out of the crisis he is experiencing. But the novel stages other possibilities for ethical action.

One of the magistrate's pastimes at the frontier is hunting, but it also one of those activities interrupted in the present crisis of the novel. In one episode the magistrate encounters a waterbuck while hunting but fails to kill it. Not only does he fail to kill it, but it seems to present a challenge to the magistrate which he backs away from. The encounter is enacted only through their mutual gaze and the challenge is articulated in the eyes of the buck: 'I slide the gun up and sight behind his shoulder. The movement is smooth and steady, but perhaps the sun glints on the barrel, for in his descent he turns his head and sees me. His hooves touch ice with a click, his jaw stops in mid-motion, we gaze at each other' (39).

The magistrate's encounter with the buck has the effect of disrupting the temporal progress of the novel: 'With the buck before me suspended in immobility, there seems to be time for all things, time even to turn my gaze inward and see what it is that has robbed the hunt of its savour' (39). The magistrate describes the encounter in terms of an excess of time, though the pair seem to be removed from the conventions of time by their mutual gaze. The terms in which the scene develops are very much reminiscent of Myshkin's description of the 'last conscious moment' before an epileptic fit: 'at that moment the extraordinary saying that *there shall be time no longer* becomes, somehow, comprehensible to me. I suppose ... this is the very second in which there was not time enough for the water from the pitcher of the epileptic Mahomet to spill, while he had plenty of time in that second to behold all the dwellings of Allah' (*The Idiot* 259). In other words, the magistrate experiences this moment with the urgency of the seconds before death or the oblivion of an epileptic seizure.

After the buck makes his escape the magistrate tells us: 'I trudge on purposelessly for an hour before I turn back' (40). Wrenched from this seemingly

meaningful encounter the magistrate is thrown back into the banal world of chronological time: 'I turn back' (40). The episode is pregnant with meaning for the bewildered magistrate: 'the stars are locked in a configuration in which events are not themselves but stand for other things' (40).⁴³ In other words, if the waterbuck represents something *more*, if it has implications greater than the magistrate's susceptibility to an animal's gaze, the events are potentially recuperable within the narrative of transformation he would like to construct. What is incomprehensible to the magistrate is his apparent weakness as a response to the waterbuck. His inability to execute the shot and complete the hunt did not arise from the self-scrutiny of turning his gaze inward but from the challenge presented in the gaze of the buck: 'My pulse does not quicken: evidently it is not important to me that the ram die' (39). This encounter has all the immediacy of Levinas's description of the imposition of the Other; while the frozen moment allowed the magistrate to reflect on the events, the decision not to kill the buck was taken 'without in some way having the time to turn back' (20).

In contrast to the knowledge and evidence that the magistrate actively seeks out and accrues to his developing conscience elsewhere in the novel, the gaze of the buck arrives unbidden and his response to it is a surprise even to himself. The magistrate, if only implicitly, links his failure to kill the buck and his relationship with the girl. From his feelings of being subject to the gaze of the buck ('not living my own life on my own terms') he proceeds to consider the girl's choice to stay with him. Her reply that 'there is nowhere else to go' confirms her lack of agency and

⁴³ This type of encounter is echoed in *Petersburg* when Coetzee's Dostoevsky goes to investigate a whining dog in the middle of the night in the conviction that it must be 'a sign.' Attridge characterises this as an encounter with Derrida's *arrivant* and the kind of responsiveness I'm talking about here fits with his account (*Coetzee* 120-24).

subjection to the magistrate's will. She is sensitive to his need to link the story of the buck with his desire for her, but she does not indulge it: 'You should not go hunting if you do not enjoy it' (41). The magistrate's narrative is frustrated: 'That is not the meaning of the story, but what is the use of arguing?'(41) She relents and gives him an account of the torture she endured and the instrument used to inflict it, but nothing in her account makes the connection with the buck. This is information he has sought since their first meeting, yet he wonders: 'Is this the question I asked?'(41) His questioning assimilates her testimony to his narrative of confession and transformation so that, finally, the only agency available to her is to withhold her story: "'I am tired of talking'" (41). The scene with the buck undoubtedly describes a step in the formation of the magistrate as an ethical subject. But in positioning it alongside his self-interested probing of the girl's wounds Coetzee demonstrates that the ethical subject is re-formed in every encounter with otherness; it is not a question of transformation, but reiteration.

Describing the effect of Coetzee's use of the present tense on the narrative of the magistrate, James Phelan notes that 'as we read any one moment of the narrative we must assume that the future is always – and radically – wide open: the narrator's guess about what will happen next is really no better than our own' (223). Phelan relates this to the immediacy of the reader's identification (and complicity) with the magistrate but Coetzee's use of the present tense – and the openness to the future which it produces – creates the conditions in which such reiteration/repetition can occur. While Phelan claims that this openness to the future erases teleology from the magistrate's narrative, to my mind his actions and reflections are informed by a teleology of moral progress conditioned by his circumstances and position. In other words, the teleology that will emerge in 'Double Thoughts' is already evident in the

magistrate's desired transformation. However, Coetzee's narrative allows the contingency of each encounter to be thrust upon him and denies one encounter the opportunity to condition the next.

The magistrate's meeting with the barbarians initially appears to be another expression of his desire for ethical transformation – the journey to the frontier is a kind of pilgrimage and his willingness to return the girl to her people a sacrifice. While the trip in certain respects signals a development of his relationship with the girl, it is in being further dispossessed of his bearings in the encounter with the barbarians that the magistrate becomes aware of the limitations of his own understanding.

His loss of control is signalled most forcefully in his reliance on the girl to communicate with the men. His instruction to her to 'Tell them your story. Tell them the truth' no longer has the force of a threat as it did in the town, but becomes a source of bemusement to the girl, who responds with a smile: 'You really want me to tell them the truth?'(71) His alienation from the barbarians and from her is completed in his exclusion from their communication: 'From above the soft cascade of the girl's speech reaches me broken by the gusting of the wind. [...] I cannot make out a word.'(71) She acts as interpreter for him in his attempts to negotiate a transaction with the men – a horse in exchange for silver. Ironically, the thoughts which occupy him while the negotiation between the girl and the men is taking place centre on his role as intermediary between Empire and Barbarian: 'And here I am patching up relations between the men of the future and the men of the past, returning, with apologies, a body we have sucked dry – a go-between, a jackal of Empire in sheep's clothing!'(72) While always highly qualified, the magistrate's earlier belief in his ability to negotiate and interpret the thoughts, wishes and transactions of the

barbarians is exposed in this incident as wishful, replaced by his utter vulnerability to the barbarians and to the girl. But to call his encounter with the barbarians a turning point would be to identify too closely with the transformative experience he desires.

Instead, the encounter is revisited obliquely in his subsequent questioning by Joll in which the latter attempts to use the poplar slips as incriminating evidence against the magistrate: 'A reasonable inference is that the wooden slips contain messages passed between yourself and other parties, we do not know when. It remains for you to explain what the messages say and who the other parties were' (110). This time adopting the role of 'go-between' with some irony, he interprets the slips as a series of letters from a father to a daughter describing the death of his son in police custody. The arbitrariness of the connection between the magistrate's story and the slips which refuse to yield their meaning indicates the magistrate's newfound awareness of his limitations as cultural translator. As he admits before beginning the story: 'I have no idea what they stand for' and later that the slips are 'open to many interpretations' (110, 112). Yet, concluding his narration he says 'Thank you. I have finished translating' (112). If he cannot read the slips, in what sense might he be said to translate?

While the relation between the story and the poplar slips is avowedly arbitrary, the elements which make up that story are far from incidental. Most potent among the images he brings to life is that of the boy's body sewn up in a sheet. Joll and the warrant officer, and indeed the reader, recognise the image of the tortured body from the opening pages of the novel (6-7). Echoing the magistrate's earlier actions, the father in the story wishes to examine the body of his son: "What if it is the wrong body you are giving me?" I said – "You have so many bodies here, bodies of brave young men." So I opened the sheet and I saw that it was indeed he' (111).

The magistrate exploits the referential indeterminacy of the slips as a challenge to Joll but also to bear witness to the death of the grandfather earlier in the novel. He does not simply relate the mysterious slips to a completely invented story, but uses the slips to mediate the specific details he carries across from elsewhere in the novel. And his persistence in marking out the story as arbitrary, acknowledging the prejudicial nature of his endeavour, both allows the slips to retain their foreignness and serves as an accusation to his interrogators about the 'truth' they claim to extract and the methods they use to do it. In addition, the connection Wade establishes with the Biko inquiry brings greater force still to the image of the tortured body.

The experience of repeated exposure to the unknown is felt with particular intensity in the dream sequence that punctuates the novel and the sense of openness – to the future, to the unknown – is captured powerfully in the recurring motif of the turn. The dominant motif in the dreams is the magistrate approaching a group of children playing on the town square. The children are alternately building a fort from snow or sand but run away as he draws near leaving behind one child with whom he interacts. In the dreams the magistrate is alternately benefactor and beneficiary, giving the girl a coin, offering to keep her warm and receiving bread from her: 'now I can see that what she is holding out to me is a loaf of bread, still hot, with a coarse steaming broken crust. A surge of gratitude sweeps through me' (109). It is not possible to claim the status of radically contingent for a series of related dreams; even if the mode of their narration preserves the freshness of the dream experience, they are, of course, conditioned by the desires and anxieties of the magistrate's waking life. Indeed it would appear that the subtle changes recounted in the dreams function as the unconscious correlate of the magistrate's struggle with his conscience

throughout the novel. Attwell notes that 'The dreams crystallize in lucid imagery the meaning of [the magistrate's] desires for continuity and reciprocity' (80).

V

Coetzee's magistrate is both a figure of the law and a guilty subject. He lives in a time when the law he represents has dispensed with due process and any pretensions of justice – it carries no force other than that which it can impose by violence. He has become a guilty subject in a double sense: he is at the mercy of this corrupt regime yet remains an agent of it. In this context, every narrative he attempts to construct has the ring of a plea – a story told in mitigation, *an excuse*. And such excuses – in the form of double thought, attempted histories, pleas for food – proliferate throughout the novel. At the peak of his understanding the magistrate may acknowledge the limitations on what he can see and know and translate: 'There has been something staring me in the face, and still I do not see it' (155). At the same time, as his narrative 'turns back upon itself' it becomes a vehicle for the circulation of images of extraordinary power: the grandfather's dead body, the girl's damaged feet, his own suffering at the hands of Mandel. Fleetingly we find him capable of a spontaneous ethical response – to the waterbuck – but no one image or event has the power to condition his behaviour or transform his sensibility.

VI

In the character of the medical officer who narrates Part Two of *Michael K*, Coetzee is repeating many of the qualities of the magistrate from *Barbarians*. Like the

magistrate, he is identified only by his function in the machine of state (in this case a medical officer in the military) while self-consciously adopting a stance of minimal if efficient compliance with the policies and practices of the regime. Unlike the magistrate, the medical officer does not develop beyond this narrowly conceived role. Instead his narrative, a diary devoted exclusively to Michael K and contained within 'K's narrative', highlights the contrastive purpose of his presence. The medical officer's diary is entirely external to K's consciousness yet obsessive in its attention to K's body and relentless in its pursuit of his story and meaning. This clearly echoes and intensifies the magistrate's obsessive relationship with the girl, so much so, that the medical officer reads like a gentle parody of the magistrate. The diary is also a highly stylised and elaborate version of the numerous encounters that take place throughout the novel between K and a range of interlocutors, from hostile soldiers to well-intentioned fellow-travellers and friendly vagrants, albeit focalized through the interlocutor rather than K. This draws attention to another point of contrast: its focalization through one character underlines the complex of perspectives embodied in what we come to think of as K's narrative in Parts One and Three.

Moreover, within the diary the medical officer (or behind him, Coetzee) has contrived several different forms of direct address to K, most notably the mock interrogation, the letter from 'a friend' and the imagined confrontation on the Cape Flats (137-140, 149-152 and 161-167). It seems to me that there is a principle of repetition at work here that is also replicated elsewhere in the novel pointing to its self-referential qualities and to a certain quality of fiction itself. The medical officer's narrative is the space in which *Michael K* most obviously and most forcefully turns back upon itself – by echoing, repeating and foreshadowing other elements of the novel and even certain key motifs of Coetzee's previous novel. In his obsession with

K and specifically with K's meaning the medical officer also assumes the role of reader-figure within the novel, thus intensifying its metafictional dimension even further. In this way I believe the pattern of frustrated transformation (or 'unconsummated conversion' in Ruttenburg's terms) leading to the turning back upon itself of the narrative that is at work in *Barbarians* can also be found in *Michael K*.

However, *Michael K* offers considerably more than the frustrated obsessions of the medical officer. As I have mentioned, his encounter with K is only the most fully elaborated of a series of encounters between K and the copious characters he meets on his travels; it is unique only in being focalized through someone other than K. These other encounters are equally marked by the repetitive and self-reflexive qualities of Part Two of the novel but, I will argue, the unique temporality of K's narrative restores to these apparently reiterated encounters the contingency that characterises the creation of the ethical subject as discussed above. The motif of the encounter or exchange is used liberally by Coetzee in both *Barbarians* and *Michael K*, although commentators rarely find any continuity between these elements of the novels. Instead, what emerge as possibilities for the magistrate in the encounters of the dream sequence, for example, are taken to exemplify K's subjection to the will of those numerous characters he meets on his journey around the Western Cape.⁴⁴ I will argue that what is at stake in the repeated motif of the encounter is the element of contingency that enables the formation of the ethical subject.

While K is not obviously a confessant or a confessor, these staged encounters repeat both the desires that motivate confessional encounters and the problems that prevent them from taking place successfully. Like many of the staged confessions in

⁴⁴ See Mike Marais, "Literature and the Labour of Negation" and Michael Valdez Moses, "Solitary Walkers".

Coetzee the encounter between K and the medical officer is hampered by the problem of address and the problem of finding a suitable interlocutor/confessor. In addition, many of the encounters depicted in the novel seem to take the form of an exchange or economic transaction, recalling the both calculation so detrimental to confession and the idea of confession as a highly instrumental exchange that emerges from the judicial confessions of *Barbarians*. If the temporality of Michael K offers a way around these transactions and exchanges, then it also offers the possibility of a confessional encounter not grounded in an economic calculation.

VII

The medical officer's obsession with K is, in some respects, a version of Achterberg's 'passion for *You*' but the self-consciously contrived nature of their encounters results in a parody that vacillates between conversion and interpellation. This is exemplified in the entries *after* K's escape when the medical officer reinvents their encounter as a spiritual conversion in which he came to see K as the agent of his salvation. The conversion and chase culminate (in the medical officer's mind) in an elaborately staged confession in which he asks K's forgiveness and attempts to explain the origin of his attachment: 'And here, in the light of day, you would at last have turned and looked at me [...] And I would have come before you and spoken. I would have said: 'Michaels, forgive me for the way I treated you' (164). The medical officer reimagines K's time in the camp in supernatural terms, yet even in this invented encounter he reverts to double thought in order to extrapolate some significance for the episode:

And standing in the doorway I would turn my bleakest stare in upon myself, seeking by the last means I knew to detect the germ of dishonesty at the heart of the conviction – the wish, let us say, for example, to be the only one to whom the camp was not just the old Kenilworth racetrack with prefabricated huts dotted across it but a privileged site where meaning erupted into the world.

[...]

So I would turn my gaze out again, and, yes, it would still be true, I was not deceiving myself, I was not flattering myself, I was not comforting myself, it was as it had been before, it was the truth, there was indeed a gathering, a thickening of darkness above one bed alone, and that bed was yours.

Thus the medical officer manages to elide K's presence in favour of K's value. The language of self-scrutiny (the turn inwards) and rigorous honesty is familiar from the magistrate's narrative, but it is clear that the medical officer generates in this imaginary encounter an occasion for a false reflexivity that is frankly tautological. He attempts to guarantee the value of K's meaning by contemplating its absence:

... if Michaels himself were no more than what he seems to be (what you seem to be), a skin-and-bones man with a crumpled lip (pardon me, I name only the obvious), then I would have every justification for retiring to the toilets behind the jockey's changing-rooms and locking myself into the last cubicle and putting a bullet through my head. Yet have I ever been more sincere than I am tonight? (165)

The medical officer is offering his possible suicide as a guarantee of his sincere belief in K's significance, when it is rather the staged sincerity that facilitates the inflated terms of his narrative. Coetzee signals his scepticism about sincerity in 'Double Thoughts' and indeed one could read the medical officer's narrative as a highly ironic example of double thought. The imagined confession within the diary undermines the fiction of his concern for K's well-being ('At first I thought of you, I will confess, as a figure of fun' [163]), instead drawing attention to the manner in which the content is determined by the need for endless discourse and endless exchange value. K's meaning, for the medical officer, is bound up with the meaning of his own narrative: for it to have meaning, K must have meaning. Similarly, the encounter underlines the

medical officer's need for an addressee or an auditor (K is hardly a confessor, though the medical officer's belief in him as the agent of salvation might suggest otherwise). The auditor, needless to say, provides the occasion for the narrative – or confession – but even more striking is the manner in which the narrative constructs and positions the auditor as necessarily weak, innocent, idiotic, angelic, that is to say, a complete contrast to the authoritative if tainted status of the confessant. Just as a narrative of innocence was the offshoot of the magistrate's attempted confession, K finds himself positioned as innocent and harmless by the medical officer. Indeed K's essential innocence is something of an article of faith for the medical officer, who is so convinced that K is incapable of revolutionary activity that he invents a story of low-level complicity to avoid further investigation.⁴⁵

For all the comedy of the quest, however, the medical officer's is not simply a harmless fantasy. His ironic self-presentation as a policeman indicates the inherent aggression of the confessional encounter: 'taking me for a policeman, a plain-clothes policeman in overalls and tennis shoes carrying a bundle with a gun in it' or 'the man shouting at your back, the man in blue who must seem to be persecutor, madman, bloodhound, policeman' (162, 167).

VIII

The initial response of the medical officer to K mirrors the response common among the numerous characters who encounter him: the certainty that he needs to be protected, rescued, even saved from the inhospitable world into which he was

⁴⁵ K's innocence and simplicity is an article of faith for many critics too, who find both his behaviour and his politics simple.

'helped' by the midwife of the opening line. He is the beneficiary of numerous acts of kindness on his travels; even the homeless people of Part Three take him under their wing (and also try to steal his seeds while he sleeps). However the problematic nature of some of these exchanges is captured perfectly in one meeting with a soldier who claims K's money as the spoils of war. In a bizarre and awkward gesture, prompted by the sobering presence of Anna K's ashes but justified because K works for the ambulance (according to his hat), he returns ten rand to K: "Just a minute. Just a minute ... Buy yourself an ice-cream" (38). Such is the force of K's vulnerability that he is simultaneously a victim of theft and an object of charity.

K is called an idiot no fewer than ten times in the course of the novel – by a clerk in Cape Town and the medical officer, among others – a reference no doubt to Dostoevsky's Myshkin (the medical officer also calls him a mouse). But when faced with the patronising and threatening presence of the Visagie's soldier-grandson on the farm, K himself reads Visagie's intentions in a similar language:

He thinks I am truly an idiot, thought K. He thinks I am an idiot who sleeps on the floor like an animal and lives on birds and lizards and does not know there is such a thing as money. He looks at the badge on my beret and asks himself what child gave it to me out of what lucky packet. (62)

Here we find K's resistance to Visagie's attempt to turn him into a servant and to the tag of idiot. Yet because K's thoughts echo those who call him an idiot and refer to the ambulance badge that attracted the soldier's attention, we also have a sense of the novel beginning to turn in upon itself.

The degree to which K can be understood in terms of 'simplicity' is more or less the degree to which we accept the impressions of him communicated by his interlocutors in the novel: the clerk, Visagie, the soldier, but also the children who

stare at his mouth, Robert who claims that he is the focus of charity at the camp because he is harmless, the medical officer remarking on his impeded speech. In other words, K's simplicity is identified with his apparent exclusion from language, which critics struggle to reconcile with the narrative he inhabits. The logical impossibility of much of his narrative is exemplified in the description of his moments of reverie in the mountains, an unmediated relationship with the world according to Valdez Moses, yet a withdrawal from language possible only in the words of a novel. In another example the narrative continues while K sleeps, divorcing the anonymous narratorial consciousness from the focalizing consciousness of K. Most critics find that one can only approach K's paradoxical relation to language through the metafictional dimension of the novel. According to Valdez Moses: 'The acknowledgement of this ... logical contradiction, takes the form of a heightened self-consciousness of presentation and a deliberate disruption of conventional (unselfcritical) forms of narrative representation' (151).

It seems to me that it is precisely at these moments when the text seems to repeat itself that the metafictional level of the novel is experienced most intensely. One becomes conscious that K is being spoken through by other voices, in the way, for example, that he echoes the politics of Robert from the camp or that he seems to echo Rousseau of the *Reveries* in his developing scepticism about charity. At other times, elements of the narrative seem to have a retrospectively predictive quality: in one clear example, K is enjoying the solitude of his time on the road to Prince Albert and speculates about the availability of 'forgotten corners and angles ... that belonged to no one yet. Perhaps if one flew high enough, he thought, one would be able to see' (47). This insight, that a perspective might be available from which one could find an unoccupied space, a corner of freedom, is immediately followed by a description of

two aircraft in the sky. This of course only points to the way in which one thought or idea might inform another, but their inversion attempts to interrupt the logic of the explanation. Later, the medical officer's narrative appears to echo and foreshadow elements in Parts One and Three of the novel (for example the farcical chase ends where we rejoin K in the subsequent section of the novel) – all of which problematizes our acceptance of K's narrative as loosely realistic and a sustained example of free indirect style.

K's repeated assertion of his incompetence as a storyteller/narrator further intensifies our sense of the distance separating him from the narrative which he inhabits. There is a sharp contrast between the smooth pacing of the narrative voice in the novel and the hesitancy which marks K's direct speech, particularly his attempts to recount his own story. In instances in which he feels compelled to share his story (with the family that give him shelter for a night, the group at the camp, the homeless people at the end of the novel) its staccato 'then I ... then I...' is in sharp contrast to the version of events we have read in the novel, a contrast K is intensely aware of. After attempting to tell his story to December and his friends it strikes him that his story is 'paltry, not worth the telling, full of the same old gaps that he would never learn how to bridge' (176). His comment that 'His memories all seemed to be of parts, not of wholes' indicates that he views his life and the events that have befallen him as a series of discrete elements that can only be brought together when viewed from a particular perspective – from the air, say, or from the point of view of someone schooled in storytelling, which he is not. The truth about himself, as he sees it at the end of the novel is that: 'I have been a gardener, first for the Council, later for myself, and gardeners spend their time with their noses to the ground' (181). It is a version of his life not likely to arouse much interest or sympathy, but this is as he

wishes it: 'I was mute and stupid in the beginning, I will be mute and stupid at the end. There is nothing to be ashamed of in being simple' (182). What K desires from a story, therefore, is a narrative that is powerless to change the course of events and utterly without affect, that is to say, a narrative with no ascertainable *value* whatsoever. Valdez Moses describes this in Girardian terms as K's lack of desire for recognition but the medical officer comes even closer: 'Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory, if you know that word. It was an allegory – speaking at the highest level – of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it' (166).

K's thoughts on storytelling contrast dramatically with the swiftly-paced narrative that brings together his 'life' and 'times' so effortlessly. The opening pages account for the events of K's life as the result of his cleft palate: 'Because of his disfigurement' and 'Because of his face K did not have women friends' (4). Almost every paragraph is governed by a temporal marker that leaves no room for hesitancy or doubt in the story it tells: 'Year after year'; 'late one morning'; 'for months'; 'for eight years' (4-6). This paves the way for the seamless link between K's life and the violent times in which he lives: 'Then late one afternoon in the last week of June a military jeep travelling down Beach Road at high speed struck a youth crossing the road, hurling him back among the vehicles parked at the curbside' (11). The narrative clearly functions by way of a perspective on time and causal relations that does not apply to K himself. The uniform chronology he imposes on the events of his life (then I... then I) provides no logical connection between them.

K's experience of time seems to be one of living intensely in the present, unable to form anything but the most cursory connections with events in the past and capable of imagining the future as either an uninterrupted continuation of the present

or a totally unknowable and unpredictable entity. 'Now' becomes a particularly loaded word for K, bearing the pressure of action required in any given moment: 'Now was the time' and 'Now, he thought ... now is my last chance: now' (18 & 110). 'Now' also lends a retrospective teleology to events that carried no real sense of intention at the time: 'Now I am here, he thought. Finally.'; 'Now it is completed, he said to himself.'; 'Now I am back, he thought.' (50, 113, 181)

The intense experience of the present can be a source of anxiety for K: Anna K's ashes come to circulate as a very powerful signifier on K's trip to Prince Alfred but perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the cremation is K's vision of his mother being consumed by flames 'all the time' when he receives the ashes at the hospital (32). But the meeting of the continuous and the unpredictable in K's experience of time is not usually so traumatic. Marvelling at the prized water pump on the farm, K remarks that: 'Every time he released the brake and the wheel spun and water came, it seemed to him a miracle' (60). It seems paradoxical that a repeated and ostensibly predictable event like the functioning of a mechanical water pump could attain the status of miracle, but such is K's susceptibility to present and future events that past form does not have the power to condition his expectations. In an essay on Kafka Coetzee confronts a similar temporal problem in 'The Burrow': the difficulty of reconciling the apparently iterative aspect of the narrative with the unforeseeable nature of the actions that recur. Kafka's creature is in a heightened state of anxiety as he is repeatedly 'at the mercy of forces he cannot control or predict' (*Doubling* 212). K's attitude to the future is characterised more by openness than anxiety, however. Attridge finds in K's temporal experience: '... a kind of openness to the future ... a kind of trust in events that has no relation to the calculations by which most of us live' (57). Indeed, in its combination of mechanical repeatability and unpredictable

miracle, at least as presented in K's narrative, the water pump takes on some of the qualities of Derrida's 'machine-event' ('Limited Ink 2').

While K shows himself to be open to future events, he has no desire to make a strong impact on the future – to have children, to leave a legacy or any other trace of his existence. His attitude to the future is also not conditioned by any pre-existing moral beliefs. In response to one of his kinder benefactors, who indicates that he believes in helping people, K is puzzled:

Do I believe in helping people? he wondered. He might help people, he might not help them, he did not know beforehand, anything was possible. He did not seem to have a belief, or did not seem to have a belief regarding help. Perhaps I am the stony ground, he thought. (48)

X

Mike Marais finds in K's numerous encounters a 'labour of negation' and holds that they are above all examples of 'contact with a character who attempts to assert himself by negating K's alterity' (107). He holds that the encounters are 'identical and thus interchangeable.' In this reading the recurring motif of the encounter is deployed uniformly by Coetzee to emphasise, by sheer excess of example, the self-interestedness and violence implicit in the entry into social relations. But Marais must omit many of the details specific to each encounter in order to determine their position and value within the novel only on the basis of the perceived outcome of negation, albeit a powerful idea and in some cases a valid observation. The equivalence that Marais creates between many different elements in the encounters allows him to conflate, among other things, interrogation, incarceration, theft, charity, altruism, kindness and need. He finds in K an alternative to this 'labour of negation'

insofar as he is increasingly 'a consciousness that is divested of a controlling subjectivity,' although this is reflected in his relationship with things rather than with people (107). In Marais's reading, K's withdrawal from the conscious world is enacted through his exclusion from the field of language, a strategy which is foregrounded by Coetzee in the metafictional framing provided by the medical officer's diary. But this too ignores those instances where even a character as weak and marginal as K has something to offer: care for his mother, protection to the children at the camp, carrying a bag for the young mother in the closing pages when K himself barely has the strength to walk. And the novel closes with K's fantasy of acting as benefactor to an anonymous old man, repeating again the miracle of bringing water from the spring at the farm.

The narratives of the magistrate and the medical officer are also defined by the fantasy of acting as benefactor – to the girl and K respectively. But as I have shown, these fantasies are informed by a desire for a fixed meaning that would facilitate their moral transformation, guaranteeing their place in the future. *Barbarians* and *Michael K* renounce such certainties in favour of the principles of indeterminacy and contingency. I argued that the ethical subject in *Barbarians* is produced not by transformation – transformation is simply not available in either novel – but by reiteration, a possibility that emerges from the varied outcomes of the encounters described in the novel. This can also be found in Parts One and Three of *Michael K* where the protagonist's experience of time and the narrative in which it is described renounces the time of transformation in favour of a radical openness to the future and to the encounters it might bring.

K is the victim of many utterly unsympathetic characters throughout the novel: the soldier who steals his money, the muggers, the policeman who searches his

belongings, the clerks and the guards at the medical officer's camp all distinguish themselves by their contemptuous treatment of him. But this does not determine all of the encounters in the novel. While waiting for news of his mother outside the hospital in Stellenbosch K accepts money from an old man to buy them both food: 'He sat beside his friend on the bench and ate. The pie was so delicious that tears came to his eyes. The man told him of his sister's uncontrollable fits of shaking. K listened to the birds in the trees and tried to remember when he had known such happiness' (30). The encounter is a foreshadowing of the 'bliss' K would experience eating the pumpkin he had grown himself, but it is rooted in an encounter with another that is not obviously founded on subjection or negation. At the start of his journey with his mother they encounter three young girls who accompany them for part of the trip, one of them walking along holding Anna K's hand. She gives them each a coin from her purse before they part (26). It is followed immediately by a farmer's convoy from which the children in the trucks point at K and his mother, making comments they cannot hear. These are minor episodes but they demonstrate in equal measure the kindness and the cruelty with which K and his mother were met.

Elsewhere K is drawn, if somewhat reluctantly, into a form of narrative exchange. In his interactions with the man who invites K into his home, with Robert's group at the camp, and with December and his companions K senses in the encounter that his turn has come to speak. In the encounter with the family the urge to speak and frustration at not being able to are quite strongly felt: 'At the table the urge again came over him to speak. He gripped the edge of the table and sat stiffly upright. His heart was full, he wanted to utter his thanks, but finally the right words would not come. The children stared at him; a silence fell; their parents looked away' (48). If K finally feels inadequate to the task, it is because he cannot create a coherent whole

from the various elements that could be incorporated into a story of his life. Aware of his limitations as a storyteller, he nevertheless understands the power of certain elements of his story: 'Now I must speak about the ashes, thought K, so as to be complete, so as to have told the whole story' (79).

In one early example, K's instinct to reciprocate the generosity of a man who gives him a lift is unnecessary: 'But the old man did not need help, nor was he in the mood for talk' (35). After his encounter with the prostitute K feels all narrative powers leave him: 'When it was over he felt that for the sake of both of them he ought to say something; but now all words had begun to escape him' (179). The prostitute's willing embrace – particularly of his deformed mouth – brings about this intensification of K's natural disinclination towards storytelling. In most of these examples we see that K experiences the desire for reciprocation but not as a necessity. For better and worse, Coetzee preserves the distinctiveness of each encounter: both the nature of the interlocutor, the circumstances of the encounter and K's response, which is conditioned by his experience of the present rather than informed by a particular teleology.

XI

I have described the medical officer as a parody of the magistrate of *Barbarians* – a form of repetition – and his narrative is itself marked by repetitions, a series of situations contrived to facilitate his address to K. *Michael K* ends more or less where it begins: K imagining a journey where he would act as saviour. I have already suggested that this fantasy repeats K's sense of wonder at the repeated miracle of the water pump. But the story of K does not, at this point, seem destined for a happy or

redemptive ending and one wonders if the repeated journey might not end like the first one: in death. The power of the novel to get behind itself, to undermine any reading we might impose on it – redemptive or pessimistic – means that it truly is the enemy of analysis (Ruttenburg 749). In many ways this effect is achieved through repetition – a turning back upon itself that reflects the representational impasse of Ruttenburg rather than the charge of evasion levelled at the novel by many critics. If we can also understand repetition to preserve the element of contingency in every encounter – and fiction uniquely placed to stage this – then the possibility for ethical action is also preserved. Repetition in this sense poses a challenge to the teleology of moral progress and desire for transformation that in many ways determines the actions of the magistrate and the medical officer. When the ethical subject does emerge, it seems to be a result of a collapsing or flattening of chronology which denies the economy of exchange the ability to signify *as exchange*.

Barbarians and *Michael K* are therefore determined by the teleology of confession that will drive ‘Double Thoughts’ but also pose a serious challenge to this teleology. I am attempting to describe Coetzee’s engagement with confession as characterised by discontinuity, as a result of the apparent incapacity of confession to allow the confessing subject to proceed through the teleology described in the essay, that is, to allow confession to deliver absolution or cynicism to lead to grace. By describing the way in which the economic model of confession is undone by collapsing chronological time, I am in effect describing a kind of discontinuity – the occurrence of different events that cannot be described as conditioning one another. And yet, it seems clear to me that neither am I describing events that occur in utter isolation. What must be described as a discontinuity in philosophical and critical

discourse, can be figured in a novel in an encounter with a buck or the miracle of a water pump.

CHAPTER FOUR

'A private matter ... till it is given to the world': Confession as a Figure for Authorship in *Foe* and *The Master of Petersburg*

*"All novelists are dangerous models for other novelists,
but Dostoevsky ... is especially dangerous."*

-- T. S. Eliot

I

Coetzee's Nobel lecture, a story called 'He and His Man,' addresses the relationship of the writer to his art. 'He' is Robinson Crusoe who after a lifetime of adventure has settled in Bristol to write stories, a process which 'he' describes, or *figures*, as receiving witness reports from 'his man' – not his 'man Friday' but one whose particularity varies according to the circumstances he describes. For the reader these stories and circumstances are familiar from the works of Daniel Defoe,⁴⁶ but to Robinson they are all figures for different aspects of his time as a castaway on the island.

Like Nobel Laureates before him, Coetzee used this auspicious occasion to examine the practice of writing. In this regard, the problem staged within 'He and His Man' and the critical challenge it presents – how to articulate the relationship

⁴⁶ See Attridge (196).

between author and creation – is continuous with Coetzee's *oeuvre* rather than a commentary on it. His point in the Nobel lecture seems to be that the relationship between author and creation – and the process that connects them – can only be approached figuratively and is consequently subject to the possibilities and limitations of figurative language, best approached through literary rather than critical discourse. This emphasis on figuration is exemplified in the closing image which 'he' describes as a likeness for he-and-his-man:

... they are deckhands toiling in the rigging, the one on a ship sailing west, the other on a ship sailing east. Their ships pass close, close enough to hail. But the seas are rough, the weather is stormy: their eyes lashed by the spray, their hands burned by the cordage, they pass each other by, too busy even to wave.

The image exploits the idea of a shared spatial and temporal framework but it is underpinned by a lack of awareness of the other so fundamental that it might be understood as an essential incapacity or even unwillingness of one to acknowledge the presence of the other, or at least a sense that they are, in this seemingly opportune moment, at cross purposes. That is to say, their interests are potentially at odds with one another and are not served by acknowledging one another. As such, it is highly suggestive of the bond that exists between author and creation, or as Attridge sees it, between author and the act of creation. He finds in the image: 'the haunting illusion ... that there is an unbridgeable distance between the person who lives in the world and the person, or impersonal force, that produces the words' (200). But the image is also a figure for figuration itself – a process which allows radically different and often irreducible elements to be suspended in one frame, held in place, as the two ships are, by the imaginative force behind them.

There are many different ways of describing the relationship between writer and creation. The notion of the author came into being to categorise this relationship in legal and economic terms. Another figure which can, at least in theory, bridge the gap between private writing subject and creation is the metaphor of confession, which sees the work as the expression or projection of the writing subject (everything is a figure for Crusoe's time on the island). My focus here will be on the identification or conflation of these categories, by writers and readers. I will argue that Coetzee collapses the distinction between the private and public dimensions of authorship through his deployment of confession as a figure for the creative process in *Foe* and *The Master of Petersburg*. In both cases this involves a problematic identification of author and creation. In *Foe*, Susan Barton describes her relationship with the famous author Daniel Foe in terms of confession, she is the confessant who recounts her true experience to the confessor, who interrogates and disseminates her version of events. In *Petersburg*, literary works – produced by the historical Fyodor Dostoevsky, the character Dostoevsky and his son Pavel – are all in some sense identified with their respective creators such that authorship comes to seem like a transgression of the private in the interests of the public. Coetzee's work, therefore, resuscitates the author/writing subject as a topic for critical discussion thereby self-consciously opening himself to the risks that this might entail.

One of Coetzee's key insights into confessional narrative in his non-fiction writings on the subject is its relentless self-interestedness. I have already cited one of his more extreme statements: 'The only sure truth in autobiography is that one's self-interest will be located at one's blind spot' (392). Time and again, it is suggested that the primary interest served by confessional narrative is narrative itself, and anything that serves writing is surely in the best interest of the writer. The confession of a

writer, therefore, serves the interests of authorship. But in the model of writer and creator that I outline above, the author is also a private writing subject facing other interests and demands. By adopting confession as a figure for authorship I hope to describe the competing interests of the author-characters in *Foe* and *Petersburg*.

In 'Double Thoughts' Coetzee describes 'Stavrogin's confession' in *The Possessed* as 'a game whose essence is that certain limits will not be transgressed, though the contestants will pretend to each other and to themselves that there are no limits. It is thus a game of deception and self-deception, a game of limited truth. Tikhon ends the game by breaking the rules' (289). I will demonstrate that in *Foe*, the author Susan Barton navigates the self-interestedness of authorship and confession by observing and manipulating the limits of confessional discourse. As 'the *agent* of *other-directed* ethics,' Barton self-consciously stops short of transgressing certain limits in making her confession (Spivak, *Critique* 182). The limits in play in *Petersburg*, on the other hand, are the limits of private and public; to the extent that writing appears to transgress these limits it is interpreted as confessional and is itself the subject of confession. Indeed, confession and authorship acquire their greatest force in the manner in which the author-character risks transgressing certain limits.

In terms of the discontinuity that I have been describing in Coetzee's engagement with confession generally, Barton's manipulation of the limits of confessional discourse in the first three sections of *Foe* prepares the ground for the shift of voice, tone and register in section IV. Naming its final chapter 'Stavrogin,' *Petersburg* is the only Coetzee novel that explicitly engages the confessional framework that I outline in my introduction. The startling omission from the novel, however, is Tikhon. To pick up the Derridean terms that I draw on in chapter 1, the 'event' that occurs in *Petersburg* is the event of writing rather than the event of

absolution or forgiveness, and it is no more reducible to calculation than the latter. Indeed, *Petersburg* suggests that the event is related to exceeding limits and conditions rather than working within them. Confession, on the risk-model proposed by Michel Leiris, acquires its greatest force in the context of this excess. But if *Petersburg* is a confession, it is without any trace of self-forgiveness. This might well be an invitation to the reader to act as confessor.

II

Beyond the extension into the public world that is publishing, the relationship between author and work has become difficult to approach unless within the strictly referential framework of literary biography. In spite of Coetzee's apparent academic sympathies with schools of thought that are inherently sceptical about the accessibility of the author (or writing subject) as a subject for critical analysis, his particular *body of work* – novels, essays, memoirs, interviews, reviews – consciously keeps in play, and in some cases presupposes, the lived experience of an author (though not necessarily J.M. Coetzee).⁴⁷ He is acutely aware of the value placed on authorship as a western cultural institution and, by extension, the currency available to the author by way of publishing and reputation. But he is also sensitive to the fact that writing, publishing and reputation are part of the writer's lived experience; to the extent that the writer's life affects and is affected by the institution of authorship, they are inextricably bound up one with the other. Nor does the writer's life begin when he or she enters the field of publishing; Coetzee's interest in autobiography and

⁴⁷ His reviews for the *New York Review of Books* are instructive in this regard: the provision and evaluation of biographical information is very much part of Coetzee's reviewing formula. This frequently necessitates the inclusion of published material beyond the scope of the particular review essay, such as biographies, diaries, letters, etc.

experiments with autobiography might be seen as an attempt to reconcile pre- and post-publication dimensions of the writer's life.

The tendency in Coetzee's work to stage both the private and public dimensions of writing is most keenly felt in *Foe* and *Petersburg* where he reimagines the authorial practice of the historical Daniel Defoe and Fyodor Dostoevsky. *Foe* rewrites Defoe by collapsing the distinction between *Robinson Crusoe* and *Roxana*, author and character, history and fiction, to create a narrative that might represent an early stage in the creation of the well-known novels or such drastic alternatives that they would never be written.⁴⁸ In *Petersburg* Dostoevsky the author becomes a character in a novel that stages the act of creation of *The Possessed*, drawing detail from his works and biography, as well as Russian history.⁴⁹

Both novels propose to restore a context, albeit fictional, to the creation of these familiar works of literature. Mike Marais says of *Petersburg* that it reminds us that the writer is 'ineluctably situated *in* history' ('Death and Response' 87). But what is in question in these novels is not just a recreation of the historical, political and cultural context in which they were written and which might be reconstructed by way of a particular kind of historical research but an imaginative projection of the material, emotional and physical conditions in which the person we know as the author wrote the works in question. Moreover, Coetzee has allowed these conditions to appear to implicate themselves, obliquely, into the artistic works that are produced by the respective author-protagonists within each novel, so that the relationship

⁴⁸ According to Spivak 'Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, which engenders *Foe*, does not exist' (*Critique* 183).

⁴⁹ *Petersburg* engages many more works of Dostoevsky than *The Possessed*, but for ease of reference at this stage I will limit myself to the novel that seems to offer an over-arching structure to Coetzee. In addition, Patrick Hayes has demonstrated that *Foe*'s structure owes something to Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, thus complicating any easy delimiting of intertextual reference.

between author and work, while certainly not one of identity, comes to seem more a question of likeness than one would previously have thought.

Attwell's comment that in *Foe* 'Coetzee sheds a "preliterary" light on his protagonists in order to place the transformations of the "literary" in question' provides a very clear description of the project while also revealing its inherently paradoxical nature (107). Attwell is referring specifically to Coetzee's use of the historical names Cruso, Foe and Susan, but his comments hold true for the way in which Coetzee invents a biography for his author protagonists in order that it can be *seen to be* transformed into the work that is taking shape within the novel. Both novels imagine a biographical context only to complicate its relationship to the work of art: the emphasis is unquestionably on the process of transformation. But naming aside, the 'preliterary' in *Foe* and *Petersburg* is already transformed: it is fiction or at least fictionalised. Coetzee's is not the practice of the literary biographer but of the novelist; insofar as he is working back from existing literary works to imagine the circumstances of their coming into being, his act of creation might be seen as the fictional equivalent of reading autobiographically. What Coetzee reads back into these novels, however, is a view of the transformations of the artistic process as quantifiable in terms of loss, perversion and betrayal. Susan Barton, who for the greater part of *Foe* is determined that the story of her time as a castaway be narrated and published eventually resigns herself to a marginal position with regard to that story: 'But now all my life grows to be story and there is nothing of my own left to me. [...] Nothing is left to me but doubt' (133). And Daniel Foe, the 'author' she has entrusted with reshaping and publishing her narrative, exploits her story and becomes a conspirator in her marginalisation. He describes himself as: "An old whore who

should ply her trade only in the dark” (151). Friday’s role in the novel also problematically underlines its reliance on the dynamics of absence or loss.

In *Petersburg* the transformation of the writing process is figured in the darkest possible terms: ‘*Perversion*: everything and everyone to be turned to another use, to be gripped to him and fall with him’ (235). The artistic process emerges as a kind of transaction in these novels, where lived life is sold or exchanged or simply used to produce something of dubious value. It is a transaction governed by a principle of devaluation and loss. Indeed one is compelled to ask what model of authorship and creativity – and relationship between author and creation – allows it to be understood in such negative terms? Is it the case that any model of creativity that incorporates the private dimension of authorship – the lived life of the writer, the confessional model – becomes a model of devaluation by that very inclusion?

III

The debate on authorship is still conducted within the terms of two influential essays: Roland Barthes’ ‘The Death of the Author’ (1968) and Michel Foucault’s ‘What is an Author?’ (1969). Both essays historicize the category of author, locating its emergence in a post-enlightenment western tradition with increasing emphasis on individual responsibility and private property. This ‘positivism, the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology’ is one dimension of Barthes’ rejection of the concept (143). His essay famously announces the disappearance of the author from the text, offering a critique of the temporality whereby the author is considered to precede a work: ‘The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a

before and an *after*. The Author is thought to *nourish* the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child' (145). Foucault comments that the concept of the author is: 'a privileged moment of individualization in the history of ideas, knowledge, and literature' (115). Rather than do away with this valuable analytical category he redefines the public extension of the writer as a function of discourse: 'the function of an author is to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society' (124). This allows him to discuss the cultural history of authorship while closing off its reliance on a private writing subject (the referential subject of autobiography, for example): 'Writing unfolds like a game that inevitably moves beyond its own rules and finally leaves them behind. [...] it is primarily concerned with creating an opening where the writing subject endlessly disappears' (116). The respective interventions of Barthes and Foucault have effected a division between the public role of the author – the author function – and the private writing subject.

The public and private dimensions of authorship are kept in play in Coetzee's writing on the subject, even if this is, finally, with the aim of collapsing the distinctions between them. His most extended meditation on the topic is in *Giving Offense*, his 1996 book on censorship. It is, on the face of it, a surprising volume insofar as it explores the way in which an essentially public institution, which presumes to regulate the circulation and dissemination of a writer's work, insinuates itself into the private life of the writer. To this extent, as its analysis moves between the public and private spheres it is simultaneously premised on the collapse of the distinctions between them. In an early chapter outlining the terms of the argument, one can delineate two strands to the analysis that roughly correspond to the private

and public dimensions of authorship. In the first instance, he discusses censorship as a pathogenic invader into the scene of writing, inserting itself boldly between the writer and his work. This is an intrusion into the writer's unconscious, the delicate and intimate world of writing which Coetzee describes thus: 'It is also a very private activity, so private that it almost constitutes the definition of privacy: how I am with myself' (38). But in the following pages he goes on to discuss the emergence of authorship as a profession: 'The notion that, by dint of writing, a person could aspire to and attain fame' (41). He by and large concurs with Foucault on the importance of censorship in formalizing and legalizing the role of author but he also presses this public dimension of authorship much further than Foucault, to embrace the 'mystique' of the author and the desire for 'fame and immortality' opened up by the invention of printing :

A book can be seen as a vehicle used by an author to project his signature – and indeed sometimes his portrait – into the world, in a multiplied form. It is this potentially endless multiplication of traces of himself that gives to the author in the early modern age intimations of a power to cross all spatial and temporal boundaries.
(41)

So authorship is not merely 'the definition of privacy' but the willingness and compulsion to sacrifice it in the sphere of publishing. In this account, the author's capacity to create is as reliant on the public domain as on the private. The reward for these acts of self-projection and self-sacrifice is the cultural capital and mystique that attaches to the role of author, a power that has immense potential in the context of state-sponsored censorship but about which Coetzee is also highly ambivalent.

An incident in Russian literary history provides Coetzee with a term for the kind of currency unique to the artist: *mastery*. The incident referred to involves Stalin's attempts to ascertain the threat posed by poet Osip Mandelstam, leading him

to ask Boris Pasternak if Mandelstam was in fact 'a master.' For Coetzee the power of the writer exceeds the author function described by Foucault; it is a power which is not limited to publishing and being read: 'the word of the master author has a disseminative power that goes beyond purely mechanical means of dissemination' (43). The idea of mastery is perhaps, in its twentieth and twenty-first century guise, the role of the public intellectual. But the 'fame and immortality' sought and attained by the master author is not, in the end, restricted to his or her reputation as a writer (though it is a result of it), but attaches itself to all aspects of lived experience.

The essays in *Giving Offense* leave one in no doubt that censorship, even as it is designed to police boundaries, does not observe the boundaries of private and public life and indeed the essays frequently highlight the permeability of this boundary. To the extent that censorship could be said to police authorship, it does so with no respect for the supposedly distinct fields of author function and private writing subject. If McDonald's research on South African censorship demonstrates that Coetzee's readers on the censorship committees were more sympathetic than he imagined, *Giving Offense* records the imaginative experience of the writer under censorship. The inherent instability in the division of authorship into a private and public dimension animates Coetzee's treatment of authorship in *Foe* and especially in *Petersburg* where we feel the full force of the confrontation between 'the definition of privacy' and the power of mastery and the sacrifice of one for the other.

IV

As I point out in chapter 1, Coetzee's critique of Rousseau is more or less a critique of the notion of sincerity and the self-interest that it masks. Coetzee's use of confessional narrative is therefore never far removed from questions of self-interest, particularly the self-interestedness that comes with the desire to be an author. If we approach the problem of authorship in this context, one can see that the interests of the private writing subject for whom writing is the 'definition of privacy' are not necessarily compatible with the desire for 'fame and immortality' that marks the desire to accede to the world of publishing, and that neither set of interests is compatible with the lived experience of the writing subject and the world he or she inhabits and his or her motivation to give an account of it. But if a certain principle of loss or failure seems to be built in to Coetzee's relentless scepticism about the self-interestedness of confession, as I point out in earlier chapters, his body of work bears out the fact that he has not entirely abandoned confession as an idea, that is, the idea of telling the truth about oneself. If 'the idea of the truth' serves as the model confession within the Coetzee oeuvre, then it is relentlessly challenged by competing interests.

Coetzee's author protagonists in *Foe* and *Petersburg*, Susan Barton, Daniel Foe and Dostoevsky, all write on the basis that there is something to be gained from the enterprise. For Barton it is initially the fame of authorship, for the more established Foe and Dostoevsky it is at least a settling of the debts that find them evading bailiffs and creditors for the duration of both novels. Barton clings doggedly to the notion that her narrative must be true to her 'substantial' experience and Foe seeks out stories of adventure and criminality as the raw material for his narratives.

Dostoevsky too conceives of his own life as currency that he must spend in order to write:

In fact, it is not so much a life as a price or a currency. It is something I pay with in order to write. [...]

Nevertheless, *I pay too* [...] I pay and I sell: that is my life. Sell my life, sell the lives of those around me. Sell everyone. [...]

A life without honour; treachery without limit; confession without end. (222)

Dostoevsky's comments suggest that there are material benefits to be gained from writing but also that the creative acts with which the novel concludes yield work of artistic merit and value or that some form of equivalence if not added-value governs the transformation of life into art. What is truly chilling about *Petersburg*, however, is that Dostoevsky does not write with any such certainty nor does the novel offer one. Similarly, while Daniel Foe might have eventually benefited from the publication of a castaway narrative, it is at the expense of Barton's 'substantial experience' and her authorial ambitions.

Earlier in *Petersburg*, after reading a story written by his stepson as a thinly-veiled sketch of the boy's unhappy childhood, Dostoevsky longs to give him some writerly wisdom about the relationship between life and art. He describes the economy of the writing process: 'We do not write out of plenty, he wants to say – we write out of anguish, out of lack' (152). In an interview in *Doubling the Point* Coetzee (speaking of Kafka) is critical of the idea that 'art becomes the alienated artist's private means, his private vice even, for turning lack and woe into gain' (203). While I do not wish to conflate Coetzee's comment in an interview with an observation from one of his characters, there is some consistency about the idea that while art might well emerge from a position of lack or marginality, it does not necessarily translate into gain.

In *Foe*, the self-interestedness of the creative process is staged through the deployment of confession as a figure for accession to authorship. Barton conceives of herself as a confessant and sees confession as ultimately instrumental, but when faced with the betrayal of her interests by Foe, she confesses just enough to protect the interests of Friday, becoming, in Spivak's term, 'the agent of other-directed ethics' (*Critique* 182). *Petersburg* is equally preoccupied with concerns about the self-interestedness of confession and authorship but I will argue that it attempts to overcome self-interest by staging the artistic process in terms of gambling and *risk*. This, in a general sense, is informed by the 'unproductive expenditure' of Georges Bataille's critique of the principles of classical utility. Gambling, in his view, is an example of 'unproductive expenditure,' a type of activity where 'in each case the accent is placed on a loss that must be as great as possible in order for that activity to take on its true meaning' (118). This is echoed in Dostoevsky comments about his recklessness in *Petersburg*:

Of course they are something to be ashamed of, these reckless bouts of his. Of course, when he comes home stripped bare and confesses to his wife and bows his head and endures her reproaches and vows he will never lapse again, he is sincere. But at the bottom of his heart, beneath the sincerity, where only God can see, he knows he is right and she is wrong. Money is there to be spent, and what form of spending is purer than gambling? (159)

Artistic production is similar to gambling in that it too is an example of 'unproductive expenditure.' Bataille goes so far as to say that artistic production 'can be considered synonymous with expenditure; it in fact signifies, in the most precise way, creation by means of loss. Its meaning is therefore close to that of sacrifice' (120). In the material sense that the economic terms can render quite vividly Bataille comments that while artistic production is a form of symbolic expenditure, 'poetic expenditure

ceases to be symbolic in its consequences' (120). While creativity in this view is a form of symbolic expenditure, as an aspect of lived experience it has real consequences. Bataille runs the risk of privileging the romantic conception of the artist as hero and fetishizing loss as the guarantee of artistic authenticity. But loss is no more the certain outcome of artistic production than gain. Rather, as Michel Leiris points out, it is the risk of loss that gives weight to artistic production. I will show how *Petersburg* embraces the risk of loss in its engagement with the myth of Orpheus, its staging of the creative process as the transformation of life into art and its implicit invitation to be read autobiographically. While section IV of *Foe* might be seen as a further betrayal of Barton's interests by Coetzee, I will suggest that the idea of artistic production as risk allows us instead to set aside the calculations of rational self-interest in our reading of the ending of the novel.

V

The attractiveness of autobiographical narrative to readers is not just fuelled and satisfied by autobiographical texts, but by texts that use autobiography as a conceit. In 'A Fiction of the Truth' Coetzee expands on his understanding of Defoe's realism as 'fake autobiography,' describing it as a kind of fiction that exploits the 'autobiographical pact' that exists between writers and readers of autobiography, that is, 'the assumption on its readers' part that it adheres to certain standards of truthfulness.' It is notable that Defoe's realism is not just described in terms of creating a positive balance of credibility in the mind of the reader, but of exploiting the reader's conviction that the story he or she reads is verifiably true. Coetzee refers to it as forgery or ventriloquism while Ian Watt, in his influential study *The Rise of*

the Novel, describes Defoe as 'a great, a truly great liar' (93). This is realism conceived as deception.

In his introduction to the Oxford World's Classics edition of *Robinson Crusoe* Coetzee ponders this deception, wondering why the writer, presumably the person we call Daniel Defoe, insists on maintaining the charade that Robinson Crusoe is a living person. It is not only, he concludes, because 'Crusoe is Everyman, and every man is an island' – in other words, that the story is emblematic – but because there is a confessional dimension to the identification: in describing the solitude of the writing-life in London the returned castaway seems to 'merge' with Daniel Defoe, 'from whose head he was born' (vi). The tendency to identify author with creation is an extension of this *merging* of Crusoe and Defoe which Coetzee fictionalises in 'He and His Man,' as the works of Daniel Defoe appear to issue from the pen of Robinson Crusoe. Indeed Coetzee introduced the story at the Stockholm ceremony by recalling his confusion as a child about the precise nature of the relationship between the man called Daniel Defoe and the man called Robinson Crusoe, playfully re-enacting the confusion when giving the title of the story: 'I cannot remember which comes first, he or his man.'⁵⁰

The young Coetzee's confusion about the relevance of Daniel Defoe to a story that was patently that of Robinson Crusoe points to the success of Defoe's particular brand of realism. In his introduction to *Robinson Crusoe*, Coetzee calls Defoe 'an impersonator, a ventriloquist, even a forger...' (vii):

The kind of 'novel' he is writing (he did not of course use the term) is a more or less literal imitation of the kind of recital his hero or heroine would have given had he or

⁵⁰ His opening remarks are not published with the text of the Nobel lecture but can be viewed as part of the lecture on the Nobel Prize website:
<http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2003/coetzee-lecture.html>

she really existed. It is fake autobiography heavily influenced by the genres of the deathbed confession and the spiritual autobiography. (viii)

Defoe's consistent flirtation with the 'autobiographical pact' in his fiction has not so much devalued the autobiographical pact as emphasised the potential for new pacts to develop between readers and writers of fiction and autobiography. As Coetzee points out, only children are puzzled by the relationship between Defoe and Crusoe, not yet familiar enough with the conventions of one genre (fiction) to be blind to the conventions of another (autobiography – a kind of history). In 'Truth in Autobiography' Coetzee comments that a certain degree of *blindness* is in the interests of the continuing viability of autobiographical discourse: blindness to the limitations of the genre and blindness to the existence of the pact. But his point is more far-reaching than this, incorporating literary and critical discourse as well as autobiography: 'All forms of discourse may have secrets, of no great profundity, which they nevertheless, cannot afford to unveil' (6). If the deckhands described in 'He and His Man' do not acknowledge one another, it may be because they cannot afford to.

Coetzee's use of the term 'autobiographical pact' implicitly invokes the work of life-writing theorist Philippe Lejeune. In 'The Autobiographical Pact' Lejeune begins his discussion of autobiographical narrative with a definition: 'Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality' (4). As the essay develops, so does the reach of his definition, to the extent that he eventually insists on the identity of author and protagonist as verified by the reader via the author's proper name as essential to autobiography: 'Autobiography does not include degrees: it is all

or nothing' (13).⁵¹ 'Double Thoughts' is notable for its testing of various limits and conditions in which successful confession can take place, but for Lejeune the limits that he outlines with regard to autobiography seem to be binding.

The usefulness of Lejeune's definition lies in its ability to illuminate Coetzee's loss-model of creativity. In its vehemence, Lejeune's definition provides an extreme example of a model of autobiographical writing based on the absolute identity of author and work that sets a standard by which we can begin to discuss the artistic process in terms of transformation, loss and perversion. In a later, somewhat more conciliatory essay, Lejeune admits that his strict adherence to the necessary identity of author and protagonist in autobiography emerged from his conflation of autobiography and confession: 'I have always reasoned as if the center of the autobiographical domain was the *confession*. I have evaluated the whole thing by imposing upon it the rules of functioning of one of its parts: confessions must be signed for them to have any value; there can be no compromise with the truth' ('The Autobiographical Pact (bis)' 125). This model of autobiography and confession – grounded in a literal apprehension of the relationship between author and work – implicitly devalues writing that does not meet its rigorous and essentially referential standards of truth-telling. Lejeune admits that his need to define autobiography in such rigorous terms arose from an anxiety about its deployment in more dilute forms: 'My entire analysis was part of an obvious fact: 'How to distinguish autobiography from the autobiographical novel?' (127)⁵² However, the confessional model continues to dog autobiographical and literary discourse as the standard of truth-telling to which

⁵¹ Coetzee never mentions Lejeune but touches on the idea of the autobiographical pact in 'A Fiction of the Truth' and the pact between author and reader more generally in 'Truth in Autobiography.' It is also the subject of discussion in a recent interview with David Attwell ('All Autobiography' 214-15).

⁵² My purpose is not to adopt Lejeune's model of the autobiographical novel but to illustrate the extreme referential standards that apply to autobiography and confession.

one might aspire and as a result autobiographical and literary discourse continue to fall short of this standard. In other words, loss (or failure) ineluctably follows confession.

Lejeune's attempts to define and theorise the field of autobiography have been the subject of rigorous critique, most notably within the field of American deconstruction in which Paul de Man spear-headed the attack on the capacity of autobiographical discourse to reveal reliable self-knowledge: 'it does not' ('Autobiography as DeFacement' 173). De Man's critique of Lejeune singles out his reliance on the judgement of the reader to verify the status of autobiography: 'From specular figure of the author, the reader becomes the judge, the policing power in charge of verifying the *authenticity* of the signature and the consistency of the signer's behaviour, the extent to which he respects or fails to honour the contractual agreement he has signed' (174). In terms invited by Lejeune's analysis of his own argument, his reliance on the reader to verify the existence of an autobiographical pact turns the reader into a confessor, charged with verifying the authenticity and truthfulness of autobiographical writing. For this reason the confessor figures that we find in *Foe* and *Petersburg*, Foe and the detective Maximov, are both described as predators, spiders who have lured their victims into a web of self-accusation and deceit. Those who confess therefore run the risk of having their confession received in this unsympathetic manner. But the confessor figure is significant in Coetzee's writing on confession as more than a policeman or judge; in 'Double Thoughts' it is the holy monk Tikhon, notably absent from *Petersburg*, who allows Stavrogin's confession to come to an end by offering a generous interpretation of his actions that introduces the possibility of absolution and grace. So while the inherently relational

activity of confession would appear to rely on the presence of a confessor, this is not necessarily the policeman or the judge of Lejeune's pact.

V

Foe begins with Susan Barton's account of her time on Cruso's island and here and in her initial interactions with Foe we have a sense of the plenitude of her story, a narrative which she feels empowered to recount: 'Do you think of me, Mr Foe, as Mrs Cruso or as a bold adventuress? Think what you may, it was I who shared Cruso's bed and closed Cruso's eyes, as it is I who have disposal of all that Cruso leaves behind, which is the story of his island' (45). Section II takes the form of letters to Foe and, when it eventually becomes clear that the letters are not reaching their addressee, diary entries giving an account of the material difficulties facing Barton and Friday, who she sees as her charge. It documents an erosion of Barton's confidence in her narrative and in her ability to relay it, even if the imperative to do so seems ever more urgent. Section III is an encounter between Barton and Foe in which they discuss the fate of Friday, Barton's narrative, and her long-lost daughter. In effect, it marks Foe's attempt to sideline Barton's castaway story in favour of other narrative options – Friday's story or the story of Barton's daughter. The authority which she claimed over the story in the early stages is now subject to doubt; looking back from the later stages of the novel she remarks to Foe: 'I presented myself to you in words I knew to be my own – I slipped overboard, I began to swim, my hair floated about me, and so forth, you will remember the words – and for a long time afterwards, when I was writing those letters that were never read by you, and were later not sent, and at last not even written down, I continued to trust in my own

authorship' (133). Section IV represents a complete break with the logic of the novel up to this point as an unnamed narrator assumes control of the narrative, casting Barton's story aside in favour of that of Friday.

The reader of *Foe* is thus faced with a series of overlapping but discontinuous narratives in which competing stories attempt to assert themselves: on the face of it, the story of Cruso's island, but the primary stakeholders are the survivors, Barton and Friday. Critics have responded by hailing the novel as a feminist and a postcolonial rewriting of Defoe's canonical texts: the context Coetzee recreates for Defoe's novels seems to render visible the marginalized female and colonial subjects thus allowing the artistic process that gave rise to *Roxana* and *Robinson Crusoe* to appear more like silencing and effacing than representing and expressing. But the competing narratives within *Foe* have attracted equal attention: the feminist and the postcolonial rewritings that Coetzee appears to undertake are not entirely compatible; *Foe* might not be the only antagonist in the novel. Spivak's reading of the novel is informed from the outset by a sense of the competing interests at play: 'I am suggesting that ... the book may be gesturing toward the impossibility of restoring the history of empire and recovering the lost text of mothering *in the same register of language*' (183). Hayes puts it in bolder terms: 'why does the price of Friday's 'voice' appear to be Susan's 'silence', and vice versa?' (282) Indeed Hayes's argument is driven by his concern that the politics of section IV of the novel (which he argues is a wisdom tale, a kind of non-novel), which has otherwise been welcomed by critics for restoring Friday's presence in the narrative, 'do not serve Susan's interests' (282). For Spivak, this is not just about voice or representation, but more specifically, the problem of negotiating an ethical position. Acknowledging the discontinuities between the different narratives in *Foe*, she asserts that Coetzee's *interests* lie elsewhere: '*He is*

involved in a historically implausible but politically provocative revision. He attempts to represent the bourgeois individualist woman in early capitalism as the *agent of other-directed ethics* rather than as a combatant in the preferential ethics of self-interest' (182).

Employing the confessional teleology of 'Double Thoughts,' Attwell points out that the confessional dimension of Barton's narrative means that in section IV Friday 'possesses the key to the closure of the narrative' (112). For Hayes, who also employs the confessional teleology of the essay, the wisdom tale ending is not only discontinuous with the rest of the novel, which prioritises the liberal, novelistic values represented by Barton, but is fundamentally at odds with them. In describing the relation between the novel and its conclusion in terms of a conflict of interests, Hayes is setting Barton against Friday, the marginalized female subject against the marginalized colonial subject.

By introducing a female character to the story of *Robinson Crusoe*, Coetzee is positing an alternative version of the well-known narrative in which, now mediated through the consciousness of a woman, Crusoe's lack of interest in anything but the most meagre subsistence on the island robs the castaway story of much of its appeal. To restore some of this appeal Barton seeks the help of Foe, an author famed for his ability to transform a story into an adventure. In her estimation Foe is not an author in the sense of creator, but a craftsman who can work with the materials of someone else's story in order to transform it into art: 'Many strengths you have, but invention is not one of them' (72). She adopts the figure of confession to describe the process she embarks on with Foe: he is the confessor who hears a story and by making it available to a wider audience, provides fame rather than absolution. This echoes the practice of eighteenth-century court reporters and the confessional practice of the

Ordinary of Newgate prison himself, who would hear the last confessions of those prisoners sentenced for execution and later publish them in his widely read *Account*.⁵³

In the characters of Barton and Foe we have the two dimensions of authorship embodied in different characters: Barton represents the private dimension of authorship that draws on the lived life and stubbornly asserts its origins in the real and Foe, the famous author, is the public extension of the writing life, Foucault's author function. Barton's conviction that authorship is a direct extension of the lived experience of the author is reflected not just in her adoption of the figure of confession for her attempt to accede to authorship via Foe, but in the way she reads other writers in the same terms. When Foe recounts an episode from Dante's *Inferno*, asserting the literary text's claim to truth, Barton responds by conflating the truth of the text with that of the author: "'True grief, certainly, but whose?' said I – 'The ghost's or the Italian's?'" (138)

What occurs in the first three sections of *Foe* can be understood as a sequence of staged confessional narratives: first person account, letters and diaries, and a personal encounter. These forms are not necessarily confessional forms, but the governing principle of these three sections of the novel is Susan Barton's address to the author Daniel Foe, which she conceives as a confession. But her narrative is equally marked by the tensions between the demands of truth-telling and the risk of deception or self-deception that Coetzee finds typical of the genre. Indeed, the figure of confession that structures her relationship with Foe points equally to the importance of her belief in representing her own substantial experience and the necessity to structure this in such a way as to appeal to readers. As much as she

⁵³ See Linebaugh.

attempts to separate out these qualities of confessional narrative, as the novel progresses one finds that she too is implicated in an attempt to persuade as much as represent: she may have relinquished responsibility for the readability of the published account to Foe, but as sections II and III attest, she also has an audience or a reader in Foe and must expand on her version of events to maintain his interest and convince him of its worth. Attridge notes the overlap between literary representation and self-presentation in his discussion of *Foe* and the canon: 'What *Foe* suggests is that the same imperative drives our self-presentations and representations; unless we are read, we are nothing' (75). In keeping with this, while Barton initially set out to recount the story of her time on the island, once her first-person account fails to deliver her to fame as an author her focus shifts to finding a way to reveal Friday's story.

That Barton and Foe should be implicated in 'plotting' a confession is hardly surprising. One of the main intertexts for *Foe* is Coetzee's chosen example of the genre of confessional fiction: Defoe's *Roxana*. If Barton's narrative appears to be structured by the dynamics of concealing and revealing typical of the confessional novel it is because the over-arching structure is provided by the confessional model of *Roxana* and for this reason her narrative seems to tend inevitably toward her confession that she has indeed abandoned her daughter. This, at least, is the story that her confessor Foe prompts her to tell. But in spite of the powerful determining force of genre (as I outlined in chapter 2) this is a teleology that she nonetheless resists to the last.

Confessing is certainly not a disinterested activity for Barton, even if it does not reflect the interests pursued by Foe. Initially, she believes that having the story told and published will bring 'immortality and fame' but later she sees it as the means

whereby both she and Friday will find freedom: 'Can you not press on with your writing, Mr Foe, so that Friday can speedily be returned to Africa and I liberated from this drab existence I lead?' (63) But her view of confession conflicts most clearly with that of Foe insofar as she adheres not just to this instrumental view of narrative but is convinced that the story that will bring her success or freedom will be the account of events she described, that it will be faithful to her substantial experience. In other words, no more than Foe, she is enticed by the 'mystique' of authorship but, unlike Foe, she is resistant to the sacrifices involved in acceding to it. While she clings to the end to the hope that the story can somehow *act* on her life, her expectations diminish as she experiences the material and creative hardships of writing and is faced with Foe whose responses, when they come, are not what she expects and which appear to serve a different set of interests than hers and Friday's. In splitting the public and private dimensions of authorship into two different characters, Coetzee allows the conflict of interests between privacy and mastery to unfold in dramatic fashion. It quickly becomes apparent to Barton that Foe is operating under a completely different set of priorities: like the deckhands toiling in the rigging in 'He and His Man,' she and Foe are at cross purposes.

Both Barton and Foe resort to confession as a figure several times in the course of the novel, but to very different ends: for Barton, determined to provide a truthful account of her time on the island, the confessional intention to tell the truth provides the over-riding figure for the relationship between her and Foe – her sincerity is guaranteed by her apparent naivety – whereas Foe, seasoned on the confessions of the criminals of Newgate prison, views confession as essentially instrumental and therefore self-interested. But while the agency exercised by Barton in the novel issues from her desire for confessional narrative, it is confession

understood not just in terms of expression and giving voice, but as a discourse structured equally by disclosure and concealment and subject to manipulation.

Describing her first encounter with Foe in a letter to him, Barton writes: 'one of my fellow-servants told me you were Mr. Foe the author who had heard many confessions and were reputed a very secret man' (48). Her description perfectly captures the ambiguities of the motif she is employing: Foe is someone to confide in yet *famous* for keeping secrets; he has a reputation for listening but a career that involves writing and disseminating. It places Foe unambiguously in the category of *author* – the one who sacrifices the private for the sake of the public. In this knowledge, she approaches him hoping to secure a position in his household for herself and Friday in exchange for the fascinating story she would offer. Confronted by Foe's silent contemplation, however, she immediately questions the wisdom of her actions: '... I thought to myself: What art is there to hearing confessions? – the spider has as much art, that watches and waits' (48). The art that Barton expects from Foe is that of transforming the material of her experiences into a viable, publishable narrative. While she entertains the ambition of becoming an author she also accepts the differences between her and Foe as fundamental: 'The memoir I wrote for you I wrote sitting on my bed with the paper on a tray on my knees ... Yet I completed that memoir in three days. More is at stake in the history you write, I will admit, for it must not only tell the truth about us but please its readers too. Will you not bear it in mind, however, that my life is drearily suspended till your writing is done?' (63) However, the notion that Foe's artistry might have something in common with the art of the confessor allows the question of authorship and the process of artistic transformation to be understood more clearly as an issue of authority and it is given a particularly sinister gloss by the predatory spider. While Barton initially conceived of

her confessor in benevolent terms, the underlying threat in the image of the spider waiting to prey on the confessant drives home the conflict of interests at play.

Both Barton and Foe return to confession in a self-conscious manner later in the novel but, by this stage, the motif has acquired a resonance beyond their figures through the novel's growing emphasis on the dynamics of concealing and revealing, or in confessional terms, withholding and confessing. Barton has given up all hope of fame but remains convinced that full disclosure of the island story will deliver her and Friday to 'freedom.' She has always claimed the island story as her own, even though it involved speaking for both the dead Cruso and the mute Friday: '... it is I who have disposal of all that Cruso leaves behind, which is the story of the island' (45). But the apparent incapacity of the first person narrative of section I to deliver her to fame or freedom – or to maintain the interest of Foe – leads her to interpret this failure as a failure of disclosure, in other words, that she did not confess with sufficient fullness. The problem, she decides, is not with her story but with Friday's. As she has come to see it, the core of the story resides with Friday, who cannot speak of it because he is mute – Cruso told Barton that Friday's tongue had been cut out, but no evidence is provided to support his claim. For Barton, this loss is an obstacle to the story's successful completion: 'The shadow whose lack you feel is there: it is the loss of Friday's tongue. [...] many stories can be told of Friday's tongue, but the true story is buried within Friday who is mute. The true story will not be heard till by art we have found a means of giving voice to Friday' (117-18). It becomes clear that Friday poses the most serious threat to the model of literary invention proposed by Barton, to the plenitude and accessibility of her story, for how can we expect Friday's story to materialise if he cannot speak and therefore cannot confess – or cannot enable Barton to confess on his behalf? What role can there be for Friday and

Friday's silence in a model of narration and authorship that seems to privilege voice and disclosure above all else?

While placing Friday's silence at the centre of the island story, Susan expresses her fear that in describing the loss of Friday's tongue, Crusoe might have been 'employing a figure', she wonders 'whether the lost tongue might stand not only for itself but for a more atrocious mutilation' (119). Seeing Friday dance, naked except for one of Foe's outer robes, Susan believes she has uncovered Friday's real secret: 'What had been hidden from me was revealed. I saw; or, I should say, my eyes were open to what was present to them' (119). The kind of revelation that Susan believes she has witnessed is not entirely susceptible to confessional narrative, but she struggles to find another register within which to articulate it: 'I do not know how these matters can be written of in a book unless they are covered up again in figures' (120). So while the idea of full disclosure seems essential to Barton's conception of authorship as embodied in the figure of confession, it is a form of disclosure that must rely for its circulation on the concealment of figurative language. And one of these forms of concealment is the figure of confession itself, which she resorts to once more:

When I first heard of you I was told you were a very secret man, a clergyman of sorts, who in the course of your work heard the darkest confessions from the most desperate penitents. I will not kneel before him like one of his gallows-birds, I vowed, with a mouth full of unspeakable confidences: I will say in plain terms what can be said and leave unsaid what cannot. Yet here I am pouring out my darkest secrets to you! You are like one of those notorious libertines whom women arm themselves against, but against whom they are at last powerless, his very notoriety being the seducer's shrewdest weapon. (120)

Barton believed that it was in her power to control the narrative in spite of relinquishing final authorial power to Foe, yet it turns out to be otherwise. She finds

herself as desperate as any of Foe's penitents, revealing secrets in order to keep his attention. She compares herself to the criminals of Newgate prison whose final confessions would be recorded and published, not only by crime reporters such as Daniel Defoe, but also by the Ordinary of Newgate himself whose Account, according to Linebaugh, 'enjoyed one of the widest markets that printed prose narratives could obtain in the eighteenth century' (250). Significantly, the secrets in question are not Barton's, but Friday's. She has managed to tie their fates together, apparently in Friday's interests, but now it would appear, in her own too. It should be noted, however, that while Barton believes herself to be confessing and disclosing in this moment, the only figure she has found for Friday's supposed mutilation is the figure of the secret itself ('Yet here I am pouring out my darkest secrets to you!').

However, as the confessional dynamic persists it is clear that Foe is not satisfied with the (non)disclosure about Friday; he is convinced that the truth of Susan's story lies in her search for the daughter she supposedly abandoned and that her other confessions are merely a ruse to distract from this fact. So it is not enough that Barton confess, she must fulfil Foe's expectations – the expectations created by the intertextual relationship with *Roxana* – by confessing to a particular kind of transgression. Embracing the role of confessor/interrogator he presses her for information about her daughter, but she recognises the strategy:

I told myself (have I not confessed this before?): He is like the patient spider who sits at the heart of his web waiting for his prey to come to him. And when we struggle in his grasp, and he opens his jaws to devour us, and with our last breath we cry out, he smiles a thin smile and says: "I did not ask you to come visiting, you came of your own will." (120)

Once again we have the threatening figure of the confessor as a spider, but this time Barton understands the nature of her vulnerability more fully: exploiting the motif of

confession does not necessarily place her in control of the narrative. Coetzee's point is not simply to underline the threat implicit in the authority wielded by Foe, the confessor – though this is an important point – but to illustrate the risk run by the confessant in confusing confession with agency. It is, in Michel Foucault's terms, the 'internal ruse of confession' by which western man became a 'confessing animal,' cultivating the belief 'that all these voices which have spoken so long in our civilization ...are speaking to us of freedom' (60). In this way we can see that the deployment of confession in the novel, as evidenced in Barton's apparent willingness to share 'her darkest secrets' with Foe, undermines the value of disclosure that it seems to privilege.

It is in this context that Barton comes to understand the power of the confessional narrative: not the power of disclosure as such, but its seemingly endless capacity to promise a truth other than the one it avows. In other words, confessional narrative creates a certain potentiality, an unrevealed secret. The agency that one derives from confession lies not in the power to disclose but in the power to withhold: this is confessional currency. This is exemplified in the 'darkest secrets' that she claims to confess on the part of Friday: they are inscribed in the confessional narrative and simultaneously deferred for a different moment of revelation. Barton comes to understand that, as in *The Possessed*, confession is a game of limited truth. Her agency – an 'other-directed agency' in Spivak's terms – emerges from her ability to play this game.

In Spivak's account of the novel, it is the ability to protect a secret rather than reveal it that is its primary virtue. The issue at stake for her, given the text's scepticism about the interests served by disclosure (and the failure of disclosure to deliver a position from which one can act ethically), is the value available to its

opposite: withholding. And not alone that: the central problem of *Foe* is how to make withholding visible. This, I believe, could only occur in the context of a text that invests so much of its imaginative resources in disclosure. Thus, it is given to Susan to confess that she is, in fact, keeping secrets. But furthermore, she manages to protect Friday's secrets by appearing to disclose them: 'You err most tellingly in failing to distinguish between my silences and the silences of a being such as Friday' (121). Friday, according to Barton, is 'the child of his silence,' at the mercy of whatever story she chooses to tell of him. But this, of course, is merely a story she chooses to tell of him. She sees herself as an agent who knowingly withholds information in order to shape her version of events: 'I am not, do you see, one of those thieves or highwaymen of yours who gabble a confession and are then whipped off to Tyburn and eternal silence, leaving you to make of their stories whatever you fancy. It is still in my power to guide and amend. Above all, to withhold. By such means do I still endeavour to be father to my story' (123). In this respect Barton is the private dimension of authorship that defends its interests against all the odds and refuses to be sacrificed. Barton's understanding of confessional narrative has undoubtedly grown in complexity from her earlier conception of recounting a story to Foe that he might publish – 'I presented myself to you in words I knew to be my own' (133) – but her change in emphasis from disclosure to withholding still allows her to protect the dimension of private experience that animates confessional narrative. That is to say, she still adheres to a view of authorship that is rooted in the lived experience of the author, but this experience might have to be concealed in the figures that propose to reveal and disclose it.

Foe attempts to challenge Barton's emphasis on withholding and the private sphere she protects with two stories about convicts at Newgate prison. The stories

relate to two women who are facing the gallows and whose actions are therefore taking place in the shadow of last things. In this way, both anecdotes explore ways of embracing the end – in both cases, death. The first woman attempts to postpone the end by making endless confessions to the ordinary of Newgate and the second woman embraces the end having arrangements made for the care of her daughter. The first anecdote is not merely an account of how one might achieve immortality through notoriety and publishing (though this was part of the contract between the ordinary and prisoners) but an attempt to stave off death by the act of narrating and confessing.

The incident is a parody of the argument presented by Coetzee in 'Double Thoughts' where no confession is true or final but constantly subject to reevaluation and further disclosure. Foe's anecdote is implicitly a threat to Barton – Foe as confessor has the power to bring her narrative to an end, as she recognises – but also a warning that her new position which privileges withholding might also be subject to revision. The alternative is to embrace the story Foe is determined to tell, the ending preordained by the intertextual relationship with *Roxana*, and the great transgression that he presumes to lie behind her incomplete confessions. While these are presented as alternative possibilities, they are in truth two versions of the first: Susan capitulating to the authority of Foe. Worse still, as Susan has already observed of Friday, it is now she that is at the mercy of the story Foe decides to tell.

In keeping with the suggested antagonism of the title, critical accounts of *Foe* have described the conflict between Barton's interests and those of Crusoe, Friday and Foe. Spivak's assessment that she is 'the *agent of other-directed* ethics rather than ... a combatant in the preferential ethics of self-interest' (182) recuperates the loss implicit in her model of authorship for a postcolonial ethics but it can also, I believe, be recovered for a model of confession that casts aside self-interested disclosure in

favour of a withholding disguised as disclosure. Attridge notes that canon formation relies on a certain amount of silencing, which may take many forms: 'All canons rest on exclusion; the voice they give to some can be heard only by virtue of the silence they impose on others. But it is not just a silencing by exclusion, it is a silencing by *inclusion* as well: any voice we can hear is by that very fact purged of its uniqueness and alterity' (82). The silence that Barton successfully defends is not her silence but Friday's, who appears substantial as, in Spivak's terms, the agent of a withholding, 'the guardian at the margin' (190).

Marking the discontinuity inherent in Coetzee's confessional model, section IV abandons the self-referential confessional mode of the earlier part of the novel, even if it implicitly retains the thematics of revealing and concealing insofar as it draws much of its power from daring to imagine what had previously been withheld: the home of Friday. In addition, the authority by which it asserts itself as a space in which 'bodies are their own signs' is achieved by the relentless undermining of authority that has gone before. While it is clearly a departure in style from what has preceded it, it also repeats and echoes earlier passages from the novel and, as Attridge has amply illustrated, from canonical literary and non-literary texts, thereby drawing on a different kind of authority. Narrated by an unspecified *I*, that seemingly cannot be fragmented by its location in different times and places, without the qualification of citation that occurs elsewhere in the novel, renouncing even the positioning of ventriloquising a specific voice, section IV is unapologetic in its adoption of literary tropes. If, as Susan asserted earlier, that in order to speak of Friday's secrets they would need to be 'covered up again in figures,' then this is how the 'home of Friday' is achieved in the closing section of the novel (120).

So if, in this novel of staged confessions and 'fake autobiography' confession and disclosure have only the power to conceal and the only agency available to the confessant is the agency of withholding – in other words, a power derived from the ability to retain confessional currency rather than spend it – what means of signification is available to the putative autobiographical? In spite of Barton's memoir, her concern for the material conditions of authorship, and the challenge she throws down to Foe, her efforts to accede to the public role of author fail. In a recent interview with Attwell, Coetzee responds to a question about self-invention in autobiography: 'As for postcolonial or feminist autobiography, as long as the agenda that drives it remains political, I don't see it being allowed to venture far into the realms of invention. I look forward to being proved wrong' (217). But in an earlier interview the fictional context of *Foe* seems to provide a space in which to reconcile what Attwell calls the need for 'historical self-reclamation' with the textual processes of self-invention. Coetzee asks: 'is representation to be so robbed of power by the endlessly sceptical processes of textualization that those represented in/by the text – the feminine subject, the colonial subject – are to have no power either?' (248) In *Foe* the power available to the feminine subject is complicated by a refusal to equate representation with the disclosure of confession. Instead, authorship emerges as an act not unlike the dynamic of disclosure *and* concealment that informs confession – strategic, self-interested, and dependent on others.

That Barton's strategic confession is conducted through a rigorous interrogation of narrative authority does not undermine her ability to speak. As Foe asks her towards the end of the novel: 'Have you considered that your doubts may be part of the story you live, of no greater weight than any other adventure of yours?' (135) If Barton manages to protect Friday's secret by naming it as secret, we cannot

discount the possibility that she also protects her own secrets, but by naming other secrets. In *Given Time* Derrida discusses 'Counterfeit Money,' a story by Baudelaire in which a man excuses an act of excessive generosity to a beggar by confessing that his donation was in fact counterfeit. In Derrida's account, the generosity of this act – its qualities of the 'gift' – is disguised by the confession. According to Derrida: 'It is superficial, without substance, infinitely private because public through and through. It is spread on the surface of the page, as obvious as a purloined letter, a post card, a bank note, a check, a 'letter of credit' – or 'a silver two-franc piece' (169). Insofar as confessional narrative is always subject to reassessment, revision and further disclosure, it is constantly threatened by the accusation of untruth or insincerity. What better repository of secrets?

VI

Building on Foucault's account of the emergence of the category of author as a subject against which the censorship apparatus could act, Coetzee, in *Giving Offense*, posits the notion of *the master* who is targeted by the state not for what he writes but on account of 'a certain disseminative power of which the power to publish and have read is only the most marked manifestation' (43). Coetzee highlights the way in which the machine of state censorship targets the master author not by publishing restrictions but by invading the creative process itself. In general, *Giving Offense* is concerned less with the material impact of censorship on the circulation of texts and more with the effects of the censorship apparatus on the individual, either the private writing subject or the subject as a conduit for ideas. In this way, censorship becomes an extension and intensification of the creative process itself, a less than benevolent

presence that both threatens and enables the writing process and the writing subject. The essays are informed by the principle that literary works produced and published in these circumstances bear the traces of the various writers' struggles with their respective foes; Coetzee's challenge is to find a critical register with which to analyse writing enterprises that have become divided against themselves due to the presence of a censor. He frequently figures writing in these circumstances as a kind of madness, an enterprise that must serve such conflicting interests that it appears to be mad, or at the very least, irrational. Discussing the private writing subject as the locus of a struggle between various ideas, desires and instincts, he presents an elaborate metaphor of the unconscious as a zoo, over which the 'zookeeper of rationality' struggles to maintain control (37). As I noted, the activity of writing which takes place in this 'zoo' is described by Coetzee as 'the definition of privacy' (38).

In most cases, Coetzee's study of censorship proceeds through a metaphorical framework to an understanding of how the factors that influence the circulation and regulation of discourse act on the writing subject, and vice versa, so that the distinctions between the public and private dimensions of the writing process grow less and less distinct. While the author, as identified by the name on the title page, becomes a target of the law under censorship, the influence of the master author extends beyond the printed page and the reach of censorship is not confined to the way the law can exercise itself on the author.

Unusually for a book on censorship, *Giving Offense* consistently questions and even undermines the power of censorship to curtail or prohibit the circulation of 'threatening' texts or ideas. Coetzee is quick to note that even in the darkest days of censorship in South Africa, alliances between writers (at least in English) and foreign publishers assured that their work would not be consigned forever to oblivion. In the

case of the master author, he speculates that the currency of the writer's reputation might be enhanced by the attention of the censorship apparatus and therefore wonders 'whether writers under censorship are wholly disinterested in presenting themselves as embattled and outnumbered, confronting a gigantic foe' (44). While available correspondence from the late 70s shows his anxieties about censorship and about benefiting from the notoriety of being censored (though none of his novels were banned), the fact that this was largely misplaced does not undermine its role in the creative process (see Ravan Material at NELM). Although presented in terms of an external threat or invasion, censorship is continuous with the psychic drama of the creative process and can therefore be enlisted in the service of this process. In an essay on Breyten Breytenbach, Coetzee's analysis attempts to negotiate between the defiant public utterances of the writer who views the censor unequivocally as a foe and the private world of his writing that bears the scars of his engagement with this foe. Coetzee describes the public statements as: 'an unambiguous struggle between a voice struggling to utter itself and a gag that stifles it' (*Giving Offense* 232). But his account of Breytenbach's 'private' encounter with the censor in his work is more typical of the struggle between the private and the public that characterises Coetzee's reading of censorship elsewhere: 'the doctrine to be teased out of his more intimate writings, is that the writer writes *against* and cannot write *without* a manifold of internalized resistances that are in essence no different from an internalized censor-twin, both cherished and hated' (232). In other words, there is an element of productive constraint in the limitations of working under censorship. I will suggest that in *Petersburg* this is replicated in the author's relation to his private life more generally.

Censorship conceived in this private dimension is not unlike the dynamic of confessional narrative insofar as it too relies on a process of revelation and suppression, that is to say, confession is a form of self-censorship. If the only agency available in *Foe* is the power to withhold one's story, this is because confession attains its value in Foucault's terms as 'a ritual in which the truth is corroborated by the obstacles and resistances it has had to surmount in order to be formulated' (62). Another variation on this dynamic occurs in 'Double Thoughts' as Coetzee describes the typical Rousseauian confession in terms of self-censoring: 'Confession consists in a double movement of offering to spend "inconsistencies" and holding back enough to maintain the "freedom" that comes of having capital' (272). On the other hand, it is the 'lack of prudent self-censorship' that leads Coetzee to find in Geoffrey Cronjé's writing 'the heart-speech of autobiography and confession' (164). The emphasis on censorship helps us to see these two versions of confession not so much as opposites but as continuous with the dynamic of revelation and suppression: the difference is that the former is governed by the Rousseauian pact of sincerity, which Coetzee is deeply sceptical of, and the latter by a form of madness or demon-possession, undoubtedly less calculated than Rousseau's sincerity but also considerably more dangerous.

If the conflicting demands of the creative process can be understood to rely on a similar dynamic (the zoo of the unconscious, the influence of the censor, the deckhands at cross purposes) then it follows that it is not necessarily in the interests of the writer to admit this. Coetzee's concern about the role of *self-censoring* in confessional narrative is evident in his discussion of the way in which genre relies on the existence of unspoken rules or pacts between writers and readers of autobiography in 'Truth in Autobiography'. He comments on the necessity of a

certain degree of *blindness* to the continuing viability of autobiographical discourse: blindness to the limitations of the genre and blindness to the existence of the pact (5). Indeed, as I have mentioned, his point is more far-reaching than this: 'All forms of discourse may have secrets, of no great profundity, which they nevertheless, cannot afford to unveil' (6). We can see this being teased out in different ways in both *Foe* and *Petersburg*. In *Foe*, the emphasis on withholding is one way of protecting secrets that Barton cannot afford to reveal – or is not authorised to unveil. Whereas the power of section IV of the same novel derives from the element of risk in seizing this authority, at whatever cost. In *Petersburg*, as the protagonist says, 'nothing is private anymore' (241).

VII

The circulation of dangerous, revolutionary ideas and their potentially lethal consequences is Dostoevsky's theme in *The Possessed*. The novel is considered the major intertext for *Petersburg* and Coetzee duly takes up the Dostoevskian thematics of the circulation of dangerous ideas by exploring the metaphorical implications of the idea of possession, picking up Dostoevsky's concern with the nihilistic tendencies of radical Russian politics but especially by figuring both writing and reading as acts that might potentially transgress the law, social norms and personal bonds. The locus of this struggle is author and master Fyodor Dostoevsky. Coetzee uses possession as a figure for one's susceptibility to forces beyond one's control, a state of receptivity that potentially enriches but also endangers the self and those around one.⁵⁴ In *Petersburg* radical politics, grief, sexual intimacy, epilepsy, reading and writing are

⁵⁴ Attridge describes this in terms of Derrida's *arrivant*.

all described in terms of possession. It is a state not unlike madness, particularly insofar as it appears to operate at a remove from the normal calculations of rational self-interest. In this way possession is a way of staging a certain unguarded and uncensored element in fiction. Coetzee's novel, however, is animated by the risks implicit in such an exercise.

In 'The Autobiographer as *Torero*,' Michel Leiris attempts to outline a kind of writing – autobiographical or fictional – that embraces risk in a particularly intense manner: 'I distinguish in literature a genre of major significance to me, which would include those works where the horn is present in one form or another, where the author assumes the direct *risk* either of a confession or of a subversive work, a work in which the human condition is confronted directly or 'taken by the horns' and which presents a conception of life 'engaging' its partisan – or its victim' (163). Leiris's comments are generally taken to suggest that autobiographical writing is a particularly risky business. *Petersburg* is not an autobiography, nor does it stage the writing of an autobiography. But it is a novel that is alive to the risks of the writing enterprise as embodied in the actions of the writer protagonist Dostoevsky. This is particularly evident in the closing chapter as he figures writing as a form of gambling and sees the story he has produced as a challenge to God: 'Now God must speak, now God dare no longer remain silent. [...] The device he has made arches and springs shut like a trap, a trap to catch God' (249). The high stakes attaching to writing in these pages emerge from the connection between Dostoevsky's writing and the world that Coetzee has invented for him: in writing this story and leaving it to be read, Dostoevsky appears to betray the memory of his dead stepson in the narrative he has created and corrupt the innocence of the girl who he intends to read the story. In other words, the sense of risk that pervades *Petersburg* is a result of the slippage that

occurs between the private and public dimensions of the writer's life. Dostoevsky's writing is not, strictly speaking, autobiography but it runs the risk of being read autobiographically.

In *Petersburg* Coetzee explores the private and public dimensions of authorship by constructing the character of Dostoevsky from his reading of the published works of Fyodor Dostoevsky, an oeuvre which at this stage stretches beyond the fiction to include the letters, diaries and biographies that prove so valuable in the case of a master author. The novel thematizes the distinction between fiction and biography as modes of knowledge, only to complicate the relationship between them by emphasising those aspects of Dostoevsky's life that were most frequently read back into his work, the result being that Coetzee's Dostoevsky is more an authorial figure than a historical figure. In addition, Coetzee invents a biographical context for the writing of *The Possessed*, inviting both the reader *and the writer* to read the fictional biography back into the novel as it is taking shape. In this way Coetzee manages to stage this writing as a *self-conscious* act of betrayal and as a gamble, a flirtation with the risk of autobiographical writing. While *Petersburg*, like *Foe*, is extremely sensitive to the material circumstances in which writing occurs and the material benefits and costs that accompany authorship, through the metaphor of gambling *Petersburg* stages a kind of writing which flaunts even its most closely guarded secrets, such that the calculations of rational self-interest are no longer applicable. If *Petersburg* can be read as a confession, it confesses that writing is a form of gambling, exposing itself to the losses that this entails.

Coetzee's preoccupation with the circulation and potency of dangerous ideas and his most overt engagement with *The Possessed* is evident in his staging of the genesis and writing of the chapter from the Russian novel that has become known as

'Stavrogin's Confession'. In the closing chapter of *Petersburg*, called 'Stavrogin' after the character from *The Possessed*, Coetzee's Dostoevsky appears to write two stories that readers familiar with the Russian author will recognise as a version of the chapter 'At Tikhon's.' In the chapter in *The Possessed*, a dialogue between Stavrogin and a holy monk named Tikhon, Stavrogin confesses to having sexually assaulted a young girl, who he subsequently allowed to commit suicide; or, more specifically, he has written a pamphlet in which he confesses to the crime, and which he now intends to circulate in atonement for the crime. Tikhon is permitted to read most (but not all) of the pamphlet; Stavrogin retains one page. The encounter has become exemplary of a successful secular confession for Coetzee, informing his reading of confession in 'Double Thoughts' and in interviews discussing the essay.

Such was the disturbing nature of the character and the confession that Dostoevsky was forced to omit the chapter from the serialized version of the novel due to the objections of his editor. Furious reworking of the novel ensued to limit the damage caused by the omission of the chapter, to the extent that it is now impossible to reinsert it into the completed novel; it is still circulated merely as an appendix to the rest of the text. Both the structure of the chapter and its subsequent publication history mean that Stavrogin's transgression must remain private in order to prevent the circulation of the dangerous and obscene ideas that are contained within it but one of the most disturbing aspects of the confession is Stavrogin's insistence that the pamphlet in which it appears be circulated. He states his determination that once one person (i.e. Tikhon) reads it, everyone shall read it. Tikhon, as confessor and interlocutor, does not question the veracity of Stavrogin's confession, but examines instead the motives behind his desire to have his shameful secret circulated in this

manner: 'It is as though you purposely wished to represent yourself as a coarser man than your heart would desire' ('At Tikhon's' 30).

In his biography of Dostoevsky, Joseph Frank describes how in its existence, revisions and suppression 'Stavrogin's Confession' gave rise to the rumour that Dostoevsky was guilty of a similar offence against a child, a rumour that has persisted to this day and that still necessitates refutations in biographies and accounts of the writer's life and works.⁵⁵ The presumption that 'At Tikhon's' constituted a confession on the part of the writer is not justified by the text nor by reference to any external evidence, yet in its vivid preoccupation with guilt, desire for punishment and determination to be published and circulated it is certainly an explosive and suggestive document, the result being that the force of the writing – the performative power of the staged confession – is identified with the author's purpose. The suppression of the chapter, together with its thematic preoccupation with the withholding and circulation of texts, enhances its confessional currency and consequently its truth value.

The importance of 'Stavrogin's Confession' in 'Double Thoughts' is not that Stavrogin is an ideal confessant who has somehow managed to circumvent the pitfalls of confessional self-interest – on the contrary, the omissions in his confession are calculated to fascinate and forestall truth-telling – rather, the burden of Stavrogin's confession is assumed by his auditor and confessor, Tikhon, who reads Stavrogin's confession for its performance rather than omissions and consequently recommends Stavrogin to another holy monk who might grant him absolution. Tikhon, in Coetzee's account, comes to represent the possibility of grace, absolution, and self-

⁵⁵ Frank goes to great lengths to illustrate the spuriousness of this rumour, yet Watson, in his article about *Petersburg*, cites it as part of the background to the novel.

forgiveness but his reworking of the episode is notable for its omission of a Tikhon figure, a confessor that might alleviate the anguish of the confessant. Even the change in titles, reworking 'At Tikhon's' into 'Stavrogin,' indicates an opposition in purpose and intention that defines the later novel.

The discontinuity that I have been attempting to describe is figured by Coetzee as an incomplete conversion or ongoing dialogue between Stavrogin and Tikhon. The absence of Tikhon in *Petersburg* therefore suggests that only one part of the dialogue is represented in the novel – the cynicism of Stavrogin. To keep with my framework of confession as a figure for authorship, this is borne out by the confessor figure we find in the novel: Maximov the detective who, like Foe, is figured as a predatory spider. But insofar as confession in the novel takes the form of writing, the confessor could be seen as a reader. In this way, confessors multiply: Dostoevsky himself becomes a confessor in his readings of Pavel's stories and diaries, Coetzee is a confessor insofar as *Petersburg* relies on his readings of Dostoevsky, and the readings of Dostoevsky that he draws on – by Freud, Eliot and others – allow them to become confessants. But the kind of readings they engage in run the risk of being predatory in the manner of Maximov. Might it be possible to read the novel in the spirit of Tikhon?

Taking as its starting point Dostoevsky's manipulation of the historical material in *The Possessed*, *Petersburg* presents two related layers of transformation: Coetzee's decision to rewrite the episode as the possible murder of Dostoevsky's twenty two year old stepson Pavel (rather than the student Ivanov) and, crucially, the author protagonist's reworking of these invented biographical circumstances into *The Possessed*. While the murder of Ivanov in Moscow in 1869 is widely believed by scholars of the Russian author to have influenced the genesis of *The Possessed*,

Dostoevsky's stepson outlived the author, thus driving a fictional wedge between Coetzee's novel and the context it proposes to recreate.

Petersburg is therefore first and foremost a novel about grief and a grieving father's attempt to find an appropriate response to the death of his son. However, in spite of the intensity of his grief, Coetzee's Dostoevsky both cannot and is not permitted to mourn in an appropriate manner: from the outset his actions are governed by the writerly imperative to bring Pavel back to life, a response informed by a series of recurring references to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. In addition, once reinserted into the world of St Petersburg, Dostoevsky finds that he is no longer just a father but an author, and not alone that – he is a *master* with all of its ensuing demands and responsibilities.

Although he is travelling under false documents and not named himself until page thirty four of the novel, the reader quickly discovers the identity of the protagonist through his encounters with other characters, all of whom recognise him as the author, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and consequently assume a certain amount of knowledge about him or his work. Pavel's landlady, Anna Sergeyevna, is aware of the nature of his relationship to Pavel but also of his reputation as a writer via her husband's reading of *Poor Folk*. After carrying out his charade of unmasking the impostor Isaev at the police station, the star-struck detective Maximov gushes in his presence: 'You are a man of gifts, a man of special insights, as I knew before I met you' (45). Ivanov, beggar and police spy, adopts the familiar Fyodor Mikhailovich ('you don't mind, do you?' 87) without any formal introduction. As the novel progresses, Dostoevsky's status as master manifests itself in two ways. In a manner similar to Coetzee's account in *Giving Offense* (essays which were composed in the same period as *Petersburg*), the power and value of Dostoevsky's reputation becomes

a key to the developing political drama: one of the more plausible explanations for Pavel's death is that it was a strategy to lure his famous stepfather out of hiding. Added to this, however, is the fact that the currency of Dostoevsky's reputation and its ability to replicate and disseminate itself far exceeds any expected political intervention: such is his celebrity that the details of his private life are as well-known as his work: Maximov incautiously hints at rumours about his uneasy relationship with his father, as does Nechaev. In this way we can see that Dostoevsky's biography is public property before he ever contemplates selling it in the closing pages of the novel: 'it is not so much a life as a price or a currency. It is something I pay with in order to write' (222).

In spite of the writer's attempt to dedicate himself to the supposedly private activity of mourning for his stepson – 'there is a measure to all things now, and that measure is Pavel' (167) – the competing demands of authorship (or mastery) consistently violate the private experience of mourning. This is something imposed on Dostoevsky by the demands of authorship but it also emerges as a compulsion to respond to Pavel's death in writing. While the novel abounds with images of Dostoevsky seated at the desk in Pavel's room, assuming the pose of the writer, in such moments he is generally absorbed in memories of his son. For the writer, it is not possible to separate mourning and writing. The conflicting interests of Dostoevsky's different roles, father and author, private and public, reach a crisis point in the final chapters of the novel as he appears to answer the Orphic imperative to bring Pavel back to life by writing a version of 'Stavrogin's Confession' in the empty pages of his stepson's diary: the beloved son, Pavel, is transformed into Stavrogin.

Petersburg demonstrates that writing is a source of power and Dostoevsky's life a currency that can be exploited to this end, yet it also leaves the writer vulnerable

to exploitation. Aware of the immense potential of the Dostoevsky signature Nechaev seeks to harness it to his utilitarian politics. The picture of Dostoevsky created in the novel no doubt owes something to Coetzee's reading of the writer's private letters, diaries and notebooks, valuable documents in the public domain precisely because this was not their intended forum.⁵⁶ One must imagine that the preoccupation with private papers within *The Master of Petersburg* is Coetzee's confession to the intrusions committed in the novel: 'The prospect that after our decease a stranger will come sniffing through our possessions, opening drawers, breaking seals, reading intimate letters – such would be a painful prospect to any of us, I am sure' (39).

But the novel owes as much to Coetzee's reading of Dostoevsky's oeuvre, the fictional output that constitutes his life's work and a more significant reflection of what we know, or think we know, about Dostoevsky. This is particularly evident in his treatment of Dostoevsky's epilepsy. While seeming to fall within the order of knowledge of biography, the representation of epilepsy in *Petersburg* is grounded in Dostoevsky's depiction of Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*. In describing the 'time out of time' characteristic of epilepsy, Coetzee writes: 'As for him, he hears nothing, he is gone, there is no longer time' (68). This echoes Myshkin's description of the 'last conscious moment' before an epileptic fit: '...at that moment the extraordinary saying that *there shall be time no longer* becomes, somehow, comprehensible to me' (259).

In this way we can see that the novel thematizes the distinction between the literary and biographical modes of knowledge. The reader/confessor figure of Maximov is typical in this regard, assuming a certain familiarity with the writer on the basis of having read his work: 'knowing you as I do, that is, in the way one knows

⁵⁶ The main resource on Dostoevsky's life of this period is Joseph Frank's *Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years 1865-1871* published in 1995, a year after *The Master of Petersburg* appeared (Coetzee's review appeared promptly in *The New York Review of Books*).

a writer from his books, that is to say, in an intimate yet limited way' (147). This is the kind of knowledge that Coetzee stages of Dostoevsky. The entire Dostoevsky canon, and a lifetime of engagement with it, lies behind *Petersburg*. We can draw on no less an authority on Dostoevsky than Frank to list some of the intertexts for *The Master of Petersburg*, among them *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Crime and Punishment*, *The House of the Dead* and an early story entitled 'The Landlady' ('The Rebel'). He irritably notes that Coetzee 'plays fast and loose with the historical record' and 'has culled from many places for his own purposes.' Frank's irritation belies the significance of the epistemological framework Coetzee has put in place: the literary rather than the biographical is the mode of signifying and knowing in *Petersburg*. Indeed such is Coetzee's dedication to the literary as a way of generating meaning, that it comes to influence other aspects of experience: memories, for example, are constructed from literary sources. Allusions to other works by Dostoevsky, when they are not put to the author protagonist by other characters, are figured as memories that are half-remembered or half-forgotten, that is, Dostoevsky, the author, experiences references to his own writing as (vague) memories. One of the more obvious examples is the reference to *Crime and Punishment* in Dostoevsky's premonition of an epileptic attack while waiting to meet Maximov: '... somewhere to the side falls the nagging shadow of a memory: surely he has been here before, in this very ante-room or one like it, and had an attack or a fainting fit! But why is it that he recollects the episode only so dimly? And what has the recollection to do with the smell of fresh paint?' (31) By figuring Dostoevsky's relationship to his own work in this way Coetzee is placing the experience of creativity within the range of life experiences that might be remembered or forgotten. But he is also verifying his character's status

as an author, establishing links with published texts that are verifiable, if not in historical terms then at least in literary (historical) terms.

The biographical elements that Coetzee has chosen to emphasise are those that are most frequently read back into the fiction: his epilepsy, gambling, debts, the suggested assault on a child. Writing in *The Dial* in 1922, T.S. Eliot's warning to novelists about the dangers of having Dostoevsky as a literary model are grounded in his belief that Dostoevsky's 'particular topography, the characteristics of his universe' are inseparable from the life he lived (329). More controversially Freud's 'Dostoevsky and Parricide' is an account of the writer's epilepsy which describes it as a symptom of his neurosis and locates its origin in his sense of guilt about the murder of his father. He describes Dostoevsky as a kind of criminal: 'it comes from his choice of material, which singles out from all others violent, murderous and egoistic characters, thus pointing to the existence of similar tendencies within himself, and also from certain facts in his life, like his passion for gambling and his possible confession to a sexual assault upon a young girl' (442). Freud is initially careful enough to frame his reading in the context of Dostoevsky's 'choice of material' but it is clear in his veiled reference to 'Stavrogin's Confession' that his essay is an example of the willingness to identify author and creation.⁵⁷

In the course of the novel, Pavel comes to represent a very different idea of authorship to his famous stepfather: he too was a writer, albeit an unpublished one, something Dostoevsky only learns after his death. For this reason, Pavel's private papers, containing some stories, journals and letters – all that remains to his stepfather – acquire an added value. Indeed the limits of the private and public

⁵⁷ In an interview in *Doubling the Point* Coetzee singles out this essay as an example of the 'old-fashioned Freud' that 'Double Thoughts' attempts to set itself against (245).

dimensions of authorship are contested on the basis of these papers. In his eager pursuit of Nechaev and his circle, the detective Maximov engages in a thorough investigation of Pavel's papers and insists that his stories be admitted as evidence of his political radicalism. Dostoevsky, on the other hand, refuses Maximov's allegorical reading of Pavel's story for two reasons: because it is private and because Maximov is not equipped to read it. Dostoevsky equates his son's stories with his diaries and letters on the basis that they were *unpublished*. For Dostoevsky, a story is 'A private matter, an utterly private matter, private to the writer, till it is given to the world' (40). However, this does not mean that they cannot be read; rather, in keeping with his assertion of their private status, Dostoevsky reads them in a spirit of violation and transgression (148-153, 216-222). And this is the kind of reading that Dostoevsky advocates. He rebukes Maximov's allegorical reading claiming that Pavel's papers 'will tell *you* least of all because clearly you do not know how to read' (46). Instead Dostoevsky proposes that 'reading is being the arm and being the axe *and* being the skull; reading is giving yourself up, not holding yourself at a distance and jeering' (46). Attridge points out that the view of reading that emerges from these encounters is a form of madness, or 'demon-possession' as Maximov himself responds (134).

As the focus of this debate through his papers, Pavel can be seen as an incipient author figure. He comes to represent the private dimension of authorship in a similar way to Susan Barton in *Foe*, and in a manner that is simply no longer available to the master, Dostoevsky. By Dostoevsky's reckoning, this standard of privacy can only be asserted as long as the stories remain unpublished, that is to say, as long as Pavel's name does not appear on the title page of a published book he cannot be held legally responsible for its content. By virtue of being read, however,

such assertions of privacy are placed in question. As Attridge comments on the desire for acceptance into the literary canon: 'What *Foe* suggests is that the same imperative drives our self-presentations and representations; unless we are read, we are nothing' (75). The fact of being read collapses the distinction between Pavel's literary offerings and his diaries and letters. Contrary to the political allegory that Maximov finds in Pavel's story, Dostoevsky reads it as a veiled autobiography: 'Not untrue, not wholly untrue, yet how subtly twisted all of it!' (151) Later, reading a particularly hurtful passage in Pavel's diary, he speculates about his motives in writing it: 'For whom were these mischievous pages intended? Did Pavel write them for his father's eyes and then die so as to leave his accusations unanswerable? Of course not: what madness to think so! (219) Yet Pavel's papers are eventually shown to be vulnerable to his stepfather, whose writing in the closing pages of the novel is a kind of reauthoring or even forgery.

VIII

Petersburg is deeply informed by a sense of writing and reading that adheres to the idea of private experience as something that might be transformed into art, with the emphasis on transformation as opposed to representation. This notion is adhered to by the novel's writers and readers and it is staged by Coetzee in the way he has constructed his author protagonist and invented the scene of authorship of one of his major novels. The novel also demonstrates the paradoxical nature of this view of writing and reading by drawing attention to the manner in which everything is already transformed by the competing interests at stake in the creative process, a process

which is both 'the definition of privacy' and in which 'nothing is private anymore.' To the extent that the culminating events of the novel owe their force, at the very least, to the creative process as a dimension of private experience if not to the inscription or transformation of this experience in the work produced, the novel demands that the relationship between author and work be taken seriously.

In its preoccupation with private papers, diaries, letters, confessions and rumours *Petersburg* stages the *value* of the private in the public realm, a principle which corrupts and collapses the distinction between the two. This is evident in the political plot of the novel, the interest in Dostoevsky's personal life and the creative process itself as represented in both writing and reading. Insofar as these activities seem to generate loss they can be related to the 'pure expenditure' that Bataille finds typical of gambling and artistic production. And to the extent that they keep in play the lived experience of the author – as inscribed within the artistic work and as represented in the artistic process – the stakes attaching to this gamble are very high indeed. If autobiography is a particularly risky activity in Leiris's account, its possible staging in *Petersburg* is laden with risk.

It is precisely the question of risk and the writer's willingness or compulsion to embrace it that defines artistic inspiration in Maurice Blanchot's 'Orpheus' Gaze.'⁵⁸ Blanchot reads the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice as Orpheus' reckless pursuit of the forbidden darkness represented by Eurydice to the exclusion of all else, even Eurydice. Contrary to Bataille, Blanchot maintains that: 'What the Greek myth tells us is that a work of art can only be achieved when the artist does not seek the experience of unrestrained intensity as an end in itself' (177). That is, Orpheus must

⁵⁸ Mike Marais draws on this essay in his reading of *Petersburg*, but he is not interested in inspiration or risk.

observe the injunction not to look back at Eurydice. At the same time, however: 'the myth simultaneously implies that Orpheus' fate is to refuse to submit to this law ... Thus he betrays his purpose, Eurydice and the dark. Yet not to look back would be no less a betrayal' (177-8). Blanchot implies that for this to occur Orpheus must exercise a certain impatience and recklessness with regard to both Eurydice and art as his inspiration lies in his willingness to risk both, this is the paradoxical necessity of art: 'To look at Eurydice without a thought for art, with the impatience and recklessness of a desire oblivious of laws, that is what *inspiration* is' (179). Part of the necessity of art is that there is no guaranteed gain from Orpheus' gamble: 'it does not ensure the success of the work of art any more than it celebrates in art the triumph of Orpheus' ideal or Eurydice's survival. Art is no less threatened than Orpheus by inspiration. The moment of inspiration is, for art, the point of maximum insecurity. That is why art tends so often and so violently to resist what inspires it' (179-80). Blanchot's sense of the risks involved in examining the source of one's creativity and art's resistance to it is articulated by Coetzee in 'Truth in Autobiography' in terms of self-interest, secrets that the confessant or writer cannot afford to reveal (6). It is also comparable to the suggestive figure of the deckhands from 'He and His Man.' But for Blanchot, Leiris and Bataille the artist's power lies in the willingness to embrace one's inspiration and flaunt one's secrets, as we find in *Petersburg*.

Among papers donated by Coetzee to the National English Literary Museum in Grahamstown are seminar notes on Olive Schreiner (NELM 2002.13.2.3.4).⁵⁹ Discussing Schreiner's career, Coetzee speculates about the source of her inspiration or, to be precise, about her apparently stalled inspiration following the success of *Story of an African Farm*. He attributes what he sees as her late creative paralysis to

⁵⁹ They are notes for an MA course at UCT in 1993.

her unwillingness 'to absorb herself deeply enough in the project to transform it and allow it to transform her.' In other words, Schreiner fails to risk something of herself in her creative endeavours. In an extraordinary turn, Coetzee breaks with the discussion of Schreiner to admit: 'Of course I am talking about myself. Whenever we talk about something else we are talking about ourselves.' But he closes off this autobiographical moment just as quickly, claiming that it is not in his interest to pursue this line of thought: 'But I choose not to reflect on it, turn myself back to look upon it (like Orpheus). Life is too short. (The meaning of the Orpheus story: you kill your inspiration by turning back to look at it.)' The wariness expressed here is typical of comments Coetzee has made in interviews about the risks to the creative enterprise of the kind of self-scrutiny demanded by forms such as the literary interview. His responses to Attwell's subtle questioning in *Doubling the Point* frequently evade this kind of analysis by deferring to what may or may not be *in his interest*, as a writer, to know. His comments on the influence of René Girard on his work are typical in this regard: 'Whatever the truth, I feel that questions of influence on my novel-writing are not for me to answer: they entail a variety of self-awareness that does me no good as a storyteller, as a site where fantasy should not be hampered by unnecessary introversions and doubts (105).' But the comments on Schreiner are particularly interesting given Coetzee's discussion of the paralysing effects of Schreiner's perceived distance from her creative enterprise and his unprompted invocation of the myth of Orpheus. What Coetzee omits in this account of the Orpheus myth as a story of inspiration, is an acknowledgement that it is precisely the risks implicit in how one treats one's inspiration that gives inspiration its power. In this particular instance Coetzee *chooses* not to engage in the activity of creative self-scrutiny.

The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is invoked from the beginning of *The Master of Petersburg* and consistently throughout the novel to describe the nature of Dostoevsky's duty towards his stepson. For Dostoevsky this is not to mourn the passing of his son but to bring him back to life by conjuring his presence, using words and writing to breathe life into him. The earliest example sees Dostoevsky trying to conjure Pavel's presence in his own room by repeatedly invoking his name:

Silently he forms his lips over his son's name, three times, four times. He is trying to cast a spell. But over whom: over a ghost or over himself? He thinks of Orpheus walking backwards step by step, whispering the dead woman's name, coaxing her out of the entrails of hell; of the wife in graveclothes with the blind, dead eyes following him, holding out limp hands before her like a sleepwalker. No flute, no lyre, just the word, the one word, over and over. When death cuts all other links, there remains still the name. Baptism: the union of a soul with a name, the name it will carry into eternity. Barely breathing he forms the syllables again: *Pavel*. (5)

In this early reference to the myth the focus is on the power of Orpheus to bring the dead back to life and by implication, the power available to the writer to do likewise. But while this compulsion and necessity governs all references to the myth in the novel, subsequent examples focus more on the risks implicit in such an activity. Some pages later, seated at the desk in Pavel's room, Dostoevsky is flooded with what he calls memories, among them a scene of farewell. Trying to understand the significance of the images, there is a break in the third person voice of the narrative. The narrative seems to move into direct address (speech or thought), but while 'I' is used throughout the passage, it is not clear that it always refers to the same person; the move to the first person might collapse the distinction between the 'he' of the narrative and the 'I' of Dostoevsky's experience, or between Dostoevsky and Pavel: 'Because I am he. Because he is I. Something there that I seek to grasp: the moment before extinction when the blood still courses, the heart still beats. [...] Not oblivion

but the moment before oblivion' (53). The scene he imagines is Pavel's death but it is also an echo of the 'time out of time' by which he (and Myshkin) describe the moment before an epileptic seizure: a brief moment of clarity which is followed almost immediately by the annihilation of the seizure. In other words, this is a moment of openness and vulnerability but also of risk. In Dostoevsky's mind the 'moment before oblivion' becomes a scene of departure and farewell which is articulated in the terms of the myth of Orpheus:

All that I am left to grasp for: the moment of that gaze, salutation and farewell in one,
past all arguing, past all pleading
[...]
I hold your head between my hands. I kiss your brow. I kiss your lips.
The rule: one look, one only; no glancing back. But I look back.
[...]
Forever I look back. Forever I am absorbed in your gaze. A field of crystal points,
dancing, winking, and I one of them. Stars in the sky, and fires on the plain
answering them. Two realms signalling to each other. (54)⁶⁰

The collapse in the narrative voice seems to be a symptom of a more profound loss of consciousness or self-consciousness when, in full knowledge of the consequences, he dares to look back on the forbidden image. Indeed, given the consequences of looking back in the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, it is almost a confession: 'But I look back [...] Forever I look back. Forever I am absorbed in your gaze' (54). Yet in keeping with Blanchot's discussion of the myth, there is no option but to look back: 'not to look back would be no less a betrayal' (178). In other words, there is no real calculation of interests at work in this episode; Dostoevsky cannot choose not to look back, as Coetzee does in his piece about Schreiner. So while the look back is similar to Coetzee's double thought, the characteristic motion of self-consciousness, in the situation staged in the novel self-awareness is more of a compulsion than a choice.

⁶⁰ The image of the deckhands in 'He and His Man' seems to me to echo this passage.

Dostoevsky's awareness of the threat that overshadows the power of Orpheus does not inhibit his willingness to embrace the myth. Rather, he grows bolder and more resolute in facing the risks involved:

On the streets of Petersburg, in the turn of a head here, the gesture of a hand there, I see you, and each time my heart lifts as a wave does. Nowhere and everywhere, torn and scattered like Orpheus. Young in days, chryseos, golden, blessed.

The task left to me: to gather the hoard, put together the scattered parts. Poet, lyre-player, enchanter, lord of resurrection, that is what I am called to be. (152)

Once more we have Dostoevsky in the role of Orpheus assuming the obligation to resurrect Pavel, but crucially, Pavel is also figured as Orpheus, albeit the dead Orpheus for whom risk is no longer an issue.

It is in the final chapter, however, that references to Orpheus acquire their full force:

An image comes to him that for the past month he has flinched from: Pavel, naked and broken and bloody, in the morgue; the seed in his body dead too, or dying.

Nothing is private anymore. As unblinkingly as he can he gazes upon the body parts without which there can be no fatherhood. And his mind goes again to the museum in Berlin, to the goddess-fiend drawing out the seed from the corpse, saving it.

Thus at last the time arrives and the hand that holds the pen begins to move. But the words it forms are not words of salvation. (241)

Dostoevsky's efforts throughout the novel have been directed to bringing Pavel back to life, conjuring him up in words or breathing life into Pavel's own words. But in this final section of the novel he accepts that this will not happen, at least not in the form he expected: 'Ultimately it will not be given to him to bring the dead boy back to life. Ultimately, if he wants to meet him, he will have to meet him in death' (237-38). One way of meeting him in death is to gaze on his corpse, as he does in the above scene. This scene contrasts starkly with Barton's resistance to describing the body of Friday in *Foe*. Of course, the differences between looking on the corpse of a

relative and the body of a man who is apparently in a position of dependence (and marked in terms of racial difference) are great. Rather, what I would like to draw attention to is the difference between Barton's (compelled? strategic?) restraint and Dostoevsky's lack of restraint, which is at the same time compulsive and highly self-conscious. The emphasis on the unblinking gaze, his refusal of any consolation, is in keeping with the chapter as a whole: 'refuse the chloroform of terror or unconsciousness' or 'as long as he does not flinch' (234, 235). Couched in the terms of Orpheus' betrayal of Eurydice, Dostoevsky's gaze leaves him exposed to all kinds of risk; his intention is 'not to emerge from the fall unscathed, but to ... wrestle with the whistling darkness' (235). While he has consistently and self-consciously engaged with the world as material for his art, it seems more and more that he is willing to look on his stepson as a source of inspiration while simultaneously betraying him.

In addition, the doubling of the figure of Orpheus that I mention earlier occurs again in the final chapter: 'Letters from the whirlwind. Scattered leaves, which he gathers up; a scattered body, which he reassembles' (246). In this way we can see that in the process of attempting to resurrect his stepson, Dostoevsky is also resurrecting Orpheus, that is to say, bringing the figure of the author back to life. Beside his stepfather, the master author, Pavel represented a more private dimension of authorship: unpublished, read only by those closest to him who sought hints of reproach, love or political radicalism in his notebooks and diaries. In other words, it is the private writing subject that Coetzee attempts to resurrect in *Petersburg*. He compares his exploitation of Pavel's memory to the goddess saving the seed from the corpse, a seed which is undoubtedly writing. But just as Pavel cannot be imagined as himself, this is not quite the dimension of authorship that we get. In these pages the

beloved stepson becomes Stavrogin, but so too does the author – a cold, amoral figure willing to risk everything.

But what does this further twist on the figure of authorship as confession imply? “Stavrogin” comes into being in the two stories, ‘The Apartment’ and ‘The Child,’ that Dostoevsky writes into his stepson’s diary. Although the chapter is titled ‘Stavrogin,’ and the similarities between the stories and *The Possessed* leave little doubt about the character’s identity in the reader’s mind, Stavrogin is not actually named in the stories. Rather: ‘He is, to a degree, Pavel Isaev, though Pavel Isaev is not the name he is going to give himself’ (242). In other words, in the creative process described here Dostoevsky in some sense *becomes* the character he is creating: ‘In his writing he is in the same room ... And he is not himself any longer’ (242). This is the field that ‘he’ and ‘his man’ attempts to untangle. Here, ‘he’ is not named, but he is recognisable as Stavrogin.

While Dostoevsky’s Stavrogin achieved greatest notoriety in the suppressed confession of ‘At Tikhon’s,’ the stories in *Petersburg* can only be understood as a confession in the light of the biographical context which Coetzee has painstakingly put in place and a reading of the stories as versions of this biography. Dostoevsky’s sense of betrayal emerges not from his conviction that this is necessarily the case – he describes the character thus: ‘It is a version that disturbs him. It is not the truth, or not yet the truth’ (240) – but from his belief that Matryona will read the stories. The stories contain just enough detail – the white suit, the story about Maria Lebyatkin – to alert the young Matryona to the correspondence with Pavel. In addition, having consulted her on an alternative name – Dusha – ‘the child’ becomes the confessor to his depraved Stavrogin. Written in his hand, in Pavel’s diary, it is not clear to what extent Dostoevsky views the stories as forgeries. But it is clear that aside from being

creative events, they are calculated to *act on* Matryona's innocence. To the extent that the entire chapter, 'Stavrogin,' stages Dostoevsky self-consciously preparing for and writing these stories, it is a confession of betrayal and corruption on his part: he confesses that his intention is to betray Pavel's memory and corrupt Matryona's innocence. But, given the kind of creative process that is staged in the chapter, the betrayal is not simply the act that tarnished Pavel's memory for Matryona but the writer's openness to anything and to any version of Pavel. This, in Blanchot's terms, is the carelessness and recklessness of his creative enterprise: 'He must do what he cannot do: resign himself to what will come, speech or silence' (239). The chapter stages the risks of the creative process as a form of gambling, and in the shape creativity takes in the stories, Dostoevsky sees himself as gambling with his soul. He describes himself as a voluptuary of the moment before the fall, the moment when uncertainty reigned but doom beckoned: 'For which he will be damned' (242). In the stories he gambles with God: 'To corrupt a child is to force God. The device he has made arches and springs shut like a trap, a trap to catch God' (249). In return for whatever material gains attach to writing, 'he had to give up his soul' (250). The stakes for this particular gamble could not be higher and the confession could not be articulated in more powerful terms. The other confessions that occur in the novel are Dostoevsky's insincere confessions to his wife, about his relationships with other women but mostly about his relentless gambling and the huge losses he incurs as a result (62, 84-85, 159).⁶¹ Describing the pain that his gambling brings on his wife, Dostoevsky also manages to portray the allure of gambling: 'Without the risk, without subjecting oneself to the voice speaking from elsewhere in the fall of the

⁶¹ 'His indiscretions hitherto have been followed by remorse and, on the heels of remorse, a voluptuous urge to confess. These confessions, tortured in expression, yet vague in point of detail, have confused and infuriated his wife, bedevilling their marriage far more than the infidelities themselves' (62).

dice, what is left that is divine?' (84) For this reason he continues to gamble and continues to confess.

In spite of its close intertextual ties to *The Possessed*, *The Master of Petersburg* is overwhelmed by the force of the fiction of Dostoevsky's grief at his stepson's death. One could use the novel's metaphor of possession to describe Dostoevsky as possessed by grief to such an extent that it overwhelms all other demands and interests: 'there is a measure to all things now, including the truth, and that measure is Pavel' (167). We are in a situation when, according to Dostoevsky, 'either the heart speaks or the page remains blank' (97). For most of the novel, his attempts to write are abortive and the page does indeed remain blank. But not in the final chapter. In 'Stavrogin' Dostoevsky sets aside Pavel as a measure and obeys only the risk of the creative process, a gamble whose stakes are determined by the biography that Coetzee has invented for Dostoevsky and the overwhelming grief that pervades the novel. But the risks that attach to writing relate not only to the possibility of betraying one's inspiration like Orpheus, but of being seen to; that is to say, one runs the risk of being read *autobiographically*.

The issues relating to staging and reading the biographical within a work of fiction are particularly loaded in the case of *Petersburg*. Writing about the novel, many critics have quietly inserted the facts of Coetzee's own biography into the critical record: his son Nicolas died in an accident in 1989 at the age of twenty three.⁶² In most cases, the fact duly noted – or, indeed, footnoted – it remains to the reader to decide what, if any, bearing it has on one's experience of reading *Petersburg*. Attridge comes closest to articulating the challenge presented by the biography by suggesting that *Petersburg* might well be a confession of personal

⁶² Among the critics who mention Nicolas Coetzee are Attridge, Lawlan, Gallagher, and Gaylard.

betrayal on the part of Coetzee. Attridge admits – or confesses – his reluctance to ‘carry out the betrayals’ that exploring this aspect of the novel would entail and that he experiences the novel’s implicit invitation to do so as a challenge to his own ‘preconceptions about fiction, about the act of literature’ (136). There can be little doubt that in its preoccupation with the currency of the writer’s reputation and personal life, the circulation of rumours and the persistent tendency to read the biographical back into the fiction, *Petersburg* invites a reading that explains its transformations of *The Possessed* in terms of Coetzee’s own loss and grief. But unlike ‘Stavrogin,’ which is confessional insofar as it can refer to the invented biography throughout the novel to verify a transgressor (Dostoevsky), victims (Pavel and Matryona) and a crime (leaving the story for Matryona to read), there is no referential frame by which to read any aspect of *Petersburg* as a confession by Coetzee.

But the novel in many ways takes this kind of reading as its theme. By pointing to the way in which the historical Dostoevsky has been read and to how Dostoevsky and Pavel are read within the novel, Coetzee opens himself to a similar kind of invasive reading. Given the novel’s preoccupation with risk and gambling, one could also say that if Coetzee has written a novel that invites a reading that explains it in terms of his son’s death, then he is risking the possibility that it will be read as such. And most ominously, in the absence of a Tikhon figure, reading is mediated through the figure of the confessor as predatory spider, who observes no limits and threatens the private writing subject. This is exemplified in Maximov’s veiled threat to Dostoevsky: ‘The prospect that after our decease a stranger will come sniffing through our possessions, opening drawers, breaking seals, reading intimate letters – such would be a painful prospect to any of us, I am sure’ (39).

A reading that would restrict itself to these terms would not just be a betrayal of Coetzee, as Attridge fears, but a betrayal of the way in which the novel painstakingly lays out the terms of its reference. Yet it runs the risk of being read in this way, and of seeming to have been conceived and written in this same gambling spirit when, like Dostoevsky, Coetzee gazes on his inspiration at the risk of betraying it. The author represented and resurrected in *Petersburg* is the private writing subject who experiences writing as a betrayal of lived experience and whose life is deeply affected by the experience of writing.

In 'He and His Man' the deckhands – writer and creation? writer and inspiration? – do not dare to look up for fear of being distracted from the job at hand: 'they pass each other by, too busy even to wave.' Resurrecting the author as private writing subject runs the risk of dissolving the metaphor, creating the possibility and danger of 'two realms signalling to each other' (54). But this discontinuity can only be bridged figuratively, by the creative process itself.

CHAPTER FIVE

'Nothing is private anymore': Reinventing the Limits of Performance in *Age of Iron and Disgrace*

I

In the closing pages of *Disgrace*, as David Lurie tries to find words and music for the opera he is composing, he is prompted by the playful company of a young dog in the backyard of the animal welfare clinic that now serves as his place of work to consider writing a part for a dog into the score. The inclusion of the dog would be only the most recent reconception of a work that began as a revisiting of Byron's time in Ravenna but is now a reimagining of that time from the perspective of Byron's mistress, the middle aged and lonely Teresa Guiccioli. After all his efforts to adapt and accommodate new considerations into the opera, Lurie wonders if he would risk allowing the dog to howl alongside 'lovelorn Teresa' and thinks: 'Why not? Surely, in a work that will never be performed, all things are permitted?' (215)

Lurie has long since submitted to the comic impulse that seems to drive the opera and the inclusion of a dog is a further embrace of this. But the idea that resides in the comment – the notion that if the opera will never be staged by performers in real time, then it need not be determined by the demands of context, audience, genre, etc.; in short, in the absence of any limiting factor anything can be allowed – has far-reaching implications for a novel that itself offers little by way of the comic and in which so much seems to be at stake. The allusion to Dostoevsky's *The Brothers*

Karamazov sits uncomfortably with the comic tone of the opera; the challenge posed by Ivan's notorious comment that if God doesn't exist, then everything is permitted is one aspect of Dostoevsky's novel that leads Coetzee to see it as 'the battle pitched on the highest ground' (*Diary* 226). In the context of Lurie's highly allusive narrative, one cannot rule out the possibility that the reference to Dostoevsky is a kind of comic deflation at Lurie's own expense. But while the tone of the opera is comic, Lurie nonetheless pursues the project seriously. And behind Lurie, stands Coetzee; his avowed regard for the Russian author makes it difficult to imagine that the allusion is either accidental or entirely comic.

But can Lurie's claim that the work will never be performed be taken seriously? Once the score and libretto are written, who is to say that the opera will never be performed, let alone read, not to mention the fact that the act of writing and composing impose their own constraints. As it stands, Lurie is at least operating within the conventions of the opera form and working with historical material that places particular constraints on the project: 'He is inventing the music (or the music is inventing him) but he is not inventing the history' (186). Lurie's assertion comes to sound more like an attempt to install performance itself as a limit against which to measure actions, rather than a strategy to transcend the limitations of performance. In this regard, his statement echoes another Dostoevsky character; as Coetzee points out in 'Double Thoughts,' the Underground Man claims that unlike Rousseau who lied out of vanity, 'he will have no readers and therefore ... will have no temptation to lie' (276). So, the attempt to suspend or remove limits that are perceived as inhibiting might just be a way of installing yet another limit.

The concept of performance as something that takes place under specific conditions and subject to calculation and quantification is also treated seriously in

Disgrace. Etymologically, performance has its roots in the notion of carrying out or executing an action or a promise, or to achieve, complete, or finish something, and one definition describes the 'capabilities, productivity, or success of a machine, product, or person when measured against a standard' (OED). The novel's critique of instrumentalism and calculation is a critique of the idea of performance as something that can be measured and quantified, a critique that covers Lurie's new discipline of Communications as well as his appearance before the university committee charged with investigating allegations of sexual harassment against him. The acts of confession, testimony, apology, forgiveness and reconciliation – made and withheld – that structure the novel can also be described in terms of performance or performativity, after J. L. Austin. As I outline in chapter one, speech act theory attempts to delineate a kind of language that acts (performative) rather than states (constative) and to define the circumstances in which this can occur. The novel stages with such urgency the struggle to create and meet the conditions in which a felicitously performative speech act can be made that the nightmarish scenario of Ivan's statement looms in the background: in the absence of speech acts, conceived privately and in terms of their role in the law, everything is permitted.

Like many of the novels I have discussed so far, *Age of Iron* and *Disgrace* are concerned with the limits within which certain speech acts can take place. But they are unique in articulating this problem specifically within the terms of speech act theory, in their attention to the contemporary historical situation in which they were composed and the determining effects of that situation on the availability of felicitous speech acts. If, as Derrida suggests, the interest in speech act theory arose from a desire for speech acts to produce events and thereby 'master history,' few places have experienced the need for this to occur more keenly than South Africa. The violent

events depicted in these two novels in particular make the need for performative speech acts to influence events seem all the more urgent.

In *Age of Iron*, Mrs Curren is preoccupied with the conditions in which her confession – a letter to be delivered to her daughter after her imminent death from cancer – can be successfully made and received. The novel engages with the conditions of confession that emerge in ‘Double Thoughts,’ evoking the notion of death as a guarantee of sincerity in Mrs Curren’s terminal illness and continuing Coetzee’s preoccupation with the problem of address in the treatment of Verceuil, her confessor. But like *Barbarians*, *Michael K*, *Foe* and *Petersburg*, *Age of Iron* also stages this confession as self-interested and goal-oriented insofar as the letter is a plea to her daughter, a plea for salvation or redemption and a way of living on after her death. In this way, it is modelled on the confessional teleology of ‘Double Thoughts.’ But it is so consistent in its observation of the conventions of confessional narrative that it seems to succeed in fulfilling the requirements of the trajectory. I will argue that Mrs Curren’s careful negotiation of the conditions for a successful confession together with her openness and susceptibility to changes in those conditions allows her narrative to be experienced as a successful confession.

In *Disgrace*, the limits within which speech acts can occur are experienced by the protagonists as so narrowly conceived that they make successful speech acts – confession, testimony – seem impossible. This contrasts with the potentially unlimited vulnerability to unpredictable and violent events in the novel. I will argue that the novel’s critique of instrumentalism, which is conducted by depicting speech acts as potentially successful only under very limited and narrowly conceived conditions, is directed at the political expediency that informed the establishment of the TRC and the resulting limitations on the kind of justice that it was allowed to

deliver. As part of this critique the novel stages the possibility of suspending the limits and conditions of speech acts altogether, but ultimately the only potential for successful speech acts emerges in attempts to renegotiate and delineate limits and conditions under which accommodations can take place, as we find in the event of Lucy's 'marriage' to Petrus. As in *Age of Iron* this necessitates a certain responsiveness and openness to a new set of conditions, but it also restores the horizon of the idea of justice and the idea of the truth that informs all of Coetzee's engagements with confession.

II

Age of Iron and *Disgrace*, published almost ten years apart in 1990 and 1999 respectively, are the two novels in the Coetzee oeuvre that address themselves most explicitly to the historical, political and social context in which they were written. *Age of Iron* closes not with the deathly embrace of Verceuil but the dates of composition of the novel: '1986-89' (181). The authority that Mrs Curren claims in the novel is also inextricably linked to this context: 'my truth: how I lived in these times, in this place' (118). As Attridge illustrates in his reading of *Disgrace*, it is equally preoccupied with 'the times' and their impact on the lives and events depicted in the novel (*Coetzee* 165-72). David Lurie finds 'the times' unreceptive to his attitudes and actions thus precipitating devastating changes in his personal circumstances and his daughter Lucy refuses to look any further than her immediate context to justify the decisions she takes in the aftermath of a violent attack on her farm, 'in this place, at this time [...] This place being South Africa' (112). Alongside the undoubted emphasis on the South African context, South Africa is also situated in

a wider global context of travel, emigration, commerce and values, as illustrated by Attridge (93, 166-69) and Stanton.

But the preoccupation with the historical and political conditions which form the backdrop to the composition of both novels is not merely contextual; both novels self-consciously stage the determining effects of these conditions. In *Age of Iron* the conditions of possibility for the entire narrative lie in its context, as the novel proposes to stage the final address of the terminally ill Mrs Curren to her daughter whose residency in the United States was initially at least an act of protest against South Africa's apartheid state. The novel is scrupulous in its attention to the conditions which give meaning to this narrative: the plausibility of the writing project from day to day, its legitimacy as an address to an other or interlocutor guaranteed by Verceuil's 'promise' to post the letter to her daughter, and its distinction between her spoken confessions to Verceuil and the act of writing them down on paper for her daughter to read (75). And all this before one considers the authority that accrues to Mrs Curren's narrative by virtue of being her last word, guaranteed by her imminent death. In short, the novel goes to great lengths to legitimise its conceit, ensuring that the process of confessing or testifying that it sets in motion can be satisfactorily completed, at least until the final lines. Or, to put it in the terms invited by its preoccupation with confession, it is concerned to guarantee its felicity as a performative speech act.

In contrast, as Lurie's ex-wife Rosalind points out, his catastrophic loss of status is brought about by the fact that he did not 'perform well' when invited to explain his actions before a university committee charged with investigating allegations of sexual harassment against him (188). Indeed, his failure to 'perform well' by either of the OED's definitions – 'to carry out' or 'to complete or finish' –

has been the subject of considerable critical interest even if the notion of measuring performance is itself the subject of critique in the novel.

Given the preoccupation with confession in Coetzee's work, it is not surprising that it features prominently in the two novels which confront the South African context in which they were written most directly. What must be remarked on, however, is that the momentous changes in South African society in the period between the publication of these novels seems to have intensified Coetzee's scepticism about the availability and efficacy of confession as a performative speech act. Specifically, if *Age of Iron* represents an attempt to negotiate, however successfully, the conditions required for confession to take place, *Disgrace* presents an almost relentless critique of the model of performativity which proposes to lay down and measure such conditions.— in a new context which does precisely this — to the extent that the subject of critical scrutiny in the novel is the confession and testimony that are *not* made. In the starkest terms *Disgrace* asks what hope there is for performative speech or what meaning is available to symbolic actions, when events have the power to impose themselves with such terrible consequences.

The specific context engaged by *Disgrace* is the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Emerging from the negotiated settlement that would eventually see a transfer of power in South Africa from the National Party to the African National Congress, the TRC has been described as a 'quasi-legal' or 'quasi-judicial' body, performing a legal function but also inflected by Christian and psychoanalytic discourses of reconciliation and healing (Sanders, *Ambiguities* 1 and 184). The terms of its juridical function were defined so that in the event that the conditions laid out were met, amnesty from prosecution could be granted. The limitations of the kind of justice available from the TRC, its perceived

instrumentalism – inviting narrative with the goal of achieving healing or amnesty – and its conflation of different (incompatible) discourses are the target of Coetzee's critique in *Disgrace*. To a significant extent, David Lurie's refusal to provide anything but the most cursory explanation for his relationship with Melanie Isaacs to the university committee is a rejection of the quasi-judicial model of the TRC that the hearing invokes. More precisely, it is a refusal to submit to its procedures and accept its conditions, asserting his right to 'Freedom of speech. Freedom to remain silent' (188). Lucy's later refusal to report the rape to the police and again in her refusal to justify this decision to her father, insisting that what happened to her was a 'private matter,' also involves a rejection of legal avenues of redress. Crucially, however, David's refusal to confess is grounded in his adherence to a strict understanding of legal procedure; he later insists on the law as the appropriate way to deal with the attack at the farm: 'I want those men caught and brought before the law and punished' (119). On the other hand, Lucy's rejection of the law as a means of redress suggests a more radical critique of the kind of justice available through the law than David's rejection of the performative requirements of the committee.

In *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin exhaustively describes different kinds of performative utterances and the conditions required for them to carry out their function *feliculously*; his stated aim is to 'consider how many senses there may be in which to say something is to do something, or in saying something we do something, or even *by* saying something we do something' (109). For Austin, such utterances are not susceptible to judgement as true or false, but may be happy or unhappy, felicitous or infelicitous, sincere or insincere, all of which would effect their successful completion. To reach successful completion they should be recognisable, verifiable, repeatable. If the conditions which make such recognition possible are not

met, the speech act is considered to have been a misfire. In addition, the performative conditions for the successful completion of the speech acts at issue in these novels – confession, apology, testimony, forgiveness – is that they are sincere, honest, even selfless. If this condition is not met, the speech act is considered to have been an abuse. These qualities are obviously inconsistent with the demands for verifiability and repeatability, and this irreconcilability is the focus of Derrida's writings on the subject. In addition, many of the conditions and limits that apply to confessional narratives (so conditions giving rise to misfire if they are not met) are attempts to prevent the charge of abuse. For Derrida, all confessions – and indeed all speech acts – are susceptible to the charge of abuse, as I point out in my discussion of the performative dimension of supposedly constative speech acts in chapter 1.

Many of the performative utterances described by Austin are official or legal ceremonies such as naming, marrying, swearing, and his critics have highlighted the potentially regulatory function of the field he analyses. Hillis Miller notes the frequent references to 'the law, to lawyers, judges and legal theorists' (*Speech Acts* 132) and, as I point out in chapter 1, performative conditions aside, speech acts frequently rely on the authority of the law for their successful completion. The law, of course, relies to a significant degree on utterances that might be considered to be performative speech acts, albeit that their successful completion is guaranteed by conventions codified in the law. A quasi-judicial institution, the TRC might be seen as extending and intensifying this reliance of the law on performative speech acts.

If Austin's work presents a theory of language as essentially instrumental – he counts even literature among the 'uses' of language – his intention to isolate the conditions for felicitous performative utterances has initiated a tendency to measure and quantify the force and validity of speech acts and to emphasise above all else

their successful completion. Shoshana Felman singles out as Austin's fundamental gesture 'substituting, with respect to utterances of the language, the criterion of satisfaction for the criterion of truth' (*The Literary Speech Act* 61). But, as I point out in chapter 1, Derrida makes a virtue of the resistance of performative utterances to quantification, finding a clear ethical dimension in their immeasurability and resistance to economic models of exchange. This is particularly evident in his writings on forgiveness and confession. Yet in most cases where performative speech comes into play, it is invariably bound up in a system of calculation or quantification. So it is for most critiques of the TRC, the unspoken backdrop to Derrida's lecture on forgiveness.

Age of Iron predates the political negotiations that would institute the TRC and the national spectacle that it would become. However, Neill argues in a recent essay that together with other confessional novels of the interregnum it created the conditions in which the TRC would eventually function: 'In the prominence which they gave to confession, these writers might be thought to have anticipated (and perhaps even helped to create the climate for) the elaborate rituals of public contrition, supervised by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, through which the post-apartheid state successfully averted the South African Day of Judgement' (4). He goes on to note that these novels also in a sense anticipate the scepticism about confession that is to be found in *Disgrace*.

As I suggest in chapter 1, among the key texts of the interregnum period we might count Coetzee's 1985 essay 'Double Thoughts,' which in its own way is concerned with the circumstances in which confession can reach successful completion. In its dialogue with the model of confession that emerges in the essay, *Age of Iron* is typical of Coetzee's work of this period.

Coetzee could not have foreseen the spectacle of the TRC when he was drafting 'Double Thoughts' in the early eighties, nor does he explicitly engage with the idea of confession as a speech act in the Austinian sense, but the tensions within the essay between the conditions in which confession might take place and the rigorous policing of motives and interests on the one hand and the potential operation of grace on the other, tensions set in motion by the confessional teleology he describes, foreshadow some of the debates around the workings of the commission. Indeed, the TRC might be seen as an institutional realisation of the 'new collective' projected in Gordimer's 'Living in the Interregnum' and, as I have illustrated in previous chapters, an agent of the desired transformation that is the subject of fantasy in many of Coetzee's novels of this period (including *Age of Iron*).

But the TRC is an institution negotiated in a fraught political context, not the projected horizon of 'the idea of the truth.' So rigorous is the critique of instrumentalism in *Disgrace* that the model of confession provided by the essay comes to seem instrumental itself, mirroring too closely the desire to measure the performance of the confessant. At the same time, given the violent events of the novel, the need for speech acts – as opposed to violent acts – to shape events could not be greater. (Mastering history is not an option in *Disgrace*; Attwell and Sanders have pointed to the gloomy and vengeful nature of history in the novel ['Race in *Disgrace*' 338 and *Ambiguities*]). In this context I will describe Lucy's accommodation with Petrus as simultaneously restoring the horizon of 'the idea of the truth' and 'the idea of justice' that is obscured by the instrumentalism of speech acts and itself a kind of speech act that allows for a new beginning.

III

Prompted by a suggestion from David Attwell in an interview conducted shortly before the publication of *Age of Iron* that at a deep level his work projects 'a certain faith in the idea, or the possibility, of an ethical community,' Coetzee commented on the novel's preoccupation with the conditions for speaking:

... there is also the entire performance (in an Austinian sense) of the book itself as the message of someone speaking from the jaws of death, as a backward herald, so to speak, a herald looking and speaking back. Much of the book is in fact taken up with the question of whether performative conditions for messengerhood are met (conditions involving authority to speak, above all). (340)

Coetzee's response indicates some of the ways in which *Age of Iron* attempts to stage the performative conditions for speaking: the authority of the dying and of Mrs Curren's narrative as a last word, the necessity of Verceuil's role as messenger so that her daughter might receive the letter, and the extent to which she can speak authoritatively of the events in Cape Town in this period. *Age of Iron* is marked by Mrs Curren's self-conscious negotiation of these conditions for speaking, a kind of speaking that she understands in explicitly confessional terms: 'As far as I can confess, to you I confess' (124). Thus in *Age of Iron* the successful completion of Mrs Curren's confession relies in the first place on her imminent death and secondly it becomes a question of trust as she must rely on Verceuil to fulfil her final wishes.⁶³ The other significant performative act of the novel, Mrs Curren's suggestion that she try to retrieve some symbolic capital from her death by setting herself alight outside government buildings, is fundamentally flawed as it would not be received or understood as a meaningful symbolic act in those circumstances. While the

⁶³ The nature of this trust is the subject of Attridge's discussion of the novel (91-112).

conditions for elaborate performative gestures do not obtain, Mrs Curren's confession, predicated on the impossible trust in Verceuil, is made, whether or not it is received. And if the proposed public suicide would fail by the exacting standards of Florence, Mrs Curren's housekeeper, the novel shows Mrs Curren opening herself to a different kind of public and to public judgement, which suggests the possibility of the 'ethical community' Attwell proposes in his question above.

One of the key problems with confessional narrative identified by Coetzee in 'Double Thoughts' is the question of closure: how does the secular confessant, for whom absolution in the Christian sense is not available, successfully end his or her confession? In the essay as in the fiction (see my discussion of *Barbarians*) the ending that affords the confessant the least opportunity for self-deception and double thought is the ultimate closure of death, outlined in Coetzee's discussion of Tolstoy's *A Confession* and Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*. Ippolit's confession in *The Idiot*, according to Coetzee, is the closest we come in that novel to an authoritative confession precisely because of the circumstances in which it occurs: 'His confession belongs to last things, it is a last thing, and therefore has a status different from any critique of it. The sincerity of the motive behind last confessions cannot be impugned, he says, because that sincerity is guaranteed by the death of the confessant' (284). But the eventual failure of Ippolit's experiment in truth-telling places the authority of these limits in doubt. Instead, his 'Explanation' comes to seem like a seed which will allow him to live on. Confession, then, even in the shadow of death, is a way of living on rather than achieving closure.

As I point out in the introduction, critics who have sought to relate the confession essay to Coetzee's fiction have frequently done so through the teleology implicit in his description of the process of which confession is just one part –

'transgression, confession, penitence, absolution' – focussing for the most part on the successful completion of this cycle, allowing the confession to deliver closure through absolution or some proposed secular equivalent. I take as typical of the forms this critique usually takes essays on *Age of Iron* which emphasise the novel's reliance on death as a guarantee of truthfulness (Collingwood-Whittick, Head), the significance of Verceuil as confessor, and, sceptical of the ability of confession to deliver grace, its availability through other means (Neill).⁶⁴

In keeping with the proximity of confession to death throughout Coetzee's writings, *Age of Iron* in a sense unites the two anecdotes recounted by Foe to Susan Barton in *Foe* about a woman who hopes to postpone death by confessing and another who hopes to live on through her daughter: Mrs Curren's confession both postpones the moment of the end and invests in the moment beyond the end by addressing her confession to her daughter: 'This is my life, these words, these tracings of the movements of crabbed digits over the page. These words, as you read them, if you read them, enter you and draw breath again. They are, if you like, my way of living on. Once upon a time you lived in me as once upon a time I lived in my mother; as she still lives in me, as I grow towards her, may I live in you' (120). Like Coetzee's staging of confession elsewhere, the possible self-interestedness of the confessional narrative places in doubt the authority claimed by her proximity to death.

The authority of death is already comprehensively undermined in the novel – by the force of the other deaths that are taking place around Mrs Curren and by her awareness of the conditions on which her narrative relies and her attempts to meet these conditions (and for the most part, failing). Death is self-consciously staged as

⁶⁴ For a fuller discussion of these essays see my Introduction (9-10).

the limit which becomes the condition of possibility for the entire novel and the deeply private, final address to her daughter that is staged within it: 'Death is the only truth left. Death is what I cannot bear to think. At every moment when I am thinking of something else, I am not thinking death, am not thinking the truth' (23). But if *Age of Iron* charts this gradual movement towards death, its setting (and composition) in Cape Town in the late 1980s falls in the shadow of another projected end: the fall of the apartheid state. While it is tempting to identify a common purpose in these two imminent endings, in other words to view Mrs Curren's cancer as a metaphor for the pathology of apartheid (see Attridge 102) – a strategy she resorts to herself, with little effect – the novel in fact stages these endings as competing horizons: "'Your days are numbered," I used to whisper once upon a time, to them who will now outlast me' (9). In Attwell's terms the novel stages a 'conflict of limits' between the personal and the historical (121). And while Mrs Curren repeatedly asserts the intimate nature of her narrative and the status of the letter itself as 'private papers,' what meaning accrues to it is established by the twin horizons of her personal journey towards death in a country that lurches through an ongoing crisis.

As the novel progresses, the competing horizon of history shifts from the public figures parading on the television to the specific form of Mrs Curren's domestic, Florence, and her family. Through Florence Mrs Curren gets an insight into the world of the Cape Flats, in her accounts of the chaos taking place in the schools, in the attitudes of her son and his friend, and in two trips to Guguletu township. Witnessing the aftermath of Bheki's death in Guguletu, she is acutely aware of her irrelevance to the mourning crowd or the on-looking security forces, a point underlined again in her exile from her house following the police attack on John.

Yet it is her overt attempt to push the limits of what death might mean that drives home her marginal status in the society. She suggests to Verceuil that she is willing to set herself alight in her car outside the official buildings on Government Avenue as a protest against the policies and actions of the apartheid state. She conceives of the idea as a means to yield something from her life: 'I am trying to work out what I can get for it' (104). But she realises finally that she may not get anything for it (indeed, that the idea of getting something for it is itself a false one). She finds no sign that the act she intends to be deeply symbolic would find any understanding: 'These public shows, these manifestations – this is the point of the story – how can one ever be sure what they stand for? An old woman sets herself on fire, for instance. Why? Because she has been driven mad? Because she is in despair? Because she has cancer? I thought of painting a letter on the car to explain. But what? A? B? C? What is the right letter for my case? And why explain anyway? Whose business is it but my own?' (105) But of course if her intention is to claim some symbolic force for her death then it is disingenuous to suggest that it might be private. The instinct to 'get something for it' turns out to be not unlike the confessant's desire for absolution: 'I want to sell myself, redeem myself, but am full of confusion about how to do it' (107). But like the confessant's desire for absolution, the conditions in which death might be meaningful are beyond her control. Her death in these circumstances does not have symbolic currency: 'It is like trying to spend a drachma. A perfectly good coin somewhere else, but not here. Suspiciously marked' (152).

Like the 'Explanation' of Ippolit Terentyev, her desire for a public spectacle also runs the risk of being a desire to live on through some symbolic value. In keeping with the self-consciousness of her narrative, she sees the falseness that lies behind the instinct: 'The truth is, there was always something false about that

impulse, deeply false, no matter to what rage or despair it answered' (129). While her reevaluation of the desire for symbolic value seems to emerge from the self-conscious spiral of thought typical of confession, she identifies Florence as her true audience: 'If Florence were passing by, with Hope at her side and Beauty on her back, would she be impressed by the spectacle? Would she even spare it a glance? A juggler, a clown, an entertainer, Florence would think: not a serious person. And stride on' (129). Florence's judgement becomes the benchmark by which Mrs Curren measures the seriousness of her positions: 'Florence is the judge. [...] If the life I live is an examined life, it is because for ten years I have been under examination in the court of Florence' (129).

While Mrs Curren experiences Florence's presence as an exacting judgement on her insignificance to the events occurring in Cape Town in the late 1980s, the more overtly confessional qualities of her narrative could be seen as a kind of advocacy for herself and the life she lives. While she never explicitly expresses the desire for absolution, she wishes for salvation and redemption, and at several points describes her narrative as a plea. She is making a general case for the life she has lived, even suggesting that this is constitutive to the confessional form and the first person it uses. Addressing John, she speculates that he sees her first and foremost as 'I, a white' (72) but (drawing on Thucydides) notes that every 'I' claims some kind of exceptionality: 'A word of protest: I, the exception. [...] The truth is, given time to speak, we would all claim to be exceptions. For each of us there is a case to be made. We all deserve the benefit of the doubt' (73). But the nature of the plea that she addresses to her daughter is quite different; she is pleading for love, forgiveness, and even company. This is initially the subject of her confession to Verceuil, admitting a deep desire for her daughter to return, to utter the words 'Save me!' (67) She realises

the burden this places on Verceuil: 'How tedious these confessions, these pleas, these demands!' (67) But it is of course also a deeply embedded plea to her daughter.

This is also true of the more overtly confessional moments in the narrative – overtly confessional because staged as disclosures that are then subject to a rigorously stylised revaluation that seems to speak directly to the dynamics of confession as outlined in 'Double Thoughts.' The first such moment occurs after she has seen the body of Bheki and his comrades laid out in Guguletu. Mrs Curren describes the scene in terms of a coming-to-awareness, an exposure to a reality of which she can no longer deny awareness in good faith: 'I thought of the boy's open eyes. I thought: What did he see as his last sight on earth? I thought: This is the worst thing I have witnessed in my life. And I thought: Now my eyes are open and I can never close them again' (94-95). With echoes of the magistrate from *Barbarians*, this highly stylised double thought suggests that even this harsh awareness can be circumvented, might be redirected to more self-interested purposes, as she goes on to acknowledge in an explicit warning to her daughter: 'I ask you to draw back. I tell you this story not so that you will feel for me but so that you will learn how things are. [...] I am the one writing: I, I. So I ask you: attend to the writing, not to me. If lies and pleas and excuses weave among the words, listen for them. Do not pass them over, do not forgive them easily. Read all, even this adjuration, with a cold eye' (95-96).

Later, her confession is broken into stages – the first, second, third words tending it would appear towards the last word, but not reaching this point of authority. She firstly confesses to wanting salvation, but being unable to accept loving John, loving the unlovable, as her route to salvation. This in turn leads her to consider the prospect that her love for her daughter is not what she thought: 'The more I love you, the more I ought to love him. The less I love him, the less, perhaps, I

love you' (125). But it leads to a more shameful admission still, a desire for her daughter: 'Come, says this letter: do not cut yourself off from me. My third word' (127).

The final example of the overtly confessional occurs after the death of John, as she lies in the open air with Verceuil. Her disclosure is that she had calculated endless shame to be the cost of living in South Africa, that she is a good person who has not shirked the dishonour of her circumstances, and is willing to admit this. "It is a confession I am making here this morning, Mr. Verceuil,' I said, 'as full a confession as I know how. I withhold no secrets. I have been a good person, I freely confess to it. I am a good person still. What times these are when to be a good person is not enough!'" (150) But she is now forced to revise this position: 'What I had not calculated on was that more might be called for than to be good. For there are plenty of good people in this country. We are two a penny, we good and nearly-good. What the times call for is quite different from goodness. The times call for heroism' (151). But after making this admission she finds that Verceuil is asleep. Suddenly the weighty concepts of goodness and heroism fall rather flat and she questions the validity of the sentiments – of the confession – when they appear not to have been received: 'Is a true confession still true if it is not heard?' (151) Significantly, she does not question the truth of the confession, the sincerity of the confession one might even say, but she questions the extent to which it can count as a true confession in the absence of one of its key performative conditions. To use Austin's terms, she is concerned that it might be a misfire rather than an abuse.

The seriousness of the confession is undermined further by her subsequent actions – going to the toilet behind a bush in the open air. Indeed, if her narrative at this stage is informed by a principle of disclosure, it is functioning even more

rigorously in the staging of the narrative: 'On our flattened out box in the vacant lot we must have been visible to every passer-by. That is how we must be in the eyes of the angels: people living in houses of glass, our every act naked' (151). One is conscious, at this point, that Mrs Curren is a speaking body, uttering her confession to another body. If the confession is undermined by Verceuil's failure to listen, it is at the same time strengthened by the extreme physical circumstances in which she finds herself.

Early in the novel, having just received the news that the cancer she is suffering from is terminal, Mrs Curren imagines two competing views of the afterlife. The first she calls heaven: 'a hotel lobby with a high ceiling and the Art of Fugue coming softly over the public address system' (22). This is prompted by her realisation, playing Bach on the piano, that she has an audience in Verceuil. In the course of her performance, Mrs Curren finds that occasionally 'the real thing emerged, the real music, the music that does not die, confident, serene' and that Bach himself represents 'pure spirit' (21). She wonders if the unchanging, essential quality of the music, is embodied, however briefly and imperfectly, in her and Verceuil: 'Where does that spirit find itself now? In the echoes of my fumbling performance receding through the ether? [...] Have our two hearts, our organs of love, been tied for this brief while by a cord of sound?' (22).

After some pages in which her attention is taken to the historical realities of Cape Town in the late 1980s through the seclusion of her barricaded home and the obscene news that makes its way through the television, music once more turns her thoughts to Verceuil and the afterlife. Listening to a recording of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* she again imagines sharing the experience with Verceuil: 'Against the garage wall the man was squatting, smoking, the point of his cigarette glowing.

Perhaps he saw me, perhaps not. Together we listened. At this moment, I thought, I know how he feels as surely as if he and I were making love' (27). This imagined but unconfirmed connection with Verceuil, now in the form of a physical union, leads her to rethink her idea of the afterlife:

Though it came to me unbidden, though it filled me with distaste, I considered the thought without flinching. He and I pressed breast to breast, eyes closed, going down the old road together. Unlikely companions! Like travelling in a bus in Sicily, pressed face to face, body to body against a strange man. Perhaps that is what the afterlife will be like: not a lobby with armchairs and music but a great crowded bus on its way from nowhere to nowhere. Standing room only: on one's feet forever, crushed against strangers. The air thick, stale, full of sighs and murmurs: *Sorry, sorry*. Promiscuous contact. Forever under the gaze of others. An end to private life. (27)

The sense of being crushed, the stale air, the apologies, the relentless exposure: everything in the second vision of the afterlife seems to fall well short of paradise. Indeed, Neill describes it as 'hell' (15). Yet the 'promiscuous contact' initiated first by Bach and intensified in Mrs Curren's imagination in a sense contrasts favourably with the anaesthetized hotel lobby of 'heaven.'

In the final pages of the novel Mrs Curren describes Verceuil as her 'shadow husband,' this time in the private space of her bedroom rather than exposed to the public eye: 'We share a bed, folded one upon the other like a page folded in two, like two wings folded: old mates, bunkmates, conjoined, conjugal. *Lectus genialis, lectus adversus*' (174). The key difference between her earlier vision of the afterlife and these intimate scenes is that the latter bear no trace of the hellish, forced intimacy of the bus, nor the atmosphere of apology and regret. They undoubtedly bear witness to a compelled contact of a sort, and indeed to a loss of privacy that is imposed by circumstance, but *under these circumstances* this is no bad thing. That is to say, Mrs Curren's proximity to death not only provides the limit against which her confession

might be articulated but it also creates the conditions in which intimacy with the other can be achieved: as much as death is singular and hers alone, the loss of the private that its approach brings also occasions new forms of intimacy.

IV

In *Ambiguities of Witnessing* Sanders draws attention to the way in which the TRC played host to the words of the other; it was a forum that opened itself to a multiplicity of stories, voices and languages and it – the individuals involved and those who watched, or listened, or read – was altered, modified and stretched beyond its limits in the process. To my mind there are two kinds of critique of the TRC: those that focus on what it did not and could not do and those that focus on how it went about its task – a political one in the first instance, but also much more than this – of national unity and reconciliation. In their introduction to a journal special issue on post-apartheid literature, Attwell and Harlow point out that the TRC:

makes no provision for natural justice; forgiveness in the name of peace has been elevated above justice in the name of principle. For the good of the nation, victims have often been obliged to accept a moral and material settlement that is less than satisfactory. [...] by emphasizing individual acts of abuse, it has tended to obscure the systematically abusive social engineering that was apartheid. (2)

In a similar vein, Mahmood Mamdani's critique focuses on the TRC's interpretation of its own remit and consequently the diminished truth that it produced. He finds that 'reduced to "the context" or "the background" of gross human rights violations, apartheid was effectively written out of the report' (38). Sanders' book is unique in managing to focus on the actual workings of the commission while inscribing this

within a critique of the limits under which it operated, focusing on the way in which the commission's limited remit was subject to change by the testimony that came before it.

As I have noted, the TRC might be seen as an institutional embodiment of the desired transformations that characterise confessional encounters in Coetzee's earlier novels, ostensibly providing a confessor, a democratic community to be rehabilitated into, and specific conditions to be observed in order to achieve 'the end of the episode' of apartheid. But if the desired transformations in these earlier examples are fraught with problems of bad faith and self-interestedness, then, as the critiques that I mention above indicate, the institutional working-out of this desire falls far short of 'the idea of the truth' or the idea of justice that animates Coetzee's engagement with confession. And as those critics also point out, there is much at stake in the 'idea' of the TRC; Attwell and Harlow noted in 2000 that 'apartheid's legacy remains evident in extensive poverty, educational deprivation, and a warped criminal justice system which, because it was developed as an instrument of oppression, seems incapable of dealing with ordinary crime' (2).

Published in 1999, *Disgrace* stages the desire and need for transformation with great urgency, but it also treats the attempted institutional solution to this with scepticism. For this reason, my discussion of the TRC and the novel will focus on the limitations of the commission or, specifically, on the limited conception of justice and limited application of the law that underpinned its formation, and which resulted in a diminished kind of resolution to the confessions it invited. I will argue that this is worked out in the novel in David's resistance to the quasi-judicial setting of the university inquiry and Lucy's rejection of legal avenues of redress for the rape.

An integral part of the negotiated settlement that would eventually see a transfer of power in South Africa from the National Party to the African National Congress, the TRC was mandated with the 'investigation and the establishment of as complete a picture as possible of the nature, causes and extent of gross violations of human rights' in the period from 1960 to 1993 (Sanders 1). In addition to this fact-finding dimension of its remit it would also be responsible for granting amnesty to perpetrators who offered full disclosure and could demonstrate political motives for their actions, and reparation to victims of gross human rights' violations. Emerging from the negotiated settlement and enshrined in law, the TRC has been described as a 'quasi-judicial' body, performing a legal function but also inflected by Christian and psychoanalytic discourses of reconciliation and healing (Sanders 2). The terms of its juridical function were defined so that, in the case of the amnesty hearings, if the conditions laid out were met, amnesty from prosecution could be granted.

The TRC was part of a historic compromise and as the literature across a range of disciplines attests it was not a perfect institution. I have already indicated the basis of some critiques of the commission, but in order to address the idea of its limited conception of justice, I will turn briefly to its limited conception of the law itself, in the form of international law.

John Dugard describes how the legislation governing the TRC emerged from the negotiations on the Interim Constitution, appearing belatedly as a 'postamble' that was later described in a Constitutional Court judgement as constituting a 'bridge from apartheid to democracy' (90). Dugard finds that great efforts have been made to bring South African law into step with international law thus restoring South Africa's position in the international community after the isolation of the apartheid years. However, he points to three key weaknesses which all relate to the problematic

'postamble' and its coming into law as the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act of 1995. Firstly, he notes the failure to take into account the fact that apartheid itself is a crime under international law meaning that 'no attempt is made to criminalize with retrospective effect acts relating to the planning and execution of the policy of apartheid' (89). For this reason, the focus of the commission was limited to gross violations of human rights; in other words, crimes that were already illegal under apartheid law. Related to this is the question of amnesty where Dugard locates the other weakness of the act. He points out that the provision for amnesty inserted in the 'postamble' was out of step with international law, which tends to demand prosecution of those responsible for gross violations of human rights under an old regime (88). This is compounded by the third weakness which relates to the Constitutional Court's failure to take customary international law into account in its judgement on the case taken by victims against the TRC, who claimed that the provision for amnesty violated their right to have their cases settled in a court of law (89-90). The TRC was therefore not just 'quasi-judicial' in its incorporation of discourses other than the law, but in its limited application of the laws available to it, for political reasons (as Dugard acknowledges). Pointing out that *Disgrace* 'takes up historical matters that predate and outlive the thirty-four-year period encompassed by the commission's investigations,' Sanders points to the novel's critique of these limits (though he also points out that the novel goes much further than this).⁶⁵

From the perspective of confessional discourse, the architects of the TRC attempted to create the conditions in which confession could be brought to an end,

⁶⁵ As I will discuss in the next chapter, I believe this willingness to exceed the limits of the TRC is also important for a reading of *Boyhood* as confession.

not by absolution but by the much less ideal concept of amnesty. It succeeded in doing this by placing conditions and limits on what was expected of those that came before it, thereby making it possible to satisfy these requirements (amnesty applicants had to be able to demonstrate political motivation for their crimes). To this extent, it presumed to measure and quantify confessional narrative in the name of political expediency.

In relation to the main hearings, Sanders notes that while the commission distinguishes between the 'factual or forensic truth' typical of the legal sphere and the 'personal or narrative truth' more characteristic of psychoanalytic discourse, its 'quasi-judicial' space brought the two into an uneasy proximity. In this context, he finds that 'Although it [the commission] declares itself hospitable to storytelling, it proves more at ease with statements that can be forensically verified or falsified' (153).⁶⁶

As I suggested earlier in the chapter, David Lurie's refusal to provide anything but the most cursory explanation for his relationship with Melanie Isaacs to the university committee is a rejection of the quasi-judicial model of the TRC that the hearing invokes, refusing to submit to its procedures and adhering to a strictly legal understanding of the language available to him before the committee. Noting his failure to 'perform well,' his ex-wife Rosalind articulates his refusal to testify in the terms of his objection to the committee's quasi-judicial status.

In the case of the hearing, the flaws in Lurie's performance are twofold: his failure to put on a convincing show of remorse for his actions and his failure to accept and submit to the conventions governing university hearings. These failures represent

⁶⁶ In terms of speech act theory, these could be described as constative and performative statements, respectively, though as I have noted the distinction between these is problematic.

two different conceptions of performance, one theatrical and the other philosophical/linguistic,⁶⁷ though the conflation of these categories, or to be specific, the incorporation of the former into the latter, is the basis of Lurie's objection. The entire hearing is characterised by Lurie's failure to accept the performative conditions laid down by the committee; his strict adherence to a legal register in which he enters a 'plea' but declines to provide evidence in mitigation means that he will never satisfy the new institutional demands to confess and demonstrate remorse *sincerely*. The word plea is generally associated with making a defence or arguing a particular case and this is the sense adopted by the committee. David, however, is adhering to the narrowest possible legal interpretation of the term: 'The formal answer to a criminal charge' (OED). The word 'plea' – marked in the former sense by Austin's 'A Plea for Excuses' – occurs in one form or other six times during the hearing, underlining the distinction between David's strictly legal understanding of the term and the committee's performative requirements: 'Frankly, what you want from me is not a response but a confession. Well, I make no confession. I put forward a plea, as is my right. Guilty as charged. That is my plea. That is as far as I am prepared to go' (51).

Explaining to his daughter Lucy the events in Cape Town that have driven him into exile, Lurie paints himself as a defender of private life: 'These are puritanical times. Private life is public business. Prurience is respectable, prurience and sentiment. They wanted a spectacle: breast-beating, remorse, tears if possible. A TV show, in fact. I wouldn't oblige' (66). Lurie exaggerates only slightly. Like the TRC, the university committee he faces in *Disgrace* draws for its procedures and

⁶⁷ The distinction between these different notions of performance is the subject of Hillis Miller's 'Performativity as Performance / Performativity as Speech Act'.

conventions on a number of different discourses – legal, religious, and psychoanalytic – without being defined by any one: ‘Our rules of procedure are not those of a law court’ (48). While it is recommended to Lurie that he enlist the services of someone familiar with the procedures of university hearings, he declines, choosing to engage only with the legal aspect of the committee, ‘playing it by the book’ (55), and even then engaging only minimally by adhering to the narrowest possible definition of plea. What he resolutely refuses to do in any of the registers available to him, is make a case for his actions in regard to Melanie Isaacs. His explanation that he became ‘a servant of eros’ is not presented as evidence in mitigation, as an excuse, or as a sin, simply a statement of fact about what occurred, as if being ‘a servant of eros’ were a constative, verifiable fact. His actions can be interpreted as an explicit refusal of performative speech on the one hand (to make a case for his actions) and refusal to give a public performance (to put on a show of remorse) on the other. His refusal to submit to the procedures of the committee is a principled objection to the conflation of different discourses and specifically the demand for public performance and underlines the inability of the law (or its variants) to function in the absence of a shared and accepted set of procedures and beliefs. Again explaining himself to Lucy, David is adamant that any plea he might have made before the university committee would not be understood: ‘The case you want me to make is a case that can no longer be made, *basta*. Not in our day. If I tried to make it I would not be heard’ (89).

In spite of David’s comprehensive rejection of the availability of confession as a speech act at the university inquiry, the urgent need for speech acts is driven home by the violent events that take place in the novel. This eventually leads David to search for a forum and shared procedures with which to address what happened with Melanie Isaacs. He settles on a plan to visit her family, addressing them

privately, in person, as a way to unburden himself of lingering guilt over the episode. His attempt at a personal apology represents a fundamental shift in his approach to confession as he submits himself to a language and set of gestures that seem more theatrical than performative in the Austinian sense. While his desire to 'make good' seems thought out in advance, he cannot find a common language with which to share this with Mr Isaacs, who equally reverts to clichés about learning from one's mistakes and intervening on one's behalf without reference to the language of forgiveness that his Christian faith might provide. David leaves the Isaacs home harbouring resentment towards Melanie's father and desire for her younger sister, having been reminded that the 'disgrace' he finds himself in is 'without term' (172).

While David's refusal to confess and failed confession are to a significant extent in sympathy with the scepticism about confession in 'Double Thoughts', as Vermeulen points out, we should not accept his position as heroic ('Dogged Silences' 2). Indeed Lucy responds to his situation in just these terms: 'It isn't heroic to be unbending' (66). Neither should we accept the equivalence that the novel offers between David's refusal to confess and Lucy's refusal to report the fact that she was raped to the police. Lucy's assertion that the rape is a 'private matter' might seem to echo David's defence of 'private life,' but like other examples where her speech echoes or repeats David's, her struggle to articulate the singularity of her actions in the context of the narrative's relentless focalization through David gives us every reason to doubt this easy parallel.⁶⁸ The 'private matter' of rape is not the same as the 'private life' of sexual desire of which David sees himself as guardian.

⁶⁸ Spivak suggests that *Disgrace* invites the reader to 'counterfocalize' through Lucy ('Ethics and Politics' 23).

Boehmer considers that Lucy completely withholds testimony of the rape, but this does not seem to be the case (344): she sees a doctor in the aftermath of the attack and we have every reason to believe that she confides in Bev Shaw. To my mind, her insistence on the 'private' nature of the attack does not mean that it must remain a secret but that it is not available for circulation and judgement in the sphere of law.⁶⁹ Indeed, the sphere of the law is a space in which confession and testimony are subjected to a similar forensic analysis, so her unwillingness to report the crime might be a refusal to submit to this space. The only right she lays claim to for the duration of the novel is her 'right not to be put on trial ... not to have to justify myself' (133).⁷⁰ In addition, while both Lucy and David are aware that her rape has a performative force beyond the violence directed at her 'in the act' (156), her insistence that the attack is 'a private matter' could be seen as an attempt to limit its symbolic potential (115, 158).

David's recourse to criminal law in the aftermath of the attack is another dimension of his 'unbending' character (66). While it seems to contrast with his refusal to confess before the university committee, it is in fact consistent with his adherence to the letter of the law on that occasion, highlighting his objection to the demands for a performance of remorse. Instead, he wishes to abdicate personal involvement by recourse to the impersonal nature of the law. Attempting to resolve the issue of Pollux's presence with Petrus, he says: 'You will not be involved, I will

⁶⁹ In South Africa and globally rape is a notoriously under-reported crime and even when reported prosecution rates are appallingly low, pointing to inadequacies in how the law administers the crime of rape and perhaps to a culture of shame for rape victims (see 'Sexual violence increasing' for an indication of these trends in an Irish context). Anya makes a strong challenge to both of these problems (*Diary* 96-119).

⁷⁰ Sanders notes a certain unease with different kinds of testimony at the TRC (153) but the subjection of confession and testimony to the same procedures of verification is a serious problem with the reception of testimony more generally as is evident in the work of Butler, Derrida, Spivak and Gilmore.

not be involved, it will be a matter for the law' (137). But by setting him in opposition to Petrus, the novel points to the bifurcated system of justice that obtained under apartheid which allowed for the separate administration of *law* and *custom* on racial grounds (Mamdani 34, Sanders). David himself only pages earlier registered the colonial origins of this system, commenting on a tribal medal worn by a man at Petrus' party: 'Symbols struck by the boxful in a foundry in Coventry or Birmingham; stamped on the one side with the head of our Victoria, *regina et imperatrix*, on the other with gnus or ibises rampant' (135). David's adherence to the letter of the law does not just reflect his unwillingness to adapt to the new conditions in which he finds himself, but points to the way in which the law has been shaped and implemented to serve particular interests, and this persists even in the post-apartheid context.

V

Both *Age of Iron* and *Disgrace* offer examples of actions that have lost their capacity to symbolise, rituals that have lost their collective meaning. In *Age of Iron* Mrs Curren's proposed public suicide is such an action. Intended to symbolise the intensity of her objection to the apartheid state, she comes to realise that the public burning of a terminally ill old white woman outside government buildings would mean nothing, either to the ruling elite whose actions she opposes or to those people suffering in the townships with whom she wishes to act in solidarity. In *Disgrace* Lucy's suggestion that David has been made into a scapegoat elicits from him a similar frustration at the unavailability of shared symbolic values. He notes that the

concept of the scapegoat 'worked because everyone knew how to read the ritual, including the gods. Then the gods died, and all of a sudden you had to cleanse the city without divine help. Real actions were demanded instead of symbolism' (91).

In *Diary of a Bad Year*, among the 'Strong Opinions' held by JC⁷¹ is a short meditation on the possible meaning of apology in the absence of material restitution, ostensibly for the Aboriginal population of Australia but he also draws parallels with the issue of the ownership of land in South Africa. This is prompted by an advertisement for a lawyer who advises clients on how to word apologies without admitting liability but expands to examine the general tendency toward the performance of remorse or apology being equated with the sincerity of the apology. The objection is not to apology as such, 'which used to have the highest symbolic status,' but to apology conceived as an alternative to material restitution, or worse, calculated entirely to avoid the risk of material loss. This 'new' conception of apology, emptied of all symbolic meaning, becomes quantifiable only by the perceived sincerity of the performance: 'To the dubious question ... Is this true sincerity? one receives only a blank look. Sincerity? Of course I'm sincere – didn't I say so?' To the lawyer, apology is not a question of sincerity or insincerity, but of liability: 'In his eyes and in the eyes of his clients, an unscripted, unrehearsed apology will likely be an excessive, inappropriate, ill-calculated, and therefore false apology, that is to say, one that costs money, money being the measure of all things' (109). The implication of the piece is that apology and remorse are no longer understood as *symbolising* the kind of loss that might come with an admission of liability, and consequently are susceptible to quantification either in terms of material restitution or the equally literal performance of sincerity. I am not claiming that for

⁷¹ The protagonist signs himself 'JC' (*Diary* 123).

Coetzee apology must be underwritten by an economic imperative, but there is a suggestion that true sincerity might require restitution.⁷²

The solution offered by the TRC to the problem of providing reparation to victims is an amalgamation of material reparation with symbolic reparation, partly in acknowledgement that adequate material restitution cannot and will not take place. According to Sanders: 'Once the nebulous concept of making the victim whole is added to the agenda, we have, as is consistent with the rest of the report, a course of action unevenly conjoining monetary and "symbolic" elements. If the former will never be enough, the latter are, by definition, always inadequate to their object' (120).

In the context of two novels where power invariably resides in the capacity of real actions to impose themselves, even the performative force of speech acts seems to be underwritten by terrible material consequences. The authority of Mrs Curren's confession lies in the terror brought on by her imminent death. In *Disgrace* the resolution that is reached involves a performative speech act of sorts: Lucy's 'marriage' to Petrus. Given Lucy's proven vulnerability to violent attack, and her sense of being marked by the rapists as part of their territory, Petrus suggests that marriage will solve Lucy's problems. As Pollux, the youngest of the rapists and a relative of Petrus, is too young to marry (thereby not meeting the required conditions), she should marry Petrus. Successfully – felicitously – completed it will bring an end to the fallout from the attack: 'It is finish' (210). The transaction is described by Lucy in terms of the conditions governing performative speech acts: 'It is not a joke, not a threat. At some level he is serious' (203). And the transaction is completed in the transfer of land, title deeds and all – Lucy's dowry.

⁷² This is also the subject of Wole Soyinka's *The Burden of Memory, The Muse of Forgiveness*.

In a sense this is a private solution, but it is public insofar as it will bring Lucy public recognition as being under Petrus's protection; that is to say, it will be received as a felicitous performative speech act, granting recognition to Lucy and to her child. The solution continues the critique of legal avenues of redress as David insists that it is not legally workable. But it also occurs in the shadow of an alternative legal model – the recognition of African customary law under the South African Constitution. Polygamous marriage was granted full recognition by the Customary Marriages Act 120 in 1998 (Himonga and Bosch 311). Lucy's willingness to submit to an arrangement that looks remarkably like a polygamous marriage – at least superficially – is therefore in one sense a deeply symbolic submission to the law of the other.

But as I have already noted in relation to David's adherence to the law, *custom* and customary law were tools of colonial control. For this reason, customary law has proven controversial in the post-apartheid context, as disagreement persists about the authority of official customary law (first codified by colonial administrators in Natal in the late nineteenth century) and its subordination under the Constitution to the South African Bill of Rights (in response to the demands of women's groups during negotiations in 1993).

In this light it is worth returning to the circumstances of Lucy's accommodation with Petrus (negotiated on her behalf by her father, though as Sanders points out, the deal does not seem to be formalised by the end of the novel). Lucy articulates her submission to these new circumstances in terms of an abdication of *rights*, starting again at ground level, 'With nothing, Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity' (205). So in terms of the tension between customary law and the Bill of Rights, Lucy seems to waive her rights in order to reach an accommodation with Petrus. This could be seen as the final

stage of her rejection of legal avenues of redress, a final renunciation of the limits on the kind of justice available in post-apartheid South Africa. But as I have pointed out, in the context of the violent acts that unfold in the novel, *Disgrace* seems to me to be less eager to suspend the limits and conditions which allow speech acts to influence events. To this end, the significance of Lucy's accommodation with Petrus is *as a speech act*, which in responding to a new set of conditions, lays down some conditions of its own: 'No one enters this house without my permission' (204).

Spivak has pointed to the false equivalence between Lucy's apparent agreement with David that she is, in her current situation, 'like a dog' (205, 'Ethics and Politics' 22). Like her assertion that the rape is a 'private matter,' we have every reason to question the element of agreement in Lucy's echo of David. Denise Riley suggests that the figure of *Echo* is the 'initiator of the ironic' (*The Words of Selves* 157). According to Riley, 'Echo is unsparingly condemned to passivity – and yet her very passivity possesses its own strong agency' (157). Writing about the challenge presented to the TRC by the testimony of women making demands on behalf of deceased relatives, Sanders compares one such woman (Lephina Zondo) to Antigone (via Hegel and Derrida) as the '*eirōn*, the dissembler, the one who feigns ignorance in order to make the law speak' (74). I suggest that we read Lucy as a similar figure of irony. In a context in which, as I have shown, legal avenues of justice have been subordinated to political expediency, Lucy's abdication of rights puts her at the mercy of another set of laws, equally calculated to serve particular interests. This is, in one sense, a radical rejection of legal avenues of redress and a willingness to submit herself to the law of the other. But if we read her *echo* of David as an indication of her status as '*eirōn*,' we could also say that she disowns and disavows the law to this extreme in order that she might finally make it speak.

CHAPTER SIX

'...two worlds tightly sealed'?: Autobiography and Fiction in *Boyhood* and *Youth*

As *Boyhood* draws to a close, we have the impression that the protagonist, John, is assuming a certain burden of responsibility from Aunt Annie, his mother's aunt. The copious volumes of *Ewige Genesing* stored in her house give him an insight into the enormity of the task she set herself in translating, publishing and disseminating this arcane work by her father. Her sense of duty toward her father's book dies with her, but John has absorbed a lesson about the connection between books, duty and remembering: 'He alone is left to do the thinking. How will he keep them all in his head, all the books, all the people, all the stories? And if he does not remember them, who will?' (166) As an account of the task of the historian, biographer or autobiographer it is naïve; in the opening interview in *Doubling the Point* Coetzee points out that 'All the facts are too many facts' (18). As autobiographical texts, *Boyhood* and *Youth* certainly do not provide us with all the stories, or all the facts. But what they do, in addition to providing an account of some of the facts, is stage different principles of selection.⁷³

In *Boyhood* selection takes the form of the duty to remember that John inherits from Aunt Annie, but remembering also occurs in the connections and

⁷³ For ease of reference I refer to both volumes as memoirs.

affiliations established at the level of form and language. The memoir unfolds in the language of confessional narrative, revealing shameful secrets and emphasising the uniqueness and singularity of the protagonist. But this same language of uniqueness also repeats the language of separation and apartness that characterised the political climate of the period described, thereby establishing key points of continuity between the protagonist and a community that he outwardly rejects. In this way, the protagonist comes to seem more representative than singular. I will argue that the memoir, published in 1997, is part of the trend toward confession and testimony that characterised this period of South African history. But focusing as it does on the mundane details of life lived distant from but complicit with the discourse of apartheid, it pushes at the limits of the national narrative (of confession) produced by the TRC, expanding the range of experience included within this narrative and the range of experience subject to confession.

In *Youth* the protagonist is distinguished by being an aspiring writer and is eager to construct a story or stories of his life that will smooth over the discontinuities and ignominies that he has accumulated in Cape Town and London. He holds to a view of writing as transforming life experience into art, so the question of selection comes to be identified with writing: 'The question of what should be permitted to go into his diary and what kept forever shrouded goes to the heart of all his writing' (9). This view of the writing process as rigorously controlled and carefully compartmentalizing aspects of experience leads to an emphasis on concealment and a desire to bring certain narratives to a close by limiting their circulation. The 'end of the episode' that structures Coetzee's engagement with confession elsewhere as tending towards absolution is here a question of concealing. But precisely those events that the protagonist is anxious to forget are articulated by the narrator in a

language of abjection that evokes the unguarded, uncensored, compulsive disclosures of 'heart-speech,' a kind of confessional language that effaces double thought and calculation in its figuration as the language of compulsive and unmediated expression. This is not only contrary to the idea of writing as selecting, but in its apparent absence of control or agency suggests a potential endlessness.

Carefully described as 'fictionalized autobiography,' *Boyhood* and *Youth* unfold within the limits and conditions of autobiography and confession and in their preoccupation with selection self-consciously stage the negotiation of these limits. I will claim that their authority as autobiography resides partly in their proximity to the discourses of confession but that this authority is also subject to certain fictional strategies.

My claim that *Boyhood* and *Youth* can be read as confessional texts relies on their status as autobiography, on their proximity to the discourse of confession, on the manner in which they unfold within the register of apartheid and of abjection, and on their part in a body of South African narrative produced in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that directed its attention to shameful aspects of its history. While my focus is on the confessional dimensions of both texts, in their tendency to document the specificities of a childhood and youth in a particular place and at a particular time – intensified in the preoccupation with remembering in *Boyhood* and the apparently inadvertent testimony of *Youth* – both texts could also be described as autobiography in the mode of memoir. Indeed, according to the taxonomy of Francis R. Hart invoked in 'Double Thoughts,' *Boyhood* and *Youth* are both confession and memoir, personal histories that seek both to 'communicate or express the essential nature, the truth, of the self' and 'articulate or repossess the historicity of the self' (Hart, 227). While the emphasis on the essential truth of the self would place

Boyhood and *Youth* in dialogue with the history of confessional narrative, it is the historicity of that self – both the writing subject and autobiographical subject – that allows us to understand them as *confession*.

I

As I outline in the introduction, in 'Retrospect,' the closing interview in *Doubling*, Coetzee reflects on the question of 'truth in autobiography' and particularly on the 'pivotal' role of 'Double Thoughts' in his intellectual (auto)biography. As part of the quasi-conversion narrative that emerges in the interview, he opts to tell the story of his life in the third person and present tense, carefully marking the occasion of the interview and reflection on this particular essay as 'the instance of discourse': 'Standing on the hillock or island created by our present dialogue, let me tell you, in the retrospect it provides, what the story of the past twenty years looks like when I make that story pivot on the essay on confession, written in 1982-83' (392). The short autobiographical piece that results covers by and large the same material as *Boyhood* and *Youth* and finds Coetzee *trying out* a voice or voices in which to recount the story of his early life. He settles on the third person pronoun, but he flirts with different descriptions of his subject: 'a man-who-writes'; 'this person, this subject, the subject of this story, this I' (392-93). Significantly, just as he carefully sets out the context of his comments in the interview, his recourse to the third person does not entirely efface the first person. To this extent the piece differs from *Boyhood* and *Youth* in allowing a space for reflection and comment on his younger self. Of his career in mathematics he comments: 'I say: he is trying to find a capsule in which he can live, a capsule in which he need not breathe the air of the world' (393). And on his

isolation in Britain and the US: 'He merely feels alien. Let me ("me") trace this feeling (of alienness, not alienation) further back in time. A sense of being alien goes back far in his memories. But to certain intensifications of that sense I, writing in 1991, can put a date' (393). Eventually, as the story ends with a description of his doctoral studies in Texas, the third person collapses back into the first person: 'The discipline within which he (and *he* now begins to feel closer to *I*: *autre*biography shades back into autobiography) had trained himself/myself to think brought illuminations that I can't imagine him or me reaching by any other route' (394). In its meticulous attention to the conventions of autobiographical writing and to the relationship between writing self and autobiographical subject, the piece signals the care with which Coetzee would later construct his autobiographical narratives.

While '*autre*biography' has been used to describe the particular kind of autobiographical effect created in *Boyhood* and *Youth*,⁷⁴ the differences between the memoirs and this early autobiographical fragment indicate that the memoirs rely on more than third person present tense narration for their force.⁷⁵ The key difference between the memoirs and 'Retrospect' is that the latter is focalized through the writing subject, the 'I', whereas the former are focalized unfailingly through the third person. This creates the effect of a discrete fictional world in both memoirs, renouncing the obvious connection to the author and even to the protagonist of the other volume. The reluctance to break the fictional frame of the discrete worlds created in both texts – in a writer whose other projects in this period included the

⁷⁴ See Sheila Collingwood-Whittick, 'Autobiography as *Autre*biography' and Margaret Lenta.

⁷⁵ In a 2002 interview with David Attwell, conducted shortly before the publication of *Youth*, Coetzee says: 'Yes, all autobiography is *autre*-biography, but what is more important is where one goes from there' ('All Autobiography is *Autre*-biography' 216). So, autobiography needn't be written in the third person to be *autre*-biography. Coetzee upholds Attwell's distinction between autobiography as *autre*-biography (historical, self-detached, ironic) and autobiography as confession (anguished), but this chapter is an attempt to complicate these categories.

remarkably *thin* fictions of *Elizabeth Costello* – inadvertently draws attention to the conditions which create these closed worlds.⁷⁶ In addition, invoking the autobiographical pact further troubles the fictional world created in each text and introduces a different set of conditions within which to consider the texts.

The autobiographical pact is invoked explicitly and implicitly in both works. First published in 1997 with the subtitle *Scenes from Provincial Life*, *Boyhood* was described as autobiography/memoir; indeed, my 1998 paperback is also subtitled *A Memoir*. In the course of the narrative the reader discovers that the protagonist is called John and insofar as there is biographical information about J.M. Coetzee in the public domain it does not diverge from the childhood described in *Boyhood*.⁷⁷ *Youth* was published in the UK in May 2002 and appeared without its connection to the earlier *Boyhood* or to the biography of J.M. Coetzee being flagged either on the dust jacket or in the promotional material to reviewers; it was released into the world as fiction. Attridge attributes the puzzled response of reviewers at the time to their failure to appreciate the autobiographical qualities of the work and the US edition which appeared some months later sought to avoid the same confusion, overcompensating with the subtitle *Scenes from Provincial Life II*. In the biographical material on the Nobel Prize website, both *Boyhood* and *Youth* are described as ‘fictionalized memoir.’ There are obvious continuities between the two volumes that reinforce its status as autobiography: the titles echo Tolstoy’s autobiographical trilogy *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth*, the protagonist of both works is called John, and the

⁷⁶ The various ‘lessons’ of *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) appeared in other forms over the previous six years, the first in 1997. Thus the autobiographical project of *Boyhood* and *Youth* and the writing of the *Elizabeth Costello* pieces were virtually contemporaneous.

⁷⁷ The most reliable source of biographical information appears to be the Nobel Prize website, which describes the material listed under biography as ‘autobiography/biography,’ suggesting that Coetzee had some hand in its selection. http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2003/coetzee-bio.html

setting in time and place is consistent with the life of the author. However, the most obvious similarity between the volumes is stylistic: the closed world of the third-person, present tense narration in both. As Attridge points out, this is Coetzee's chosen narrative mode for most of his recent fiction; it only becomes an issue therefore when one attempts to reconcile it with those qualities that seem to distinguish *Boyhood* and *Youth* as autobiography (140).

Coetzee comments in *Doubling the Point* that 'all writing is autobiography, everything that you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it' (17). While this emphasises autobiography's capacity for self-construction in the present as much as in the past, his choice of the third-person and present tense as the narrative mode for *Boyhood* and *Youth* immerses the reader in the world of the young Coetzee and closes off explicit reference to the writing self. According to Attridge, this produces 'a singular immediacy, one might almost say a depthlessness, in the recounting of events, but not the sense of intimacy we gain from confessional autobiography of a more orthodox sort' (140). In addition, what is lost in this choice of person and tense is the space for reflection and revaluation that one associates with confessional narrative, particularly in Coetzee's model of double thought. Attridge notes that this has the effect of 'avoiding the self-reflexivity that produces the problem, but in so doing he makes any attempt to relate the work to the genre of confession more difficult' (143).

Distance in *Boyhood* and *Youth* is established more by person than tense, as 'I' becomes 'he,' which accounts for the immediacy but lack of intimacy that Attridge describes. Philippe Lejeune anticipates such a reconfiguring of the rules in 'Autobiography in the Third Person,' but he describes the use of the third person under these circumstances as a figure and notes the risk to the autobiographer of

deploying such fictional strategies: 'The autobiographer finds himself confronted with the limitations and constraints of a real situation, and can neither deny the unity of his "I," nor go beyond his limitations. He can only pretend' (37). Coetzee's 1977 essay on Achterberg illustrates the attention he has devoted to the linguistic dimension of address and specifically to the ethics of first person address. According to Benveniste, whose writings inform Coetzee's position in the essay, the pronoun *I* (like *You*) is identifiable only 'by the instance of discourse that contains it and by that alone. It has no value except in the instance in which it is produced' (218). One of the distinguishing features of the third person according to Benveniste is its 'never being reflective of the instance of discourse' (222). Given the significance of address to Coetzee's engagement with confession, his choice of third person makes it more difficult to pinpoint the confessional form of the text. But *he* in Achterberg's poem is always 'watched over by a murderous warden-I' (85). If we are to read *Boyhood* and *Youth* as confessional texts, it might be necessary to counterfocalize through this 'warden-I'.⁷⁸

II

As I outlined in chapter one, confession for Coetzee is motivated by 'the idea of the truth' and his writings on confession circle around the issue of 'how to tell the truth in autobiography.' So it is hardly surprising that his assertion in *Doubling* that 'all writing is autobiography' allows him to reframe Attwell's question about autobiography as a question about telling the truth: 'The real question is: This massive autobiographical writing-enterprise that fills a life, this enterprise of self-

⁷⁸ I use the term counterfocalize here after Spivak's reading of *Disgrace* ('Ethics and Politics').

construction (shades of *Tristram Shandy*!) – does it yield only fictions? Or rather, among the fictions of the self, the versions of the self, that it yields, are there any that are truer than others? How do I know when I have the truth about myself?’ (17) So, if all writing is autobiography, it would appear that within this category there is a kind of writing that is not just part of the ‘enterprise of self-construction’ but true; it is this kind of writing that will be called confession in this chapter.

Instead of focusing on the verifiability of the facts recounted in autobiography to produce ‘truth’, Coetzee turns his attention to the process that shapes these facts: ‘Truth is something that comes in the process of writing, or comes from the process of writing’ (18). And part of this process in the case of autobiography is the matter of balancing the requirement ‘to respect the facts of your history’ with the reality that ‘all the facts are too many facts’ (18). So, adherence to the facts is eventually subordinated to other (fictional) strategies: ‘You choose the facts insofar as they fall in with your evolving purpose’ (18).

In the closing interview of the volume, which as I note above rehearses some of the material covered by *Boyhood* and *Youth*, this ‘evolving purpose’ is subject to greater scrutiny as autobiography is distinguished by the writer’s ‘privileged access’ to the facts and the deeply self-interested nature of the enterprise: ‘because tracing the line from past to present is such a self-interested enterprise (self-interested in every sense), selective vision, even a degree of blindness, become inevitable – blindness to what may be obvious to any passing observer’ (391). But while Coetzee accepts that a degree of blindness is inevitable, it does not seem to diminish the desire for truth. As Attridge points out: ‘the impossibility of the project of telling the truth to and for oneself is not a reason for its not being desirable; on the contrary, desire is at its most powerful in the face of the impossible’ (146). So, whatever truth we might expect

from the memoirs is both produced by the process of writing *and* impossible (because impeded by blindness and self-interest).

Coetzee's commitment to the idea of 'truth in autobiography' clearly emerges from his writings on confession and as I have argued from the outset, the impossibility or unavailability of the truth that structures his interest in confession does not deflect his pursuit of that truth nor should it allow his readers to set aside the form this takes as a critical dead end. In 'Double Thoughts' he makes it clear that he is unwilling to accept an infinitely deferred truth: 'the point I wish to argue is that the possibility of reading the truth 'behind' a true confession has implications peculiar to the genre of confession' (273). In fact, it seems to me that Coetzee's pursuit of 'truth in autobiography' (in his own work and in the writings of others) is a result of his identification of confession with autobiography. All writing may be autobiography, but the stakes are raised considerably when this writing is not just autobiography but confession. In this regard he has something in common with Lejeune, who as I note in chapter 4, admits that his strict adherence to the necessary identity of author and protagonist in autobiography emerged from his conflation of autobiography and confession. Lejeune's apparent softening of his definition of autobiography occurs by co-opting its more dogmatic elements to a definition of confession, allowing his policing of generic limits to persist.

Leigh Gilmore's work on autobiography across a range of books and essays provides a subtle twist on this idea, allowing for the power of confessional discourse within the field of autobiography but refusing the strict adherence to factual truth that usually accompanies it. In 'Policing Truth' she suggests that autobiography relies for its authority on its relation to the truth claim of confessional discourse rather than the verifiability of factual truth:

Authority in autobiography springs from its proximity to the truth claim of the confession, a discourse that insists upon the possibility of telling the whole truth while paradoxically frustrating that goal through the structural demands placed on how one confesses. 'Telling the truth' so totalizes the confession that it denotes the imperative to confess, the structure of that performance, and the grounds for its judgement. (55)

Gilmore goes on to argue for the significance of the border/limit case to the possibility of autobiographical agency, pointing to the productive constraints of inherited generic conventions and in particular the significance of the fictional to the autobiographical project of a writer like Jamaica Kincaid.⁷⁹ But understanding autobiography in terms of its narrative or fictional properties does not preclude the use of confessional motifs. Rather 'we can interpret autobiography as a representation, that is, a structuring of events, motives, and so on in an effort to position one's story within a discourse of truth and identity – in short, as an attempt to authorize the autobiography' (69).

It would appear that Coetzee sees no contradiction between his adherence to 'truth in autobiography' and his admission that one selects and orders the facts of one's life 'as they fall in with your evolving purpose' – this purpose being, presumably, to tell the truth. Nor does he find an irresolvable inconsistency in the description of *Boyhood* and *Youth* as 'fictionalized memoir.' The notion of selecting according to one's 'evolving purpose' sounds like a fictional strategy, but if one's evolving purpose is to construct a confessional narrative (or to confess) then this challenges the category of the fictional as much as the autobiographical.

⁷⁹ Gilmore's position here is comparable to Derrida's writing on testimony in *Demeure*, where the fictional becomes the condition of possibility of the testimonial. This has been taken up by Sanders in his understanding of the ambiguity of testimony before the TRC as a literary quality, which can in turn act on and expand the limits of the quasi-judicial setting that seems to structure it (see chapter 5 for a discussion of the refusal to provide testimony in *Disgrace*).

In *Boyhood* and *Youth* the facts that emerge about the young Coetzee's life are those that the young protagonist experienced as humiliating and shameful. They are therefore deeply held secrets, and while subject to the ironies that invariably insert themselves between the child/youth protagonist and the adult author, they are selected both for the confessional value they once held and in many cases for their enduring confessional value. In Coetzee's assessment of confessional texts he frequently finds that the desire behind the narrative is not a desire for truth but a desire to appear worse than one really is, or a desire to be a particular way; in Rousseau's words, 'if I am not better, at least I am different.' Insofar as *Boyhood* and *Youth* succeed in providing this version of Coetzee's life, they are examples of the highly self-conscious confessions that he analyses elsewhere. We might name this a fictional strategy, a plotting device as Brooks might describe it, but who is to say that there isn't some truth in the unflattering portrait he paints? Yet, it also seems to me that this is not the only version of the truth that emerges in the memoirs, or the only kind of confessional truth.

In the opening interview in *Doubling*, as he attempts to refine his ideas about autobiographical writing, Coetzee attempts to describe how truth is produced in the process of writing:

Writing reveals to you what you wanted to say in the first place. In fact, it sometimes constructs what you want or wanted to say. What it reveals (or asserts) may be quite different from what you thought (or half-thought) you wanted to say in the first place.

[...]

Writing, then, involves an interplay between the push into the future that takes you to the blank page in the first place, and a resistance. Part of that resistance is psychic, but part is also an automatism built into language: the tendency of words to call up other words, to fall into patterns that keep propagating themselves. Out of that interplay there emerges, if you are lucky, what you recognize or hope to recognize as the true. (18)

Selecting with one's evolving purpose does not tell the full story about how an autobiographical (or any) narrative is shaped, but the terms that Coetzee uses in this description seem to have particular implications for confessional narrative, which in its potential endlessness, constantly challenges the self-consciousness of selection with a kind of automatism, whether that is the automatism of the highly self-conscious double thought or automatism conceived in more pathological terms as a traumatic repetition (Sanders 184). This echoes the notorious machine-like operation of the confession that I discussed in relation to de Man and Derrida in chapter 1. While I have so far emphasised the process of selection in the confessional dimension of *Boyhood* and *Youth*, reading them with these comments in mind, there is a competing narrative at work that could also be termed confessional. This dimension of the *Boyhood* draws compulsively – whether consciously or unconsciously – on the discourse of apartheid and Coetzee's proximity to it. In the case of *Youth*, the most intensely confessional dimensions of the text unfold in a language of abjection. To contrast with the highly self-conscious deployment of confessional motifs generally in Coetzee's work, I will refer to this apparent automatism as 'heart-speech,' after his analysis of apartheid theorist Geoffrey Cronjé in 'The Mind of Apartheid'. Michael Neill finds a similar impulse at work in *Age of Iron*: 'The space where the truth is conventionally hidden is to be found deep within – in the region of the heart, as we like to say – and confession, supposedly the utterance of a contrite heart, is meant to reveal it' (16). Coetzee's writing on confession, with its consistent scepticism about language as a transparent window on the world, makes this view of confession as heart-speech seem naïve at best; at worst, it is yet another attempt to guarantee the truthfulness of confession through a kind of authentic, unmediated language, another embodiment of its self-interestedness. Yet, no more than Attridge's comment about

the desire for truth, the impossibility of achieving unmediated expression does not diminish the desire for it: 'the longing to achieve unqualified self-expression – to utter ("outer") oneself, as it were, utterly (to the outermost limit of utterance) – emerges as a recurrent motif in Coetzee's confessional writing; and it is no less intense for being recognised as chimerical' (Neill 24). Yet staging 'heart speech' in memoirs is particularly risky.

Given Coetzee's *repeated* engagement with confessional narrative, it is also this dimension of confession that lends itself to interpretation as the kind of traumatic repetition to which Sanders points in his reading of *Disgrace*. As I pointed out in the introduction, Coetzee's writings on confession self-consciously engage these apparently irreconcilable dimensions of confession, but in staging these tensions in the memoirs Coetzee is knowingly running the risk of acting out this traumatic repetition.

In what follows, I will propose that insofar as *Boyhood* and *Youth* stage the process of selecting the facts of Coetzee's life,⁸⁰ this process emerges as an echo of his comments on writing: an interplay between a highly self-conscious version of confessional narrative on the model of Rousseau and the persistent tendency of writing to resist and exceed this, an automatism that poses a particular threat to confessional narrative. I should emphasise that there is no reason to believe that the latter is any less self-consciously or artfully constructed than the former, even as it runs the risk of seeming otherwise. Rather, this struggle is staged through writing as the means of concealing and revealing, sealing off and exposing, separating and mixing.

⁸⁰ This process is staged within the texts but is also evident when the texts are compared with the historical record; my emphasis will generally be on the former, though not exclusively.

III

Boyhood is structured around a series of revelations of shameful childhood experiences: he betrays his mother's love, he is an 'irascible despot' at home, a Roman Catholic at school, he has never been beaten and will do anything to avoid physical punishment, at this remote frontier of the Cold War he prefers the Russians to the Americans, he is the only boy who experiences erotic desires and he *belongs to* the farm of his father's family. Each new chapter in the memoir recounts a different source of shame for John, the young protagonist, who as a result feels that he is distinguished from the other boys, from his family, and from the wider community by his habits and characteristics. His sense of being different extends across a whole range of experience, from the shame of being beaten at school – 'it will set him apart, and set the other boys against him too' (6) – to the lies that allow him to escape assembly – 'the separation of sheep from goats' (19) – to the ostracism that would result if his preference for the Russians were to be exposed: 'His loyalty to the Red Star sets him absolutely apart' (27). His fear of exposure leads him to devote his considerable resources to disguising his 'unnatural dispositions' beneath a veil of conformity. To this end, home life must be carefully separated from school life, and the inner life with its shameful desires and allegiances must be protected above all else. He resolves never to allow his mother access to his school life: 'He shares nothing with his mother. His life at school is kept a tight secret from her. She shall know nothing, he resolves, but what appears on his quarterly report, which shall be impeccable' (5). And in a relentless pattern, desire is inevitably followed by

concealment: 'Whatever he wants, whatever he likes, has sooner or later to be turned into a secret' (28).

But while secrecy is undoubtedly a survival strategy for young John, the sheer relentlessness of the pattern of disguising shameful truths suggests something more. That his wishes and desires must be kept secret confirms his suspicion that he is an unnatural and special boy, set apart from his peers by his very nature, but he does not consider that his desire is for secrecy and concealment first and foremost, such that he wants and likes 'whatever' ought to be concealed, nor that his desire might be for the effect of such secrecy and concealment: being set apart, being different. Such doubts do not occur to the protagonist of *Boyhood*, a child whose experiences of shame and being different are rather more typical than he would have imagined.

But one must imagine that the author's perspective is rather different, particularly if we consider the book's invitation to identify author and protagonist, albeit across a distance of some fifty years. The tightly sealed world of *Boyhood* leaves no space for the doubts of the author, an effect of the third-person, present tense narration focalized through the consciousness of the young boy. The kind of self-conscious reflection that he does *not* engage in is what Coetzee describes as 'double thought' and, as Attridge argues, the most significant effect of Coetzee's chosen narrative mode in *Boyhood* (and *Youth*) is to close off the space for such reflection, thus preventing the potentially endless double thought. But the sceptical reading of the protagonist's motives that I engage in above – suggesting that John's secrecy is somehow self-interested, and therefore itself a source of shame – is a characteristic of Coetzee's readings of confessional literature. In 'Double Thoughts' he describes the hyperconsciousness of Dostoevsky's Underground Man not as the desire for truth that he claims, but as 'a desire to *be a particular way*' (*Doubling* 280)

and in 'A Fiction of the Truth' he suggests that truth in Rousseau's *Confessions* 'is mere difference'. His earlier writings on Rousseau also indicate that shameful secrets, the markers of 'difference,' are an essential ingredient of Rousseau's narrative, a *confessional* narrative, as they constitute confessional currency: 'A desire whose value is kept secret increases in fascination and therefore in value... It is retained as a resource which, to the degree that it is mysterious, fascinating, illicit, shameful, can be exchanged for words in the economy of confession' ('Truth in Autobiography, 3). The singularity that the protagonist of *Boyhood* experiences with profound shame and alienation is, in fact, a requirement of the confessional genre.

As I have already indicated, the airtight fiction that the reader is invited to accept in *Boyhood*, not only forestalls double thought but renders the sceptical reading problematic. The memoir, after all, recreates the world of a child, and the shame and anxiety that he describes is vividly portrayed. So it is in this context that we must read the protagonist's sense of the weight of the secrets he keeps: 'So that is what is at stake' (7). Likewise, his insistence on his awareness of wrong-doing and culpability for certain actions: 'He is well aware of what a betrayal this is' (3); '[he] knows that he must bear part of the blame' (4). While the adult author may well feel that a young boy is less than culpable in the power struggle between his parents, and the reader may come away with the impression that the sentiments expressed seem subject to a gentle but unspoken irony, the narrative is explicitly structured as a confession. As Michiel Heyns points out in his analysis of *Boyhood*, 'Coetzee knows that the child is never innocent' (55). Indeed, such is the intensity of the boy's secrecy, shame and responsibility that *Boyhood* could well be characterised as 'anguished' – the word that Attwell and Coetzee agree on to describe autobiography in the mode of confession ('All Autobiography is *Autre*-biography' 216-17). At the

same time, explicit as the engagement with confession is, the narrative is structured in this way by the adult author and not by the protagonist who presumably bears the greatest burden of shame. It is, therefore, an ironic confession.

In spite of its relentless cataloguing of John's secrets, there are few moments of exposure or disclosure actually staged within the narrative and therefore few opportunities for reflection, revision or analysis by the young protagonist. But three notable moments of retrospection within the text point to the protagonist's growing awareness of the pitfalls of confession. (Though he wouldn't use this term; like catechism and communion, the other elements of Roman Catholicism, 'he does not even know what the words mean' [20]!). In the first example he recalls an incident shortly after moving to Worcester when he 'replied unthinkingly' to a boy who asked what he was doing (29). His reply – that he was 'thinking' – brought ridicule: 'From that mistake he has learned to be more prudent. Part of being prudent is always to tell less rather than more' (29). In other words, one must always retain confessional currency.

In the second example, after giving an account of a cricket game that he invents to entertain himself, he recounts a game of 'reckless intimacy' that he engineers with his school friends Greenberg and Goldstein, in which they must recount their earliest memories. He listens impatiently to one of them (the other refuses to take part) before disclosing his own story, 'For the point of the game is, of course, to allow him to recount his own first memory' (30). In his story he witnesses a dog being hit by a car from the window of their apartment in Johannesburg. It is 'a magnificent first memory,' but he doubts its veracity. Instead, he admits that there is another first memory, 'one that he trusts more fully but would never repeat' for fear of ridicule: dropping a sweet-wrapper out the window on a bus journey through the

Swartberg Pass (30-31). Recounted in the present tense like the rest of the memoir, this is a rare moment of reflection on the process that drives *Boyhood*. It is as if the three friends represent the totality of options available to the would-be confessant: recount the 'full, dull truth' (*Petersburg* 152), lie but tell a good story (John's choice), or remain silent. It emphasises that the process of recounting the past taking place in *Boyhood* might as easily be called memory selection or production as disclosure.

The final example is John's account of another incident that occurred in their early months in Worcester: he crushed his brother's hand in a mealie-grinder causing him to lose part of a finger. But this example is unusual in that the narrative clearly recounts the memory *as a memory*. The memory is triggered by a visit to Aunt Annie's house during which he and his brother play with a book press, taking turns to pin one another's arms in the bed of the press. Speculating on why they both stop short of actually crushing the other, he recounts the incident in Worcester in which he hurt his brother. Unusually, the episode is recounted in the past tense, thus allowing some space for reflection in a text that generally allows none: 'He has never apologized to his brother, nor has he ever been reproached with what he did. Nevertheless, the memory lies like a weight upon him, the memory of the soft resistance of flesh and bone, and then the grinding' (119). Given the opportunity for reflection and the avowed weight of the memory, the episode is a rare moment of confession staged within the text. In addition, it is framed by considerations of the book press and the memorializing activities of Aunt Annie, pointing to its status as a 'memory' and as confessional currency. But it also suggests that remembering is not a disinterested activity: the episode is recounted at the expense of his brother,

specifically a dismembering of his brother.⁸¹ This also positions the events in the history of writing about confessional literature, as de Man's 'Excuses (*Confessions*)' is preoccupied with the machine-like operation of the excuse/confession which always carries the threat of textual mutilation. Coetzee's chosen narrative mode foregoes the possibility of excuse, but the entire episode is carefully staged within this specifically confessional context.

So, while *Boyhood* operates within the discourse of autobiographical signification, and the discourse of confession in particular – a discourse of shame, secrets, concealment, disclosure and memory that is described in considerable detail in Coetzee's critical writings on the subject – it marks and yet resists the self-reflection and doubt that usually characterise this discourse. In other words, it draws on the signifying power and authority of the confession, and even marks out the dangers and threats posed by the confession, without taking an overtly confessional form. The result, as Attridge describes, is that the reader experiences *Boyhood* as a confessional text. But, as Gilmore notes, autobiography owes this power to its proximity to confessional discourse rather than a strict observation of the form.

Published five years later, *Youth*, opens at a later stage in the process of John's setting himself apart that had begun in *Boyhood*. Now a student, John is financially independent, working conscientiously to maintain his autonomy: 'He is proving something: that each man is an island; that you don't need parents' (3). Having removed himself from the day to day demands of family life, and eventually from the not inconsiderable demands of life in South Africa, he is in the process of reinventing himself as an artist, a move that demands the selection of a new set of parents and origins, literary mentors that he looks to initially for aesthetic guidance

⁸¹ For Irlam, the scene 'suggests that remembering and dismembering are uncannily analogous' (5).

but finally for some indication of the life one must lead in order to become an artist. If the protagonist of *Boyhood* is distinguished by harbouring unnatural and shameful desires, it is the distinction of the artist that is to set apart the protagonist of *Youth* and it would appear that anything and everything can be co-opted to this end. Although John's artistic ambitions remain largely untested and unfulfilled for the duration of the memoir, he has deduced from his chosen mentors that what is required to become an artist is experience, which he interprets as sexual experience, and so embarks on a series of affairs.

But while he awaits the transformative experience that he can in turn transform into great art, he once more seeks refuge in a life of outward conformity, each day donning a suit and making the journey to his desk at IBM with millions of other London workers. The separation of work life from inner life, the artistic life that he covets, is protected as fiercely in *Youth* as that between school life and home life in *Boyhood*. In addition, the passionate relationships that are to deliver him to the artistic life are inevitably humiliating encounters that bear more of the qualities of the unnatural and shameful secrets of *Boyhood* than the dark sensuality of Lawrence. Rather than capitalising on these experiences to transform them into poetry, as his mentors lead him to believe is the appropriate procedure, John instinctively wishes to minimise their circulation, hoping to 'close the book' or 'end the chapter' of one relationship after another. Nonetheless, the problem remains of 'how to fit it into the story of his life that he tells himself' (131). In *Youth*, as in *Boyhood*, this story becomes a confessional narrative even if its formal properties initially seem to resist this description. John's wish to 'close the book' or 'end the chapter' of various stories echoes the desire for absolution in 'Double Thoughts' but is more accurately seen as completion achieved through forgetting. Moreover, if the narrative focalization of

Youth is equally resistant to the intrusion of the older, wiser author, the fiction itself can accommodate the kind of self-reflection and self-deception that would have been out of place in *Boyhood* and consequently invites the sceptical reading typically directed at confessional texts – without allowing it to be directed at the author.

Accordingly, the question of responsibility and agency acquires a sharper focus in a narrative recounting the actions and behaviour of a twenty-something year old man. In one early episode John's relationship with a troubled, moody nurse named Jacqueline comes to an end after she reads some unflattering comments about herself in his diary. John admits to feeling bad about the circumstances of the break-up, but the real subject of the episode is his writing, as evidenced in his defensive comments when confronted by Jacqueline: "You are not going to stop me from writing!" he vows. It is a non sequitur, and he knows it' (8). What follows is typical of the memoir's preoccupation with the interdependence of life and art, specifically, the protagonist's sense that life is in the service of art, which becomes the subject of confession: 'But the real question is, what was his motive for writing what he wrote? Did he perhaps write it in order that she should read it?' (9)

Of all the shameful secrets that circulate in *Youth* – and there are many – writing is exemplary. In the form of a diary entry the secret of writing takes on a conventional enough form: a diary is considered a private document, by definition a repository of secrets. But perhaps the most shameful secret of writing is the desire of the author for a reader – a desire that is fundamentally at odds with the instinctive secrecy and privacy we find in John. In this sense, a diary may be no different to any other kind of writing: 'The question of what should be permitted to go into his diary and what kept forever shrouded goes to the heart of all his writing' (9). This

underlines the unreliability and self-interestedness of the diary format,⁸² or any autobiographical space, while also pointing to John's failure to acknowledge the power specific to an autobiographical space like the diary where the pact that operates between author and reader means that artistic truth is not the only issue at stake.

Nonetheless, while John courts experience to write about, he still clings to the possibility of holding things back, keeping part of his life 'shrouded'. In the immediate context of the memoir one might speculate that it signals a limited commitment to truth-telling and paradoxically a belief that the line between life and art can be drawn at will. While John speculates that the truth of the episode may be that he was simply too cowardly to explain himself to Jacqueline directly, he is finally reluctant to accept the diary entry, and the motives behind it, as *true*. Instead he insists that it is simply a fiction about himself, 'one of many possible fictions, true only in the sense that a work of art is true – true to itself, true to its own immanent aims' (10). Throughout *Youth* John attempts to use writing and art to justify his actions – though he seems to be as little convinced by this excuse as the reader (once more turning writing into a source of shame). Indeed, much of the irony of *Youth* is directed at John's conception of himself as a writer and artist. But his intimation that truth in autobiography, no more than truth in art, is subject to the fictional will eventually proceed beyond the realm of excuse, as his encounters with the writings of William Burchell in the British Museum lead him to speculate about creating a future work with the aura of truth.

While *Youth* describes the young Coetzee's pursuit of experience in the name of art, and the secrecy about the humiliating encounters this leads to, it cannot be said

⁸² Made explicit in the way the episode echoes accounts of diary-keeping in the Tolstoy household, as described in 'Double Thoughts' (419-20n10).

to vindicate these actions. Instead, in the face of the young writer's attempts to construct and live-out a specific narrative, there is a constant slippage between 'what should be permitted to go into his diary and what kept forever shrouded' (9). In its catalogue of humiliation, shame and culpability *Youth* adheres strongly to the confessional paradigm of disclosing shameful truths, unflattering self-examination and avowing wrong-doing. The problem for the reader is that the evidence of J. M. Coetzee's biography shows that this is no less an attempt to construct a specific narrative, in this case a confessional narrative, by omitting biographical information (like his marriage in 1963, listed on the Nobel Prize webpage) that does not fit into this version of his life.

So without adopting an overtly confessional style, that is, without staging a first person address to a confessor avowing past wrongs, both *Boyhood* and *Youth* make a direct claim to be read as autobiographical texts and explicitly invoke the language and motifs of confessional discourse. Because the texts do not take an overtly confessional form, they avoid the double thought that Coetzee finds characteristic of confessional narrative and the perverse relish with which famous confessants recount their misdemeanours. And while the potentially endless self-examination of the confession is staged as a possibility, the narratives themselves contain and limit the disclosures. The respective protagonists of both texts – their fictional frames demand that we respond differently to both – often recognise their actions and desires as shameful or wrong, attempt to conceal them to avoid the shame of exposure and sometimes express regret or the intention to amend their behaviour. Their responses to other actions and desires go unremarked, though if one attempts to counter-focalize through the author one must imagine that the cost of revealing seemingly shameful details of his early life is very high indeed. Both texts'

preoccupation with the singularity of the protagonist – as an ‘unnatural’ boy or as an artist – invokes the confessional paradigm established by Rousseau’s claim that ‘if I am not better, at least I am different.’ This, together with their insistent dwelling on shameful actions and desires, means that they run the risk of appearing to privilege shame and difference to enhance their confessional currency and hence the value of the narrative.

But the emergence of these texts in the immediate post-apartheid period suggests that there is more at stake in asserting one’s difference and the shame of one’s actions and desires than fascinating the reader with a series of disclosures. In their tendency to document the specificities of a childhood and youth in a particular place and at a particular time – intensified in the preoccupation with remembering in *Boyhood* and the almost inadvertent testimony of *Youth* – both texts could also be described as autobiography in the mode of memoir. I will demonstrate how the elements of confession and memoir act together in these texts; the memoir creates the context in which these texts can be understood as confessional. The memoir dimension of these texts is an act of affiliation with a history and a community that facilitates the confessional dimension of the text; this act of affiliation, however, could only take place in the context of the greater project of confession and reconciliation that was taking place in South Africa in this period.

IV

Although the preoccupation with the singular status of the protagonist in *Boyhood* is in obvious dialogue with Rousseau, it is also articulated within the metaphors of the

unfolding political doctrine of apartheid. This has the effect of bringing the claim of the autobiographical subject to singularity into direct dialogue with his representativeness, and in a sense, bringing the confessional and the memoir-like aspects of the autobiography into dialogue. The abiding impression created in *Boyhood* is of a young boy *attempting* to lead a private and rigidly compartmentalised life, his consciousness taking us through the apparently discrete spaces of home, school and farm. By the same token, there is an inescapably public dimension to the protagonist's insistence on discrete spaces: the separation of family life and school life means that he can continue to be part of the English-language stream at school, even though he has an Afrikaans name and family. His family's choices not to speak Afrikaans or belong to a Reformed Church mark them as 'unnatural' in the eyes of their son: 'He comes from an unnatural and shameful family in which not only are children not beaten but older people are addressed by their first names and no one goes to church and shoes are worn every day (6)'.⁸³ Such habits set them apart from their contemporaries in Worcester at precisely the moment in South African history when the state sought to identify its interests with those of the Afrikaner *volk* and attempted to complete this identification by pursuing policies of racial and cultural separation or *apartheid*. *Boyhood* opens with a description of the suburban planning of which the Coetzee's home at Poplar Avenue is part:

All the houses on the estate are new and identical. They are set in large plots of red clay earth where nothing grows, separated by wire fences. In each back yard stands a small block consisting of a room and a lavatory. Though they have no servant, they refer to these as 'the servant's room' and the 'servant's lavatory.' They use the servant's room to store things in: newspapers, empty bottles, a broken chair, an old coir mattress. (1)

⁸³ In the final interview in *Doubling* (a precursor to the memoirs) Coetzee describes his parents' place in society: 'People of his parents' kind are thundered at from the pulpit as *volksverraaiers*, traitors to the people. The truth is, his parents aren't traitors, they aren't even particularly deracinated; they are merely, to their eternal credit, indifferent to the *volk* and its fate' (*Doubling* 393).

That 'the servant's room' is integral to South African suburban architecture of this period is hardly surprising; the fact that the Coetzee's don't have a servant (no doubt for economic reasons) is an interesting early indication of the way the family could inhabit the space of the apartheid system without acting out all of its practices.

Young John's lies at school similarly take on a public significance, as his claim to be a Catholic removes him from the religious and nationalist fervour of assembly. He experiences this separation as tenuous, based on a *lie*, and therefore vulnerable to exposure. He feels that he constantly runs the risk of being transferred into the Afrikaans stream at school and thereby assimilated into the *volk*, a prospect that fills him with horror. In this way the desire of the protagonist to be different, to distinguish himself from his peers – particularly those who speak Afrikaans – comes to take on the stance both of an unwitting political oppositionality and perhaps an equally unwitting participation in the dominant political discourse of the period.

As I have shown, each of John's actions and desires leads to his sense of himself as different from his peers. This ranges from being set apart by shameful actions and secrets – his aversion to being beaten, his unnatural family, the red mattress that he takes on the scouting trip – to the distinction of his preference for the Russians ('It can have you ostracized' [28]) and the stirrings of erotic desire: 'Of all the secrets that set him apart, this may in the end be the worst. Among all these boys he is the only one in whom this dark erotic current runs; among all this innocence and normality, he is the only one who desires' (57). This is all deeply ironic, of course, John's sense of his own difference marks him out as typical. But as his sense of being set apart is intensified in his impression of being singled out and selected for an important task, one becomes conscious of *Boyhood* as *Kunslterroman* which after all

operates on the basis of being different and exceptional. After the drowning incident at the scout camp, he thinks he has been saved for a reason: 'From that day onward he knows there is something special about him. He should have died but he did not. Despite his unworthiness, he has been given a second life. He was dead but is alive' (17). Because of his frequent colds 'He is convinced that he is different, special' (108) and this is encouraged by his grandaunt's assertions that he is a special boy: 'But what kind of special? No one ever says' (165). His apparent election by Aunt Annie, who had after all assumed the burden of publishing and disseminating her father's book, leads to the enormous sense of responsibility described in the closing lines: 'He alone is left to do the thinking. How will he keep it all in his head, all the books, all the people, all the stories? And if he does not remember them, who will?' (166) But this onerous responsibility represents a subtle shift in the kind of 'difference' that is at stake: he is distinguished by the responsibility, but the essence of the responsibility to remember is about forming links and establishing continuities between people, places and things that he had previously thought distant from himself.

A similar dynamic is evident in his discussion of the family farms. He describes the farms in the same terms of separation that he uses for all desired places and goods: 'That is what sets him apart: the two farms behind him, his mother's farm, his father's farm, and the stories of those farms. Through the farms he is rooted in the past; through the farms he has substance' (22). The gentle irony that is frequently directed at young John's self-importance is evident in this passage, but it is also suggestive of the cultural work that we might say *Boyhood* is doing. John is attempting to negotiate his ties to the world around him, mediated through the thing that he feels most strongly about – the farm: 'there is no place on earth he loves more

or can imagine loving more' (79). The intensity and singularity of this attachment distinguishes him from his peers and links him not just with the farm but, through it, with the past and with the land. It also, somewhat inconveniently, connects him to his father's family and their Afrikaans-speaking, servant-keeping, school-beating ways, all of which is a source of discomfort and embarrassment to him but which he can by and large accommodate while he is on the farm. He wonders if there is a way of living in the Karoo 'without belonging to a family' (91) – the kind of fantasy that would not be out of place in *Heart* or *Michael K*. But it is precisely this concept of *belonging* that the farm provides, as he confides that '*I belong on the farm*' and, indeed, '*to the farm*' (though the farm never belongs to him) (96). So desire for the farm is a way of being different, of asserting his agency, but his connection to the farm is, finally, something that he has not in fact chosen and that he cannot control: 'Belonging to the farm is his secret fate, a fate he was born into but embraces gladly' (96).

But just as the farm brings with it the inconvenience of a family, the narrative of belonging-to-the-farm signals an affiliation to the wider family of the Afrikaner *volk*, precisely the group that he is at pains to assert his distance from. Like belonging to the farm or the family, it is not something he has chosen, but neither is it something he wishes to embrace, or even tolerate. In *White Writing* Coetzee explores the ideological baggage of the South African farm novel, the *plaasroman*, particularly the farm as the space through which attachment to the land and to South Africa is mediated. In her essay on *Boyhood*, Jennifer Wenzel illustrates how this ideological baggage also has some currency in the context of post-apartheid anxieties about land reform. She argues that Coetzee appropriates 'for his own life story some of the tropes of Afrikaner relationships to land that he has criticized in his earlier work'

(92), but that he deploys these tropes to a particular end: 'During his yearly enactment of the pastoral promise, the return to the land, the boy also begins to recognize the political imperative of the return of the land' (108). While Wenzel does not explicitly invoke the confessional dimension of *Boyhood*, her efforts to situate this post-apartheid memoir in the context of the tradition of the *plaasroman* and Coetzee's critical engagement with it leads her to describe the memoir as 'beginning a complex process of "reconciliation" with his personal, professional, and national history' (111).

Wenzel's reading of the pastoral dimension of *Boyhood*'s treatment of the farm and the land allows us to see the protagonist as embedded in the culture rather than separate from it, in spite of his insistence to the contrary. This embeddedness is also evident in the memoir's treatment of Afrikaans. The boy rejects the language, relieved that he is 'saved from having to talk like that, like a whipped slave' (49) and he lives in fear of being co-opted into the Afrikaans stream at school. Yet, his time on the farm has equipped him to speak the language effortlessly: 'When he speaks Afrikaans all the complications of life seem suddenly to fall away. Afrikaans is like a ghostly envelope that accompanies him everywhere, that he is free to slip into, becoming at once another person, simpler, gayer, lighter in his tread' (125).⁸⁴ But just as he longs for the connection to the Karoo without the familial ties, the Afrikaans language is too closely identified with 'Afrikaners'. If speaking the language is characterised as an enabling disguise, he experiences the company of Afrikaans-speakers and his association with them as a loss of privacy. He finds in Afrikaner

⁸⁴ Earlier he describes it in terms of transparency that one rarely associates with language in Coetzee; language in this case has the kind of immediacy that is usually the subject of fantasy: 'As he spoke, he forgot what language he was speaking: thoughts simply turned to words within him, transparent words' (94).

boys 'an animal indifference to privacy'; their company 'is like being sent to prison, to a life without privacy. He cannot live without privacy. If he were Afrikaans he would have to live every minute of every day and night in the company of others. It is a prospect he cannot bear' (126). While this is in keeping with the boy's squeamishness about physical impropriety elsewhere in the memoir (being beaten, not wearing shoes, going naked), it also suggests that loss of privacy is more than a physical violation; collective identity itself is experienced by the boy as a loss of privacy.

Of course, the very form that Coetzee is operating in in *Boyhood* necessitates a certain loss of privacy. Indeed, as I have shown, one of the ways in which it conforms most closely to the confessional model of autobiography is its privileging of the secret and the private, thus enhancing the value and power of the narrative that appears to violate them. In its legal or religious guise confession is public insofar as it presupposes a community in which to be rehabilitated. But what is less clear is how the confessional dimension of *Boyhood* functions alongside its preoccupations with the boy's aversion to and immersion in collective identity, also conceived of as a loss of privacy, and determined by the immediate context of post-apartheid South Africa. I would like to suggest that the loss of privacy implicit in the confessional narrative and the loss of privacy evident in collective identity can both be seen as acts of strategic affiliation. In *Complicities*, Sanders helps us to understand the ethics of such an act of affiliation:

What makes apartheid exemplary for a study of the intellectual and complicity is the paradox that, while supporters disavowed or sought to limit foldedness with the other, opponents, though striving to minimize acting-in-complicity with the agents of apartheid and its policies, tended to acknowledge, affirm, and generalize responsibility-in-complicity. (12)

Later, emphasising the extent to which apartheid 'decreed apartness' and 'disavowed relation' (189, 190), he notes that:

If such a disavowal of relation is what tends toward support for apartheid, it is an acknowledgement of this complicity and its disavowal at the heart of apartheid that is the essential starting point of any opposition to apartheid. Without it there would be no desire, no freeing of desire, for things to be any different. (190)

In 'Subjectivities of Whiteness' Sarah Nuttall finds that the emphasis in *Boyhood* on secrecy, lying, privacy and setting apart is continuous with the way in which white identity is figured in terms of visibility and invisibility across a range of autobiographical texts, during and after the apartheid period. For Nuttall, 'the exaltation of the self's singularity is in part a shielding of the self from a collective culture of conformity, the culture of whiteness' (132). Nuttall sees the privileging of privacy as a renunciation of collective identity. Irlam too finds in the memoir a shuddering away from 'the odious collective embrace of South African racism' (10). But I believe that at the level of form (confession) and language (the language of apartheid) there is a tacit and strategic acknowledgement of collective identity that coexists with this shuddering away from familial and community relations.

While the emphasis on the singularity of the protagonist ties *Boyhood* to confessional narrative and distances him from the collective culture of whiteness described by Nuttall, it also partakes of the language of separation and apartness characteristic of apartheid discourse and apartheid thinking. For Irlam, *Boyhood* is 'saturated by the poetics of apartheid, and the protocols of *setting apart*' (10). Wenzel seems to read this as continuous with Coetzee's appropriation of the tropes of the *plaasroman*; she describes his use of the language of apartheid discourse as 'scandalous' and notes that it could only have been published after 1994. But,

Coetzee's 1991 essay on Geoffrey Cronjé sets out the terms of this discussion very clearly. In it Coetzee describes the language of apartness – 'the word *anders* (different), *eie* (own/unique), *apart* (apart)' (16) – as forming one of the semantic poles of Cronjé's thought (the other pole being the language of mixture) ('The Mind of Apartheid'). By tracing the language and metaphors of apartness and mixture in 'the heart speech and autobiography' of one of the most notorious advocates of a policy of separation, Coetzee hopes to come close to the essence of what he calls 'apartheid thinking' – that aspect of apartheid that is not reducible to economic and political self-interest, a kind of pathological racism for which historians struggle to account. Coetzee's subject is not autobiography or confession conceived as the highly self-conscious art in 'Double Thoughts'; his conception of autobiography and confession in this essay is of an uncensored, blind, delirious and mad discourse where the pathology of Cronjé's racism can be read. And his reading of the obsessive meditation on blood-mixing does indeed allow the madness to emerge. Needless to say, I do not propose that Coetzee's text is susceptible to a similar reading but the Cronjé essay reminds us, if it were necessary, that Coetzee uses words 'with the full freight of their history behind them' (Coetzee, 'Speaking in Tongues'). There is no doubt that the author intends to invoke the full history of the word *apart* in South Africa, but to what end?⁸⁵

Coetzee's essay on Cronjé is fascinating for many reasons, among them his description of apartheid as a counterattack on desire, specifically the desire for mixed race relations, his attempt to supplement historical accounts of apartheid as motivated solely by rational self-interest by focusing on the irrationality and madness evident in

⁸⁵ Irlam invokes this history with reference to Derrida's 'Racism's Last Word' and the response by Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon which emphasises the disavowal of the term apartheid within official discourse as early as the 1950s.

the work of Cronjé, and his efforts to describe how the madness of Cronjé, what he calls 'apartheid thinking,' is transmitted through the social body and comes to act with the undeniable economic self-interest that sustained the system. In a sense, it is a version of the latter question that is posed in *Boyhood* (and to some extent in *Youth*): given the social and political climate in South Africa in the 1950s, how did he come to act the way he did? Were he and his family somehow immune to the madness or does it manifest itself in other ways?

Boyhood describes the young Coetzee's anxiety and revulsion at the policies of separation that were taking place around him, but it is also an attempt to understand his position with regard to the public world around him. In its revelation of his (shameful) erotic response to other boys, especially coloured boys, it suggests that he escaped some indoctrination; in his repetition of racist attitudes towards the 'natives', it is, as Attridge says, 'a confession of having been, without realizing it, all too "normal"' (150). What I am claiming here is a particular ethical significance for this assertion of unexceptional normality – representativeness – particularly as it emerges in the language of apartheid discourse. I would suggest that Coetzee's repeated use of the term *apart* and the motif of separation in *Boyhood* describes his attempt to assert his distance from the policies of apartheid as they were taking shape in those years but, more importantly, it is an indication of the potency and virulence of the language and concept of setting apart itself. As Sanders has demonstrated in his analysis of South African intellectuals, it was not sufficient to assert distance from a policy of enforced separation; what was necessary was a refusal of the logic of separation. This is what emerges in *Boyhood*.

What I am calling a strategic affiliation and refusal of the logic of separation acquires its ethical significance in the context in which *Boyhood* was written – the

years immediately following the first democratic elections in South Africa. As I pointed out in chapter 5, the TRC operated under very specific restrictions and guidelines. The period covered by *Boyhood* and the world it describes would not have fallen within its remit. As Attridge notes, Coetzee's confession in the third person and the present tense would not have been a satisfactory confession under the rules of the commission (142-43). But the climate created by the TRC nonetheless allows us to read *Boyhood* as a confession of sorts. The logic of the fiction of *Boyhood*, focalized exclusively through the consciousness of the young Coetzee, effaces this context. By demonstrating a way to restore this context, I hope to have made the overall confessional dimension of the text more apparent.

V

To a greater extent than its predecessor *Youth* points to the successful writing career to come. The period covered by the memoir could be described as a period of waiting, what Coetzee has described in an interview as 'a *youth* treading water,' and at its gloomy conclusion the protagonist has no indication of the imminent changes of continent and career that would deliver him from the misery of life in London as a computer programmer ('All Autobiography' 216). In spite of his perceived artistic failures, the informed reader sees the seeds of *Dusklands* in his enthusiasm for South African travel narratives in the British Library and his stated intention to write a book in the style of William Burchell's *Travels in Southern Africa*. What he has in mind is not a history, or a forgery, but a book with the 'aura of truth.' Writing such a book he decides is not a question of remembering facts, but of forgetting them: 'he will need to know less than he knows now; he will need to forget things. Yet before he can

forget he will have to know what to forget; before he can know less he will have to know more. Where will he find what he needs to know?' (139)

So, as in *Boyhood*, selection is a central preoccupation of *Youth*. Forgetting as a principle of selection is the end point of John's aesthetic education, pointing as it does beyond the period covered by the memoir to his imminent success as a novelist. As an indication of the process that has lent 'the aura of truth' to the memoir itself, the notion of forgetting is also instructive in reading *Youth* as a highly selective account of these years in the young Coetzee's life. I have already shown that the events recounted in the memoir have been selected on the basis of their shamefulness – 'a shameful desire is a valuable desire' in the economy of confession ('Double Thoughts' 272) – suggesting that much has been 'forgotten' (selected, shaped, omitted) to craft this confessional narrative. The notion that a confessional narrative can be constructed by omission rather than by inclusion is perhaps counter-intuitive, contradicting the idea of confession as full disclosure. But the dynamic of disclosure and concealment is central to the memoir's concern with the relationship between life and art, specifically the power available to the artist or writer to transform one into the other, or rather to control the transformation of one into the other. While there is an undeniable confessional dimension to *Youth*, the question that is posed throughout is to what extent the narrator *and the author* are confessing freely?

This question emerges from the tension in *Youth* between competing ideas of the relationship between life and art, and specifically writing as something that mediates between the two. The discussion is constructed between two extreme and mutually exclusive notions of autobiography and autobiographical writing. On the one hand, these are the highly self-conscious, self-interested fictions-of-the-self that are the subject of 'Double Thoughts' and most of Coetzee's writings on and

engagement with confessional narrative. And on the other, there is what I have referred to as 'heart-speech'; this is confession conceived as unmediated and unformed access to the 'true' thoughts of the confessant.⁸⁶ For the purpose of the chapter, I will attempt to describe this debate in terms of confessional agency. In these terms, the former, being highly self-conscious and self-aware, demonstrates the qualities that we associate with a free agent, and can be seen in the protagonist's strategic self-invention and highly selective disclosure. The seemingly unguarded and uncensored nature of the latter, however, implies a compulsive and unconscious degree of disclosure that hints at an absence of agency. Coetzee's writings on confessional narrative bring this opposition into question: in his discussion of Dostoevsky's *Underground Man*, for example, self-consciousness itself becomes a kind of pathology, and it is a short step from this to de Man's notion of the machine-like production of confessions, excuses and guilt, that I discuss in chapter 1. Similarly, the apparently unmediated compulsiveness of 'heart-speech,' of madness, is potentially another way of staging sincerity and authenticity, the guarantee of a truthful confession.

In the course of the memoir John suggests that self-writing of the kind that might go into a diary produces fiction, 'one of many possible fictions, true only in the sense that a work of art is true, true to itself, true to its own immanent aims' (10). He claims throughout the memoir to pursue experience in order to write, eschewing moral criteria in favour of aesthetic criteria in judging his actions. Writing above all else is bound up with that dimension of *Youth* that we associate with the long

⁸⁶ The term heart-speech comes from the essay on Cronjé (*Giving Offense* 164). On Cronjé's writings, Coetzee notes: 'I treat them as a confession: not as a repentant confession – far from it – but as a confession of belief all the more revealing for being full of ignorance and madness' (3). This indicates an understanding of confession as declaration of belief, but the terms in which Coetzee goes on to describe Cronjé's writings suggest a kind of uncensored expression that Neill and Vermeulen ('Dogged Silences'), for example, associate with confession.

tradition of confessional literature that Coetzee engages elsewhere. Writing is that part of his life that singles him out from other people and that is conducted in secret. His job as a computer programmer is merely a disguise: 'surely behind so eminently respectable a shield, in private, in secrecy, he will be able to go on with the work of transmuting experience into art, the work for which he was brought into the world' (44). Writing leads to dubious actions and 'ignoble emotions' and, in the final analysis of the memoir, his great failure. But eventually, the pursuit of experience in order to write comes to seem like an excuse and he finds this to be an intolerable position:

It is a justification that does not for a moment convince him. It is sophistry, that is all, contemptible sophistry. And if he is further going to claim that, just as sleeping with Astrid and her teddy-bear was getting to know moral squalor, so telling self-justifying lies to oneself is getting to know intellectual squalor at first hand, then the sophistry will only become more contemptible. There is nothing to be said for it; nor, to be ruthlessly honest, is there anything to be said for its having nothing to be said for it. As for ruthless honesty, ruthless honesty is not a hard trick to learn. On the contrary, it is the easiest thing in the world. As a poisonous toad is not poison to itself, so one soon develops a hard skin against one's own honesty. Death to reason, death to talk! All that matters is doing the right thing, whether for the right reason or the wrong reason or no reason at all. (164-65)

He reiterates this point a couple of lines later: 'So he is at an impasse: he would rather be bad than boring, has no respect for a person that would rather be bad than boring, and no respect either for the cleverness of being able to put his dilemma neatly into words' (165). Such self-cancelling logic is almost a parody of the spiralling self-consciousness of double thought that Coetzee finds in confessional narratives: it is unproductive, potentially endless, self-deceived and, ultimately, only serves the interests of the confessional narrative itself. In this dead end of self-consciousness one hears echoes of Dostoevsky's *Underground Man*, though Coetzee's translation of Emants' *A Posthumous Confession* (1975), which I discussed in chapter 2, brings us

closer to the world of *Youth* in time and, I believe, in spirit. While none of John's actions in *Youth* compare with the unsympathetic Termeer, similarities emerge in the both books' adherence to a Rousseauian confessionism evident in the desire of the protagonists to 'be a particular way' and to transform this into writing. Like John, Termeer claims to be an exceptional individual, willing to undergo some kind of transformative experience, and his own most pitiless judge. And this is all qualified by acute self-awareness: 'Under the illusion that all the peculiarities setting me apart from the great multitude, and everything inexpressible which I felt so painfully within me, would eventually be revealed as the finer impressionability of an artist, I had made my hero a faithful counterfeit of myself. The story had become an unadorned revelation of my most secret feelings' (54-55). But all of this is the stuff of Termeer's first confession; his second confession – that he murdered his wife – is figured as a burning secret that cannot be concealed, and it is in this regard that his narrative comes to seem quite mad, what Coetzee refers to in the introduction as 'Termeer's gabble.' Termeer's 'white hot writing,' as Coetzee calls it, resembles the idea of heart speech, even if it is finally part of the narrative performance.

While Termeer obsessively identifies with the books and plays he encounters, John frequently dwells on the likelihood that aspects of works he admires originated in incidents in the lives of their authors, leading him to conclude that he must live a life worthy of being transformed into art. In the case of Pound and Eliot he describes this connection as one of sacrificing life for the sake of art (20) and, quoting Eliot, notes that 'Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion but an escape from emotion' (*Youth* 61). His thoughts on Eliot elicit the admission that he 'has a horror of spilling mere emotion onto the page. Once it has begun to spill out he would not know how to stop it. It would be like severing an artery and watching one's lifeblood gush out'

(61). This image of writing as spilling brings to mind the 'heart-speech' that leaks and flows in Cronjé's writings. Instead, what John has to aim for is something much more controlled. His single account of daring to show his writing in public describes a Poetry Society meeting where he reads a poem ending with the words 'the furious waves of my incontinence'(73). This is hilariously appraised an 'unfortunate' word-choice by a fellow poet but it stages his struggle to accommodate life and experience in his writing in a manner which is restrained, controlled and disinterested in the way that Pound and Eliot advocate.

The overstatement of the first example and the comedy of the second reinforce the impression that John's writing is an object of ridicule in *Youth*, but in the abject terms on which they draw, they invite comparison with those episodes in the memoir which use similar language to utterly different ends: John's affairs with Sarah and Marianne. Sarah is a girlfriend in Cape Town who becomes pregnant and arranges to have an abortion, asking only that John accompany her and provide a place to stay in the days immediately afterwards. He feels utterly incompetent throughout the episode, merely following the arrangements she has made and proving to be quite useless as a nurse: 'It is merely a penance, a stupid and ineffectual penance' (35). But even though he doesn't witness it, he is fascinated by the physical details of the abortion. The entire scene is elaborated in a language of 'spillage'. His imagination is filled with ideas of 'bloody pads and whatever else there is' (34) and 'the bloody towels and sheets' (35). The images of flow and spillage continue afterwards as he imagines 'that pod of flesh, that rubbery manikin' being disposed of through the sewers and currents of the city. 'He is out of his depth,' he tells us, as the foetus blends with the image of a drowning cabin-boy (36).

The unfortunate deflowering of Marianne occurs within a similar lexicon of abjection as she bleeds profusely, to John's horror: 'There is blood on the sheets, blood all over his body. They have been – the image comes to him distastefully – wallowing in blood like pigs' (129). His humiliation is intensified when she seeks the help of the Malawian babysitter who also lives in the house, as he has the impression of being judged and found wanting by a community of women.

In a forthcoming essay Elleke Boehmer attributes John's squeamishness about women and their bodies, as evidenced in the abject language in which these scenes are described, to an underlying misogyny in Coetzee's recent work. The squeamishness and discomfort are undeniable, but it seems to me that the charge of misogyny does not take into account the context of Coetzee's engagement with confessional discourse in general and the terms of the confessional dimension of *Youth* in particular.

The self-laceration of John aside, these scenes are among the most overtly confessional in *Youth*. They reveal deeply private and intimate details of sexual relationships which consistently reflect badly on the protagonist, demonstrating his immaturity in the world of adult sexual relations. But immaturity is no excuse; the incidents are also examples of his casual and selfish treatment of women which, however inadvertently, lead to pain and suffering on their part. In formal terms, these episodes are also quintessentially confessional. Insofar as they have to do with sex, they contribute to Foucault's discourse of sexuality. They are presented to the reader as deeply shameful secrets, therefore intensifying the difficulty of the obstacles that must be overcome in revealing them, thus enhancing their status as confessional currency.

But the confessional currency of the encounters is also increased by the protagonist's apparent resistance to sharing the stories. While these episodes are among the most powerful confessional passages in the memoir, they are marked by a particular anxiety about story-telling. This is in keeping with the rhetoric of the confessional form, which is structured around enhancing the confessional value of the revelation, but it seems to me that in these episodes John's anxiety coincides with those moments in the memoir when we find his control over how stories circulate begin to slip. In all of the encounters with women in the novel, we find John expressing some anxiety about how the particular episode can be assimilated to the story of his life he would like to tell – this is true of his relationship with Jacqueline, Sarah, Astrid and Marianne. In the case of Jacqueline, the story of their relationship that he records in his diary is shown not only to be untrustworthy but to have far-reaching consequences for the relationship itself. In other words, the story is not the innocent fiction he would like to believe. The encounter with Astrid and her teddy-bear may have been 'getting to know moral squalor' but he dismisses the value of this narrative or any narrative that attempts to excuse or justify it (164).

His ineffective role in helping Sarah through the trauma of an abortion in Cape Town is particularly humiliating given her apparent cool-headed approach: 'As for him, he has emerged ignominiously, he cannot deny it. What help he has given her has been faint-hearted and, worse, incompetent. He prays she will never tell the story to anyone' (35). But in a more general sense the episode demonstrates how little control he exercises over the events he describes. He does not presume to speak for Sarah, but wonders about how she experiences the events: 'Is it like a sickness, he wonders to himself, from which she is now in the process of recuperating, or is it like an amputation, from which one never recovers' (36). The language he uses to

describe the events seems to be bound up with its potential endlessness. He accurately raises the prospect that what both he and Sarah experience is a form of mourning, but it appears that it is not in their power to control: '*Weep, weep!* cries the cabin-boy, who will not sink and will not be stilled' (36).

If mourning defeats his control of the story of Sarah's abortion, it is guilt and shame that prevent him from putting the awkward sexual encounter with Marianne behind him. He focuses initially on the abject detail of the scene: 'The unsettling lovemaking, the whispering women, the bloody sheets, the stained mattress: he would like to put the whole shameful business behind him, close the book on it' (130). But he has a two-pronged strategy for dealing with the story, 'what to make of the episode, how to fit it into the story of his life that he tells himself' (130) – to turn his attention inward thereby minimising its circulation: 'In the absence of anyone to administer the slap, he has no doubt that he will gnaw away at himself. *Agenbyte of inwit*. Let that be his contract then, with the gods: he will punish himself, and in return will hope that the story of his caddish behaviour will not get out' (130). In this version, guilt is a way of controlling the events, a way of experiencing them that he can accommodate to the story he tells himself, meanwhile limiting the circulation of that story. The allusion to Stephen Dedalus' self-reproach in *Ulysses* drives this home. But he thinks that it matters little if the story does get out as South Africa – where Marianne and his cousin might recount the tale – and London are worlds apart: 'He belongs to two worlds tightly sealed from each other' (130). But just as the story cannot easily be concealed within himself, it is not in his power to maintain the separate spheres of London and South Africa. His cousin writes a letter admonishing him for his bad treatment of her friend, thus collapsing the psychic and physical separation he tries to enforce. His assurance to himself that 'At least the episode is

closed, closed off, consigned to the past, sealed away in memory' must be qualified: 'But that is not true, not quite' (131). His story is unsettled by the intrusion of a counter-narrative that defeats his efforts at 'closing off' and 'sealing away'.

In these phrases one can detect echoes of David Lurie's obsessive use of the perfective aspect in *Disgrace*. Sanders points to the perfective as a grammatical undermining of the desire for completion and transformation, a marker of the novel's failed attempts at 'coming to terms with the past *in ways that render it simply past*' (*Ambiguities* 180-181). Instead Sanders emphasises traumatic repetition as a way of living with the past.

But the language that is used to describe John's failure of control and psychic separation also echoes Coetzee's comments about writing in his 1977 essay on Achterberg's 'Ballade van de gasfitter.' Coetzee points out that the significance of the occupation of 'gasfitter' in the poem relies on a pun on the Dutch *dichten*, which means both to seal a hole and to compose a poem: 'Around the familiar *dichten* pun the whole poem revolves: the gasfitter sealing off leaks is also the poet at work' (73).⁸⁷ The gasfitter's role in the poem involves maintaining the distinct hemispheres of underground gas and overworld city: 'The craft of the gasfitter is the craft of *dichten*' (73).

The connection between Coetzee's repeated use of the motif of sealing in *Youth* with the concerns of Achterberg's gasfitter becomes more apparent when one considers that the same pun exists in Afrikaans: the verb *dig* means to seal or seal off and also to write poetry.⁸⁸ Of course, it also exists in German, so at a stretch one

⁸⁷ Coetzee tells us that the word gas comes via Dutch from the Greek *chaos*. This is a pun that he also points out in his analysis of Beckett's *Murphy* in his doctoral thesis (28).

⁸⁸ As an adjective it means closed, shut, tight, dense; and from the same root the verb *dighou* means to keep secret.

might even extend the pun to include the memoir's epigraph from Goethe's *West-östlicher Divan*: 'Wer den Dichter will verstehen, muß in Dichters Lande gehen.' But my purpose is not to trivialise the memoir's preoccupation with writing or Coetzee's carefully selected epigraph from Goethe. My intention is rather to place the subtext of abjection – the language of flowing, regulating, sealing, leaking – within the context of a particular concept of writing, specifically autobiographical writing, and to extend this to the form and subject of the confessional dimension of the text. Writing in *Youth* is about control; writing is a way of maintaining distinct spheres, whether between work and other interests, private life and writing life, South Africa and London. Yet in the instances when there seems to be most at stake in maintaining these distinctions, the protagonist of *Youth* loses control of the narrative, allows the story to seep away. Of course, these are the deliberate revelations of the author, whose strategic choice of register allows the story to appear to be beyond the control and agency of the protagonist.

While John's encounters with women are notable for the abject imagery they invoke, the other topic that is articulated in similar terms is his relationship to South Africa. Early in the memoir, before he leaves South Africa in the wake of Sharpeville and the fallout from it, John describes the 'gulf' that is fixed between the races: 'from Africans in general, even from Coloured people, he feels a curious, amused tenderness emanating: a sense that he must be a simpleton, in need of protection, if he imagines he can get by on the basis of straight looks and honourable dealings when the ground beneath his feet is soaked with blood and the vast backward depth of history rings with shouts of anger' (17). In London he attempts to distance himself from South Africa, resisting his mother's letters and demonstrating no desire to return, but (perhaps to vindicate these positions) he pursues the worst news he can

find about the political situation there: 'Horror upon horror, atrocity upon atrocity, without relief' (100). Another aspect of the attempt to situate himself at a distance from South Africa might be the curious silence about the journey between Cape Town and England that Kai Easton points to in her essay on *Youth*.

Yet, as he finds on receiving his cousin's letter of reproach, the two worlds he 'belongs to' are not as tightly sealed as he would like. His first foray into prose-writing is set in South Africa, which 'disquiets him' (62). Later, as he is drawn to William Burchell's writings on South Africa he worries that he has become afflicted by patriotism. His cousin's visit prompts fond memories of time spent at the family farm and occasions a degree of comfort that is utterly out of character for John: 'the promise of ease, of easiness: two people with a history in common, a country, a family, a blood intimacy from before the first word was spoken. No introductions needed, no fumbling around' (126). Although he compares speaking Afrikaans to 'speaking Nazi' in the current political climate, it too is a comforting experience: 'Though it is years since he has spoken Afrikaans, he can feel himself relax at once as though sliding into a warm bath' (127).

But the pull of his connection to South Africa is more often articulated in much stronger terms. South Africa, he claims, 'is like an albatross around his neck. He wants it removed, he does not care how, so that he can begin to breathe' (101). And later, thinking of himself as heir to a gloomy history from his ancestors in the Karoo, he comments that 'South Africa is a wound within him. How much longer before the wound stops bleeding?' (116)⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Zoe Wicomb describes Coetzee's use of the word 'wound' in *Youth* as 'youthful histrionic mode.' She admits: 'While I squeamishly wince at the word "wound" and cannot identify with the narrator, the formulation of the problem as a bodily act of uttering an unspeakable sentence is a suggestive one' ('Setting, Intertextuality' 145). She also notes that Ezekiel Mphahlele and Lewis Nkosi describe South

The language of abjection⁹⁰ that is evident in these examples seems to stage a certain absence of control on the part of the protagonist though it seems to me that in these varied examples the resort to this language cannot be reduced to any one simple explanation. Boehmer is correct to point out John's physical discomfort with women's bodies (though I would stop short of labelling this misogyny); the ease and comfort that he expresses in the company of his cousin points to a persistent, if slightly unwilling, affiliation with his home and upbringing; the more pathological terms in which he describes South Africa suggest that there is a deeply anguished (and confessional) dimension to this affiliation. What they have in common, is the notion that the absence of control in a psychic sense – we might call it the presence of unconscious forces – finds expression in a particular kind of writing, writing that is *figured* in *Youth* as compulsive and unmediated expression. This is at odds with John's stated ambitions as a writer and with the ideas of writing that he expresses in the course of the memoir. It is also contrary to ideas about writing that we find elsewhere in the Coetzee oeuvre, both fiction and nonfiction. So what is the purpose of this staged heartspeech?

VI

Towards the end of *Age of Iron* Mrs Curren lies on a bed of cardboard in the open air beside Verceuil, uttering a three-page confession that attempts to explain her actions and attitudes towards the country in which she lives – South Africa in the late 1980s.

Central to the confession is the question of her right to such an explanation: 'Yet who

Africa in terms of a wound. Of Nkosi she writes that he: 'speaks of the South African writer as being constructed out of an historical wound (private communication)' (154n2).

⁹⁰ In chapter 1 I note the centrality of confessional discourse to Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, her book on abjection.

am I, *who am I* to have a voice at all?' (149) She confesses that she has lived her life in a state of unremitting shame: 'My shame, my own. Ashes in my mouth day after day after day, which never ceased to taste like ashes' (150). She accepted this, she tells Verceuil, as the price to be paid for her inheritance as a white South African, an inheritance to which she is enslaved: 'I was born a slave and I will most certainly die a slave. A life in fetters, a death in fetters: that is part of the price, not to be quibbled at, not to be whined about' (150). But shame, she says, was not enough; what was demanded by the times was heroism, and in this regard, as her confession implies, she has failed. In his acceptance speech for the Jerusalem Prize in 1987 Coetzee describes the 'unfreedom' of South African society in similar terms: 'In a society of masters and slaves, no one is free. The slave is not free, because he is not his own master; the master is not free, because he cannot do without the slave' (96). There is no way of resigning from South Africa's racially defined caste, 'short of shaking the dust of the country off your feet' (96).

Yet *Youth*, which recounts the period Coetzee spent in London in the late 1950s and early 1960s, illustrates that even this symbolic resignation was not sufficient to remove oneself from the 'unfreedom' of the master caste. As we have seen, the young Coetzee describes his relationship to his home country in precisely these terms of enslavement: 'South Africa is like an albatross around his neck. He wants it removed, he does not care how, so that he can begin to breathe' (101). Of course, the particular kind of enslavement invoked in this image is that of the storyteller, Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*. For this reason the attention of the reader must turn away from the protagonist struggling to assert his freedom from South Africa in London in the early 1960s and towards the author, writing in the early twenty-first century. He can stage the relationship of his protagonist, his younger self,

to South Africa as one of enslavement to the story of his origins in 'the master caste,' positioning it ironically – or histrionically, in Wicomb's view – in a language of abjection, but repeating this story, staging these revelations, making these confessions, can he entirely *seal himself off* from this compulsive self-reflection?

In the *Doubling the Point* interview immediately preceding a collection of his essays on South African literature, Coetzee discusses his affiliation with Afrikanerdom, describing the ways in which he is and is not part of the group. He concludes ultimately, 'that I am not in a position to *make* an answer. [...] Is it in my power to withdraw from the gang? I think not. [...] More important, is it my heart's desire to be counted apart? Not really. Furthermore – and this is an afterthought – I would regard it as morally dubious to write something like the second part of *Dusklands* – a *fiction*, note – from a position that is not historically complicit' (342-43).

Surveying the autobiographical and fictional confessions that appeared in South Africa in the immediate post-apartheid period, *Boyhood* among them, Michiel Heyns concludes that 'the problem for the white South African writer is how to find a perspective on South Africa that is not merely abject' (63). *Boyhood* and *Youth* respond to this demand in several ways. They stage the structural problem of confession without repeating either the structure or the problem: the potentially endless and self-interested spiral of double thought. The narratives develop within a confessional framework of shame, secrets and humiliation, but this comes to seem like a highly selective account calculated to maximise the confessional dimension of the texts. The preoccupation with writing as remembering, selecting, concealing, fascinating and sealing off is counterpointed with an abject subtext of flowing, leaking and seeping that replicates the idea of writing as an interplay of desire and

resistance. Because this is staged in a specifically confessional context, it stages this dimension of writing in terms of the machine-like, automated quality of the confessional narrative that constantly threatens the agency of the confessing subject. Finally, in the various affiliations and pathologies suggested by the deployment of the discourse of apartheid, the South African *plaasroman*, and the language of abjection, both memoirs enact a retrospective affiliation with a familial, societal and linguistic grouping that challenges an easy delineation of the limits of that group as well as implicitly addressing the historical demands made of that group. This affiliation is the basis for any serious confession but also an assertion of complicity that allows us to move from this early period of artistic frustration to the successful career that would begin with *Dusklands*.

CONCLUSION

I

In exploring the topic of confessional narrative in Coetzee's fiction from his earliest professional activities as a novelist, translator and professor of literature, via his extensive non-fiction writings on the subject, to his 'fictionalized memoirs,' I hope to have extended understanding of the scope of his engagement with the form. The scope of this engagement is not just its reach across his writing career, though this is important, but his relationship to the literary history within which he self-consciously positions himself, the extent to which his relationship to the context in which he was writing is mediated through confessional narrative, and the intimate connection between the dynamics of confession and the writing process itself.

Underpinned by the teleology of transgression, confession, penitence and absolution that he rehearses in 'Double Thoughts,' confession for Coetzee is a future-directed agent of transformation. But the limits and conventions through which confession must proceed – in terms of form and context, and which I compare with the conditions governing performative speech acts – means that this transformation is never quite achieved. Rather, his conception of absolution as grace suggests that confession is more like the event of Derrida's aneconomic gift: neutralized by calculation, exchange and teleology, it is by definition gratuitous, excessive, unforeseeable. In revisiting the structures and conventions of confessional narrative in his fiction, Coetzee allows for the possibility of this event; negotiating the limits and conditions governing confession (metaphorically and, in terms of the law, literally) he

allows these conventions to become visible as limits and frequently restores the horizon of the idea of the truth that I associate with Dostoevsky's Tikhon in my introduction. I have attempted to describe the constraining and enabling force of these limits across the full range of Coetzee's work, up to and including his memoirs: the determining force of genre in a discursive form whose main conceit is liberation, the power of physical suffering to dwarf the desire for transformation represented by confession, the immense personal risk undertaken by the writer in sacrificing private life for the public field of authorship, the need to adapt to terms and conditions not of one's choosing - physically and legally - in order to restore the horizon of the idea of the truth or the idea of justice, and finally, in the memoirs, the self-conscious staging of confession as 'heart-speech' that, never being able to bring its motives fully into focus, runs the risk of enacting rather than staging a confession.

The repeated nature of Coetzee's engagement with confession across his entire body of work is in a sense related to the failure of confession to produce closure, the failure to render the past simply past (Sanders 180-81). But I hope that in pointing to the reiterated nature of his repeated staging of confession, this *failure* comes to look rather more like a space in which the event of successful confession might be possible. In other words, while confession in itself is fraught by problems of blindness and self-interestedness, I am making an ethical claim for Coetzee's repeated, 'dogged', engagement with it. As I have pointed out from the outset, the scepticism with which he approaches confession does not diminish the desire for confession or the urgency of the need for confession.

II

It is in this spirit that I suggest we approach the confessional elements of Coetzee's most recent novel, *Diary of a Bad Year*. While not overtly confessional, the novel's unusual form explicitly engages the structural problems and conditions of confession that Coetzee has been negotiating since his earliest work: the question of speaking in one's own voice in the first person, the problem of reconciling the need for an interlocutor with the compromising presence of an audience, the risk of transgressing the boundary between private and public life in autobiography, and writing in general as a way of positioning oneself between the private and the public. In addition, as I noted in chapters 2 and 5, the subject of many of these opinions relates to Coetzee's ongoing interest in the public dimension of confession.

The idiosyncratic and often irrational spirit of the 'Strong Opinions' that initially seems to be the structuring principle behind the novel evokes the later Tolstoy that Coetzee discusses in 'Double Thoughts,' noting with some envy Tolstoy's '(rash?) decision to *set down the truth*, finally, as though after a lifetime of exploring one had acquired the credentials, amassed the authority, to do so' (293). In 'On the writing life,' one of the 'Second Opinions,' JC describes the same quality in Tolstoy (*Diary* 193). In other words, the 'Strong Opinions' might be a way of laying down the law, imposing 'the end of the episode' by virtue of the authority of the celebrated, aging writer. But the authority of the 'Strong Opinions' – opinions that the reader cannot entirely distance from J. M. Coetzee – is undermined by the demands of the body and soul that are recorded in JC's private diary and more comprehensively still by the challenging presence of Anya and the complications of her private life, eventually giving rise to the even more idiosyncratic 'Second Diary'.

The novel affects a discontinuity between these different elements in its unusual format, but the experience of reading the novel is to reintegrate these different elements and bridge the discontinuity of the different registers and voices. In addition, the novel stages both direct confessional and testimonial encounters between Anya and JC, and indirect encounters mediated through the sinister presence of Anya's partner Alan. JC's private diary in this sense becomes a confession unknowingly addressed to another, who is – beyond the control of the confessant – both devious (Alan) and sympathetic (Anya). That JC's call reaches its addressee is verified in Anya's private diary, which, without providing the ultimate closure of death, at least signals her intention to respond to JC's call and to witness the moment of the end. This might not be absolution, but it does restore a horizon of possibility for the operation of grace, or the gift – gratitude for which is the subject of JC's closing remarks.

III

The teleological tendency of Coetzee's thinking on confession – and the avowed inadequacy of it – invites comparison with the temporality implicit in the idea of the postcolonial itself. If, as Sanders suggests, the TRC embodied a 'decolonizing logic,' does the confessional narrative as it is staged and enacted in Coetzee's work represent a specifically postcolonial form of confession? Situated in the context of the South African interregnum, Coetzee's model of confession and the novels in which it was played out undoubtedly reflect a desire for liberation into an 'ethical community,' as

Attwell proposes (*Doubling* 340). Indeed, Coetzee's fictional confessions are concerned to stage the conditions in which this kind of confession can successfully take place. The post-apartheid context does not diminish the desire for confession, but it does make the conditions in which it can successfully take place seem increasingly limiting and compromising. Sanders' rejection of confession as a kind of language that attempts to render the past simply past seems to acknowledge that the postcolonial context requires something more. He suggests that this might be a kind of traumatic repetition. But for all their desire for closure, the repeated failures of Coetzee's confessions are closer to the notion of traumatic repetition than rendering the past simply past. Coetzee's might be a specifically postcolonial form of confession precisely to the extent that it fails to reach 'the end of the episode, the closing of the chapter, liberation from the oppression of the memory' (252). Or at least it demonstrates that this can be achieved only in a highly qualified fashion or at immense personal cost. But if his thinking and writing on confession exposes its limits, they also constitute a space in which the idea of truth and the idea of justice give meaning, and a form through which to approach it.

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