

**Whose Story is it Anyway? The Ethics of Narration and the Narration of Ethics
in *Summertime* and *Die sneeuslaper***

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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Abstract

This dissertation analyses and compares the narrative strategies in J.M. Coetzee's *Summertime* and Marlene van Niekerk's *Die sneeuslaper* and considers the implications of these strategies for the authors' exploration of the ethics of writing. Much has been written about the literary oeuvres of both Coetzee and Van Niekerk, including studies of the translations of Van Niekerk's Afrikaans novels into English. There are few "interlingual" comparative studies of contemporary works in Afrikaans and English, however, and certainly none to my knowledge which compares the work of Coetzee and Van Niekerk. My contribution to the conversation about Coetzee's and Van Niekerk's work, but also to an increasingly multilingual and interconnected South African literary criticism, will be a comparison of one recent work by each of these two authors, written in English and Afrikaans respectively. I draw on the theories of Bakhtin, Barthes and Levinas to consider the ethical dimension of texts in which "double-voicedness", a questioning not only of existence, but of the self is foregrounded in the content and narrative structure; where there is a shift in focus from the author to the reader ("the birth of the reader") and "utterances" are made with the response of "the other" in mind. I combine theoretical models created by James Phelan and Adam Newton to analyse the narrative ethics in *Summertime* and *Die sneeuslaper*. Although Coetzee and Van Niekerk follow very different narrative approaches in *Summertime* and *Die sneeuslaper*, certain similarities emerge. In both texts the self is fictionalised in a self-reflective and explicit way, enabling the authors to question their own experience. Both authors make use of not one, but many narrators, refusing to provide a single authoritative narrative. This refusal of closure leaves it to the reader to respond and judge the text for themselves.

Introduction: Whose Story is it Anyway? The Ethics of Narration and the Narration of Ethics in *Summertime* and *Die sneeuslaper*

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In this dissertation I will explore the narrative strategies used by J. M. Coetzee in *Summertime* and by Marlene van Niekerk in *Die sneeuslaper* and how these strategies influence the reader's judgement and interpretation of the texts. I am also interested in how the narrative strategies employed by Coetzee and Van Niekerk support or undermine their exploration of the ethics of writing (how can one write ethically, what should one write about, what ethical implications does fictionalisation have?) and the relationship between real life (the actual experiences of real persons) and art (what concrete value does art have in real life, can art influence life?). How do Coetzee's and Van Niekerk's narrative strategies and their exploration of the ethics of narration converge or differ? I believe the answers to these questions will provide insight into the ethical issues at stake in an increasingly interconnected and multilingual literary culture in South Africa and abroad. But first, with the relationship between real life and art in mind, and to motivate my comparison of these two writers and these two works of fiction, I will consider the social, political and critical context in which Coetzee and van Niekerk write. This will be followed by a discussion of the theoretical texts, terminology, analytical tools and methodology which I plan to employ in my analyses of the two texts in question.

Coetzee has long been acknowledged as one of the foremost writers in South African English and world literature, his stature cemented when he received the Nobel Prize for

Literature in 2003. Van Niekerk has won recognition not only in the Afrikaans literary community, but also in South Africa and the world. Her work has been translated into English and several other languages. It is surely not coincidental that both these authors, recognising that they are writing from the position of white privilege, would be so preoccupied with ethics and in particular the ethics of writing and narration. Both authors seem concerned about the ethical responsibilities of the author, about questions such as who should write, what they should write about, how they should write and to whom they should address their writing. Both authors seem concerned about issues such as the ethical implications of speaking on behalf of the “other”, the appropriation of the stories of others and the author’s responsibility to address ethical questions, concerns they express openly in interviews. For example, in an interview with David Attwell, J.M. Coetzee says the following about the writing of fiction:

I would say that what you call “the literary life”, or any other way of life that provides an interrogation of our existence – in the case of the writer fantasy, symbolization, storytelling – seems to me a good life – good in the sense of being ethically responsible.

(Coetzee & Attwell, 2003)

How does an “interrogation of our existence” through storytelling become an ethically responsible act? Derek Attridge (2005:xii) alludes to Levinas’ concept of ethics when he argues that “Coetzee’s works both stage, and are, irruptions of otherness into our familiar worlds, and they pose the following question: what is our responsibility towards the singular demands of the other?” Coetzee interrogates not only his own existence, but also enables his readers, through the act of reading his fiction, to interrogate their own existence. What does ethically responsible writing entail for Marlene van Niekerk? In an interview with Afrikaans literary academic, Willie Burger, Van Niekerk has the following to say about the real work of authors in South Africa:

Dikwels dink ek dat dit inderdaad die eintlike werk is van skrywers in hierdie land: om in plaas van verhale te versin, 'n rekord na te laat van hoe dinge is, met daarin verbeelding, vereenselwiging, maakbaarheid/moontlikheid/andersheid en die gedenking van verlies vasgehou as etiese dimensies. Die etiese dimensie het altyd te make met 'n belydenis en demonstrasie van die beperktheid van onder andere skrywerlike "mag".¹ (Burger, 2009:156)²

For Van Niekerk the ethical dimension of writing in South Africa should always involve a confession and demonstration of the limits of the author's power, and amongst the attributes contained in this ethical dimension is alterity, or otherness, the term Attridge uses when he describes Coetzee's work. Both authors also refer to the role of imagination in this interrogation of life, of what is. For both Coetzee and Van Niekerk, it seems, creative writing is an ethical response to, and an interrogation of, how things are.

This concern with the ethics of writing is not only visible in the way both authors write or choose their narrators, but also in the content of their work. In a novel such as *Foe* (1986), for example, Coetzee (in a literary response to *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe) silences the coloniser, Crusoe, and uses Susan Barton, a second castaway on Crusoe's island, as narrator. Friday, representative of the colonised is left mute, unable and seemingly unwilling to communicate with those who might appropriate his story. Friday expresses himself through his silence and through ritualised gestures that remain incomprehensible to Susan Barton, the narrator of the story. Coetzee's treatment of the African as other has been

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I often think that this indeed is the actual work of authors in this country: instead of making up stories, to leave a record of how things are, with imagination, assimilation, makeability/possibility/alterity and the commemoration of loss held fast as ethical dimensions. The ethical dimension always has to do with a confession and a demonstration of the limits of among other things authorly "power". (Burger, 2009:156)

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All translations from Afrikaans into English in this dissertation are my own free translations.

both criticised and defended, as Attwell explains in his article “J.M. Coetzee and the idea of Africa” (2009). Attwell (2009:68) argues that the “Africanist” criticism of Coetzee cannot be dismissed entirely and that “there might be an intimate or inescapable connection between a wounded historical memory and the representational practices associated with mimesis. In which case, no amount of nuanced positionality on the part of the author can displace it”. In his analysis of Coetzee’s treatment of Friday, Attwell (2009:77) agrees with Spivak that:

Friday manifests the anomalous terms of the agentive half-subject: he is mute but he does not disappear; he is indubitably Mudimbe’s European idea of the African subject, but he acts out a political return of the repressed. Coetzee’s Friday is therefore clearly *not* a figure representing the wholly other because he is other in his very historical *specificity* (Spivak, cited in Attwell, 2009:77).

Van Niekerk writes from the same “wounded historical memory” in *Agaat* (2004). Van Niekerk leaves Milla (representative of the coloniser) silenced by illness and at the mercy of her memories and her servant Agaat (representative of the colonised). Although Agaat has agency, Van Niekerk does not appropriate her voice to tell her side of the story. Instead, Agaat uses non-verbal communication to subvert the dominant narrative of her white foster mother. According to Carvahlo and Van Vuuren (2009:40):

Agaat is a subaltern ... who is “speaking” at a pronounced and basic level, in the sense that she attempts to communicate her subjectivity to her foster mother and, ultimately, to the reader. Her unconventional, mimetic narratives include rhymes, fairy tales, songs and allegorical citations taken verbatim from various sources. When she will not speak, Agaat is engrossed in performative gestures, among them an unusual dance, inscriptions upon her peripheral servant’s quarters and furtive embroidery projects (the most significant of which is her embroidered cap, a dense palimpsest of embroidered layers).

In both *Foe* and *Agaat* the colonial order is disrupted, but the authors, aware of their own

status as heirs of the colonisers, avoid speaking on behalf of Friday and Aagaat, representatives of the colonised. Instead they use the silence and non-verbal gestures of these characters as an indictment of and resistance to colonisation. Whether this is the appropriate response is debatable, but not within the scope of this particular dissertation. What is relevant to my discussion, however, is how this shared concern is part of a larger shared history of Coetzee and Van Niekerk as South African authors writing within a particular literary tradition.

The more recent convergence of fairly divergent literary traditions in South Africa, is described by David Attwell and Derek Attridge in the *Cambridge History of South African Literature* (2012). Attwell and Attridge discuss the “widespread practices of translingual writing and translation which reveal the extent to which multilingualism is constitutive of the field” (Attwell & Attridge, 2012:7). They go on to name authors involved in this practice, from Sol Plaatje to J.M. Coetzee and Antjie Krog. One might add to this list Michiel Heyns, whose creative translation of Marlene van Niekerk’s *Agaat* into English provided greater opportunity for proper dialogue between the English and Afrikaans literary communities in South Africa. I believe it will be useful to combine an analysis of a novel by Coetzee, one of the foremost South African English writers, with an analysis of one work of fiction by Van Niekerk, an author of similar stature in Afrikaans, to consider the similarities and differences in their treatment of the ethics of narration and the narration of ethics in their fiction.

In order to illustrate how my dissertation contributes to the critical conversation about the

work of Coetzee and Van Niekerk, and South African literature in general, I will move on to consider previous criticism of both authors' work. Critics have written thorough accounts on the subjects of ethics and the sensitivity to language in most of Coetzee's novels. David Attwell, for example, argues that Coetzee's sensitivity to the enabling potential of language and his refusal to provide a master interpretation of his work are signs of his ethical commitment to literature. For Attwell, Coetzee's mastery of language and narrative strengthens and deepens the ethical dimension of his work:

To foreground the constitutive powers of language ... is to be responsive to the inherent self-consciousness of modern life and to the claims of multiple voices in modern democracy. Similarly, one might argue that Coetzee's refusal to assume the role of superior interpreter of his own work is to support a democratic conception of how fiction and its meanings circulate within the culture. Commentators are fond of remarking on a certain aloofness in Coetzee's public presence, but he is, in fact, the most self-revealing of writers in his work, the difference being that the self-revelation is always combined with self-directed irony, and an immensely accomplished control over the narrative and the nuances of language (Bradshaw & Neill 2010:175).

Attwell is concerned with Coetzee's language and style and the universal concern with democracy and he does not consider narrative strategy in particular novels or the "historical specificity" of Coetzee as a South African writer, as I plan to do. Attwell's analysis covers all of Coetzee's novels except for *Summertime*. In each chapter he considers central themes in the novels and the way in which style and narrative strategy supports or undermines those themes.

Derek Attridge, in his book *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (2005), agrees with Attwell that there is a link between technical proficiency and the ethical nature of Coetzee's work. Attridge draws on the philosophy of Levinas and Derrida to illustrate how

the “singular inventiveness” of Coetzee’s fiction “constitutes its *otherness*” (2005:11).

Attridge (2005:31) also argues that “in Coetzee’s hands the literary event is the working out of a complex and freighted responsibility to and for the other, a responsibility denied for so long in South Africa’s history”. Attridge compares Coetzee’s work with that of other South African authors, such as Andre P. Brink, to place Coetzee’s work in perspective within a multicultural and multilingual South Africa. This paves the way for a comparative approach to Coetzee’s work and that of other South African authors writing in English or other South African languages, such as Afrikaans.

Like Attridge, Mike Marais draws on Levinas and Derrida when he considers the possibility of ethical action, engagement and hospitality in his essays and book on Coetzee’s novels. In *Secretary of the Invisible* (2009), Marais claims that Coetzee’s writing “dwells obsessively on an alterity that is figured as being absolute in its irreducibility” (Marais, 2009:xiii) and that his writing is “informed by his sense of responsibility for what is not yet present history, by the sense that it is the author’s task to make of the text a home for the other” (Marais, 2009:xv). Marais’ writing on the subject was published between 2000 and 2009 and therefore does not cover *Summertime* nor does it compare Coetzee’s work to that of other South African writers. Marais focuses on ethics as theoretical concept and as a theme within Coetzee’s work. I will attempt a more practical analysis of narrative strategy in a specific text.

For this purpose, Carrol Clarkson’s more practical approach to Coetzee’s writing has proved to be more relevant to my own discussion. Clarkson argues that “throughout Coetzee’s writing, in the critical essays as much as in the fiction, self-reflexive linguistic questions are at the core of his ethical enquiries” (2009:16). She considers the influence of theorists such as Bakhtin and Barthes on Coetzee’s writing, and proceeds with a practical

linguistic analysis of the ways in which the “seemingly innocent linguistic choices on the part of the writer have ethical consequences for the positioning of the speaking and writing self in relation to those whom one addresses, or in relation to those on whose behalf one speaks, or in relation to a world one attempts to represent or create in writing” (2009:16) in both novels and critical essays up to the date of publication of her book. Clarkson’s *Countervoices* (2009) appeared before *Summertime* was published, and so does not analyse that particular title. Dooley (2010:2), like Clarkson, acknowledges the influence of Attwell’s *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, when she argues that “the ideas of [Coetzee’s] novels are, significantly, always embodied and tested up to and beyond their limits of suffering, mortal being, and the language and narrative forms in which they are expressed are constantly interrogated”. Her study is quite recent and therefore includes all Coetzee’s books up to *Summertime* in her analysis of aspects of Coetzee’s work, such as his “reluctance to claim power” (4), his choice of point of view, his sense of the ridiculous and absurd, his use of language and languages, his choices of tenses, the “surprising flights of imagery” to be found amidst the “taut elegance of his prose” (5) and the way in which the endings of his novels “inevitably color all that comes before” (5). Although Dooley’s book provides a useful overview of Coetzee’s work, the scope of her project limits the depth of the analysis of each individual novel.

While there is a wealth of literary criticism on Coetzee’s work, studies of Van Niekerk’s is necessarily limited, both because her oeuvre is much more limited, but also because, despite translations into English, her work has been studied mainly by a small number of Afrikaans academics. Hambidge (2010) provides a fairly broad overview on the themes and literary and philosophical references in *Die sneeuslaper*. She describes the main questions posed in the novel as follows:

Dit is 'n teks wat, soos *Memorandum*, selfrefleksief omgaan met die skryfproses en die leser plaas binne die komplekse problematiek van die moderne dosent as kreatiewe begeleier, die dosent wat as skrywer sy eie fabrieksgeheime aan jong studente moet verduidelik. Wat is myne? Wat is joune? (Hambidge, 2010)³

As far as narrative strategy is concerned, Hambidge argues that it is Van Niekerk's voice that one often hears in the narrative, the language being too learned for, for example, the clock technician in the second story; the theoretical and philosophical musings too sophisticated, a strategy which has a definite impact on the narrative ethics at work in the text. Hambidge furthermore identifies J.M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* as conversational companion to Van Niekerk's work. Louise Viljoen also considers the main themes and the narrative structure of the stories and then notes that J.M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* and *Elizabeth Costello* could be considered as the most obvious predecessors to *Die sneeuslaper* (Viljoen, 2010). I believe that *Summertime* is similarly suitable as a companion to *Die sneeuslaper*, since it is also concerned with questions of the ethics of narration. Thys Human, for example, highlights the concern with the ethical dimension of writing and narration in *Die sneeuslaper* when he notes that all four stories in the book are constructed as stories within stories and that the many references to binoculars and cameras reminds the reader that the observing and writing actions of the author are seldom innocent or altruistic, but rather an attempt to look into the other (Human, *Rapport*, 6 November 2010).

There is ample room for further comparison of the fiction of Coetzee and Van Niekerk, and I believe that such a comparative approach might provide unique insights into the narrative strategies and approaches to the ethics of writing and the writing of ethics in the

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It is a text that, like *Memorandum*, deals self reflexively with the process of writing and places the reader inside the complex problematic of the modern lecturer as creative guide, the lecturer who as writer must explain his own factory secrets to young students. What is yours? What is mine? (Hambidge, 2010)

work of these two authors. I will focus on two of the most recent works of fiction by Coetzee and Van Niekerk, *Summertime* and *Die sneeuslaper*, partly because these books have not received the same amount of critical attention as the earlier works, but also because both works are acutely self-reflexive and deals so overtly with questions of ethics in general and narrative ethics specifically. *Summertime* comprises the preparatory material for a biography on a fictional author called John Coetzee, consisting of five interviews with characters who had some contact with this fictional author during a specific period of his life. These interviews are flanked by notebook entries ostensibly written by John Coetzee when he was a young man. The result is a fragmented and contradictory account, with multiple narrators claiming the central role in their narrative for themselves or refuting the biographer's version of events. The author is dead⁴ and absent, leaving only his own third person scribbles and the subjective memories of those whose lives had intersected with his. *Die sneeuslaper* contains four interlinked long short stories, in which the role and authority of the author in the narratives of others is questioned. In the first story, a would-be young author is driven to a breakdown by the vagrant whose comings and goings he tries to record. In another story the same vagrant undermines the attempts of a social researcher to record his situation and reveals that his performance in the first story was fabricated to fool the young would-be author.

In both *Summertime* and *Die sneeuslaper* the concerns of the authors are not limited to the ethics of writing. The fictional John Coetzee is concerned about his own powerlessness in the face of the oppression and injustice of the apartheid government, about the relevance of his writing in this context. Similarly, the creative writing professor in Van

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Clarkson highlights Coetzee's experiments with the structuralist notion of the death of the author in previous work in *Countervoices* (2005:77).

Niekerk's first story, "Die swanefluisteraar" (The swan whisperer) is concerned with what one should write in a country such as South Africa if you are an aesthete unable to bear the cruel reality of violence and suffering. By comparing the work of Coetzee and Van Niekerk, one extends the plurality of voices found in the text to that of voices speaking in different languages and from different perspectives, providing a polyphonic narrative of increased complexity and depth.

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I will now proceed to a discussion of the theoretical concepts and analytical tools I plan to use in my analyses and comparison of *Summertime* and *Die sneeuslaper*. I will take a linguistic approach and consider the fictional works as rhetorical constructs, using the concepts and theories of linguists such as Roland Barthes and Michael Bakhtin and the analytical approach to narrative ethics followed by critics such as Adam Newton and James Phelan. I have found the discussion of the ethics of narration in *Living to Tell About It: A Rhetoric of Character Narration* (2005) by Phelan and *Narrative Ethics* (1995) by Newton, especially insightful, and will use the practical tools provided in these two texts to do a close analysis of *Summertime* and *Die sneeuslaper*. I will consider the narrative strategies employed in both texts, linking Bakhtin's discussion of "double-voicedness" and "the dialogic imagination" to Phelan's definition of "position", "a concept that combines being placed in and acting from an ethical location" (2005:22), which he uses to build his analytical model to analyse narrative as rhetorical construct. Phelan, like Bakhtin, considers narrative as an act of communication which is written in anticipation of a response from the

reader. Lastly, I will consider how Coetzee and Van Niekerk engage with ethics in the broader sense, as defined by theorists such as Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, both often cited in studies of Coetzee's work and, when one considers Van Niekerk's description in interviews of the ethical dimension of writing, just as relevant to Van Niekerk's work.

But first it is important to define some of the key concepts to be employed in this study, such as the terms "narrative" and "ethics" and the phrases "ethics of narration" and "narration of ethics" and their meaning in relation to the fiction of Coetzee and Van Niekerk. When I use the term "ethics", it will be in relation to literature and the engagement of the author with the other (the other encountered in everyday life, e.g. the African other in *Foe* and *Agaat* but also the reader as other, whose response the author anticipates in advance). In analysing the singularity of Coetzee's approach to writing and the representation of the other in his fiction, Attridge uses Levinasian and Derridean conceptions of ethics to proceed to a definition of ethics as engagement with the other. I find this a useful starting point for my own discussion of ethics. For Levinas "ethics" is:

A calling into question of the same – which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the Same – is brought about by the other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics. (Levinas, 1991:43)

Newton (1995:12) draws on this definition of Levinas to define ethics as "the radicality and uniqueness of the moral situation itself, a binding claim exercised upon the self, by a concrete and singular other whose moral appeal precedes both decision and understanding". He concurs with Levinas that "consciousness and even subjectivity follow from, are legitimated by, the ethical summons which proceeds from intersubjective encounter" and that ethics originates "from the other to me" (1995:13). Newton uses Levinas' theoretical

concepts to create an analytical model to analyse narrative ethics in particular. Such an ethical relation in the context of literature refers both to communication with an audience or reader and to the representation of the imagined other in the author's work, a representation which is the author's ethical response to the other encountered in everyday life, but which is also discourse that invites a response from the authorial audience, in their encounter with the representation of an imagined other. These encounters with the other, whether real or imagined, provide opportunities to recognise and explore our own subjectivity and our response to encounters with the subjectivity of the other. When an author presents his narrative to a reader, this response and responsibility towards the other is invoked.

The second concept to be clarified is "narrative". Gerard Genette discerns narrative as "the narrative statement, the oral or written discourse that undertakes to tell of an event or series of events ..." (Genette, 1980:25). The story, on the other hand, is "the succession of events, real or fictitious, that are the subjects of this discourse" (Genette, 1980:25). Genette (1980:26-27) also describes narrative as "the signifier, statement, discourse or narrative text itself", while "story [is] the signified narrative content" and "narrating [is] the producing narrative action; the event that consists of someone recounting something". Narration, then, is an act of communication between two or more parties, but also an event experienced by these parties and a physical object, in the case of a written text. Genette's definition of narrative seems to correspond with the definition of the reading of literature as an event provided by Attridge.

James Phelan builds on the approach of theorists such as Genette when he defines narrative as a rhetorical act. This approach allows us to understand the way in which narrative strategy affects both the ethical perspective (or perspectives) represented in the text and the reader's ethical engagement with that text. Phelan (2005:18) states that "narrative

itself can be fruitfully understood as a rhetorical act: somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened". In his introduction to *Living to Tell about It* (2005), Phelan claims that he has deliberately steered away from defining ethical categories by looking towards thinkers such as Bakhtin and Levinas, as Newton has done. Instead, he has chosen to define the ethical categories of his approach as they arise *from his analysis of narrative technique and to place as much emphasis on "the audience's ethical engagement as on the ethical situations represented in the narrative"* (Phelan, 2005:23).

As I am interested in the narration of ethics as well, and because Van Niekerk clearly evokes Levinas's ethics in her interviews and writing, I will include Newton's approach. Newton links ethics and narrative by arguing that "narrative *is* ethics, the ethical consequences of narrating a story and fictionalizing a person, and reciprocal claims binding teller, listener, witness, and reader in that process" (Newton, 1995:11). He also argues that Levinas' definition of ethics parallels "certain kinds of textuality". Newton (1995:13) explains that "cutting athwart the mediatory role of reason, narrative situations create an immediacy and force, framing relations of provocation, call, and response that bind narrator and listener, author and character, or reader and text" and that "these relations will often precede decision and understanding, with consciousness arriving late, after the assumption or imposition of intersubjective ties". The narrative situation creates communication on an intimate and instinctual level; it is experienced as an "event" (Attridge, 2005:9).

This Levinasian definition of narrative as ethics calls to mind Bakhtin's definition of literature as communication. Bakhtin (1981:314) argues that

... [all] forms involving a narrator or a posited author signify to one degree or another by their presence the author's freedom from a unitary and singular language, a freedom connected with the relativity of literary and language systems; such forms open up the

possibility of never having to define oneself in language, the possibility of translating one's own intentions from one linguistic system to another, of fusing "the language of truth" with "the language of the everyday", of saying "I am me" in someone else's language, and in my own language, "I am other".

That other is not only the audience addressed by the "flesh-and-blood" author, as Phelan (2005:19) explains:

[T]he rhetorical act of narrating entails multilevelled communication from author to audience, one that involves the audience's intellect, emotions, psyche, and values.

Furthermore, these levels interact. Our values and those set forth by the narrator and the implied author affect our judgements of characters (and sometimes narrators) and our judgements affect our emotions. The trajectory of our feelings is itself linked to the psychological, thematic, and as we shall see, ethical dimensions of the narrative.

Under scrutiny it becomes clear that, despite the stated differences, Phelan's and Newton's approaches can be combined. Using both models to analyse narrative as rhetoric allows me to take into account both sides of the communication model: that of the communication of the implied author and the narrator directed at the implied reader and the "flesh-and-blood" reader and the response of the "flesh-and-blood" reader and the implied reader toward the narrator and his narrative and the implied author. As Phelan (2005:47) explains:

My definition of the implied author not only suggests that we have, in effect, two human agents on the left side of the communication model (the real author and the implied author) ... The implied author moves outside the text, while the implied reader, which, in my rhetorical model is equivalent to the authorial audience⁵, remains inside the text. The implied author as constructive agent of the text builds into that text explicit and tacit

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Phelan (2005:213) uses the term "authorial audience" to refer to what is also often called the "implied reader", the ideal audience the reader tries to enter when reading a text.

assumptions and signals for the hypothetical ideal audience, the audience that flesh-and-blood readers seek to become.

This model provides a practical method to assess the ethics of narration in terms of dialogue with the other, whether in the author's response and responsibility towards the other in the text or the reader as other, in the reader's engagement with the other in the text or with the author as other. Phelan (2005:23) names four ethical situations or positions (a combination of "being placed and acting from an ethical location") which come to bear in an analysis of ethical interaction in narrative fiction:

1. that of the characters within the story world, how they behave – and judge others – is inescapably tied up with ethics;
2. that of the narrator in relation to the telling, to the told, and to the audience, unreliable narration for example, constitutes a different ethical position from reliable narration, different kinds of focalization also position the narrator differently;
3. that of the implied author in relation to the telling, the told, and the authorial audience; the implied author's choices to adopt one narrative strategy rather than another will affect the audience's ethical response to the characters; each choice will also convey the author's attitudes toward the audience;
4. that of the flesh-and-blood reader in relation to the set of values, beliefs, and locations operating in situations 1-3.

Newton (1995:17-35) suggests his own framework for analysing narrative ethics not only on a narrational level, but also on a representational and a hermeneutical level:

1. The formal design of the storytelling act, the distribution of relations among teller, tale, and person(s) told (narrational ethics);
2. A standing problematic of recognition, anagnorisis that extends beyond the dynamics of plot to the exigent and collaborative unfolding of character, the sea change wrought when selves become either narrating or narrated (representational ethics);

3. “hermeneutics”, as both a topic within the text and a field of action outside it, that is, a narrative inquiry into the extent and limits of intersubjective knowledge in persons’ reading of each other, and the ethical price exacted from readers by texts
(hermeneutic ethics)

Newton’s model will be useful when analysing the narration of ethics in *Summertime* and *Die sneeuslaper*, since it proceeds from the practical to the more theoretical aspects of narrative ethics. By combining Phelan and Newton’s models, I should be able to provide a comprehensive overview of narrative ethics and the narration of ethics in both novels, with an emphasis on the practical analysis of narrative ethics, leading to a further examination of the discourse on ethics as encountered in both fictional texts.

In Chapter One of this dissertation, I will consider the ways in which Barthes’ notion of “the death of the author” is quite literally evoked in *Summertime* to create an uneasy tension between authorial and readerly authority, and the way in which the various competing narratives invokes the “countervoices” which Coetzee considers necessary for truly dialogic writing. To do this, I will use Phelan’s model to consider the ways in which the ethical position of the characters, the narrators, the implied author and the authorial audience are used to achieve truly dialogic writing and then move on to consider how the narrative ethics of the text supports or subverts the narration of ethics. In Chapter Two, I will similarly use Phelan and Newton’s models of narrative ethics to analyse how the interaction of the ethical positions of characters, narrators, the implied author and the authorial audience in *Die sneeuslaper* supports the rhetorical communication of the implied author on the subject of the ethics of creative writing. In the concluding chapter, I will compare the approaches to narrative ethics and the ethics of narration in both texts and identify similarities and differences to see what insight might be gained from this comparison. I will now move on to my discussion of narrative ethics and the narration of ethics in *Summertime*.

Chapter One - The Death of the Author, or, the Lives of Others

1

Thus is revealed the total existence of writing: a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures, and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology, he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted ... we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author. (Barthes, 1978:148)

At first glance, Barthes' now famous statement about the death of the author is invoked on at least two levels in *Summertime*: in the narrative content and in the structuring of the narrative itself. John Coetzee, a fictional author and the central subject of the narrative, is dead and only present in the writing he has left behind and in the memories and narratives of persons who knew him. These notebooks and narratives are the "traces" encountered by the flesh-and-blood reader (hereafter simply called the reader, in contrast to the authorial audience or implied reader⁶): the notebooks of the fictional author from a particular period of

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As mentioned in part 3 of the introduction of this dissertation, Phelan (2005:216) uses the terms "implied reader" or "authorial audience" to refer to the ideal reader or audience for whom the implied author intended the text. This is the audience the flesh-and-blood reader tries to enter when reading a text.

his life and the transcriptions of interviews conducted by a would-be biographer with four women who had been part of John's life at the time as well as a male colleague from his time as a lecturer at the University of Cape Town. *Summertime* diverges from Barthes' description of a text in one important way, though. The subtitle of *Summertime*, "Scenes from a Provincial Life", groups this novel with J.M Coetzee's previous fictionalized memoirs, *Boyhood* and *Youth*. These three works were initially published as separate works, but later also published in one volume under the title *Scenes from Provincial Life*. But while the main character in *Summertime* shares a first and last name with the real J.M. Coetzee, certain biographical details differ greatly from those of the real Coetzee. John Kannemeyer lists some of these incongruities in his biography on Coetzee. He explains, for example, that "Coetzee did after his return to South Africa live in Tokai for a while, but ... with his wife, Philippa, and with their two children, never with his father" (Kannemeyer, 2012:607). The largest incongruity between the biographical details of the author character (I shall call him John from here onwards) in *Summertime* and that of the flesh-and-blood author (referred to as J.M. Coetzee or Coetzee in this dissertation), is that the real J.M. Coetzee was alive and well at the time of *Summertime's* publication. What is to be gained by the introduction of these discrepancies? Firstly, these differences create distance between the character and flesh-and-blood author. Though John is in many ways like Coetzee, these discrepancies are a definite signal from the author that John is not the real Coetzee. Secondly, Coetzee, by fictionalizing himself in such a self-reflective way, draws attention to exactly that which is supposed to be absent from Barthes' text, namely the author. The result is an uneasy tension between authorial and readerly authority, so that both positions of authority are questioned.

This deliberate creation of tension between authorly and readerly authority is not surprising when considered within the context of Coetzee's theoretical and literary influences and his previous novels. In *Countervoices* (2009) Clarkson analyses the influence of Bakhtin, among others, on Coetzee's writing. She describes Coetzee's method of distancing himself (the author) from the "narrating consciousness" (Clarkson, 2009:76) and his "playing-off of the countervoices raised by the creation of fictional characters in relation to each other, in relation to the voice of the narrator, and ultimately, in relation to the implied author that they affirm" (Clarkson, 2009:77). These "countervoices", a term Clarkson borrows from Coetzee himself, are created and explored in a particularly literal and self-conscious manner in several of J.M. Coetzee's more recent novels, such as *Diary of a Bad Year* and *Slow Man*. Thus in *Diary of a Bad Year* we are presented with a fictional author's text, his narrative of events during the writing of the text, and the supposed commentary of his typist on the text and on the course of events that happen while she is typing the text. There is little distance between the implied author and the main narrator, the fictional author, JC, in *Diary of a Bad Year*. In *Summertime*, the distance between the fictional author and the real Coetzee is increased. The fictionalized author, John, writes in the third person in his notebooks, as the flesh-and-blood Coetzee had done in his previous fictional memoirs, but John's death renders him strangely passive in what is supposed to be his life story. He is unable to respond to the narratives of those who knew him, he is no longer there to tell the narrative of his own life and he has become a minor character in the lives of others. The narratives of the other character narrators⁷ in *Summertime* are presented as transcribed

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"Character narrator" is a term James Phelan (2005:2) uses to describe a narrator who is also a character in the narrative he or she narrates. This term proves useful to my study, since the position of the many characters who are also narrators in both *Summertime* and *Die sneeuslaper*, influence our judgement of them as narrators and vice versa.

interviews, implying that time has elapsed since these interviews took place and, furthermore, that these narratives have been mediated by another, the fictional biographer called Mr Vincent. This distancing technique further emphasises the synthetic nature of the text, the hand of the implied author always visible. But the use of contesting narratives also refracts the voice of the implied author. Coetzee uses the term “countervoices” in conjunction with the Bakhtinian concept of “dialogism”. It is perhaps worthwhile to consider how Coetzee himself relates these two terms to each other:

There is a true sense in which writing is dialogic: a matter of awakening the countervoices in oneself and embarking upon speech with them. It is some measure of a writer’s seriousness whether he does evoke/invoke those countervoices in himself, that is, step down from the position of what Lacan calls “the subject supposed to know”. (Coetzee, 1992:65)

For Coetzee, to “evoke/invoke” these “countervoices” when writing fiction seems to be an ethical act of self-searching on the part of the author to expose doubts, weaknesses and failings in and to the self, questioning the self, instead of protecting it by providing an authoritative and final answer. The authorial voice is refracted, but not silent, it “speaks” or responds to the countervoices which it awakens. The words “true sense” in the above quotation seem to indicate that for Coetzee there is something lacking in Bakhtin’s definition of dialogism. In a later essay, Coetzee explains what he sees as a shortcoming in Bakhtin’s definition of dialogism:

... [w]hat is missing in Bakhtin ... [is] ... a clear statement that dialogism as exemplified in the novels of Dostoevsky is a matter not of ideological position, still less of novelistic technique, but of the most radical intellectual and even spiritual courage. (Coetzee, 2002:148)

This “radical intellectual and spiritual courage” is a characteristic which Coetzee attributes to the author of dialogical prose. It takes courage to question oneself, but it also takes courage to expose this self-searching to the eyes of others, to the authorial audience and flesh-and-blood readers, allowing them to read and judge for themselves, instead of providing a single overriding and closed authorial interpretation.

I am particularly interested in the ethical aspect of “evoking/invoking” “countervoices” in a text, in the “intellectual and spiritual courage” which Coetzee deems necessary to write dialogic fiction and attempts to “evoke/invoke” in his work. To analyse the ethical aspect of the various layers of the narrative in *Summertime*, I will use James Phelan’s rhetorical model for analysing the ethical positions of characters, narrators, the implied author and the authorial audience, as discussed in the last section of the introduction to this dissertation. Phelan’s model is based on those of narrative theorists such as Gerard E. Genette, but he pays particular attention to the way in which the ethical positions of characters, narrators and the implied author influence the way in which the authorial audience and the reader judge and respond to each of these ethical positions and to the text as a whole. Although Phelan states that he did not employ the arguments of theorists like Levinas and Bakhtin to develop his model, it is not difficult to proceed from his method of analysis to a more theoretical approach. As he explains:

[T]he doubled communicative situation of fictional narration ... is itself a *layered* ethical situation. Any character’s action will typically have an ethical dimension, and any narrator’s treatment of the events will inevitably convey certain attitudes that, among other things, indicate his or her sense of responsibility to and regards for the told and the audience. Similarly the author’s treatment of the narrator and the authorial audience will indicate something of his or her ethical commitments toward the telling, the told, and the audience. Further, the audience’s response to the narrative will indicate their

commitments to and attitudes toward the author, the narrator, the narrative situation, and to the values expressed in the narrative. (Phelan, 2005:20)

Phelan's description of the "layered ethical situation" encountered in narrative fiction to some extent corresponds to Bakhtin's idea of the double-voiced nature of prose, in which the flesh-and-blood author uses "another's speech in another's language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way" (Bakhtin, 1981:324). I highlight this connection between Phelan and Bakhtin to open the door to Coetzee's own concern with the ethics involved in dialogic writing. Bakhtin's discussion of the "dialogic" nature of communication (an argument that he later applied to novelistic writing, as discussed earlier in this section) is useful when considering narrative as rhetorical act (specifically when one consider the way in which Phelan employs his rhetorical approach to the novel as an act of communication):

The utterance is filled with *dialogic overtones*, and they must be taken into account in order to understand fully the style of the utterance. After all, our thought itself – philosophical, scientific, and artistic – is born and shaped in the process of interaction and struggle with others' thought, and this cannot but be reflected in the forms that verbally express our thought as well ... The other's speech thus has a dual expression: its own, that is, the other's, and the expression of the utterance that encloses the speech. But from the very beginning, the utterance is constructed while taking into account possible responsive reactions, for whose sake, in essence, it is actually created ... From the very beginning, the speaker expects a response from [these others], an active responsive understanding. The entire utterance is constructed, as it were, in anticipation of encountering this response (Bakhtin, 1986:92-94).

Narration, like other forms of communication, is uttered with, in the case of written fiction, the reader's response in mind. In *Summertime*, the fictional biographer Mr Vincent seems to have this type of dialogic writing in mind when he points out that "What Coetzee writes

there [in his notebooks and novels] cannot be trusted, not as a factual record – not because he was a liar but because he was a fictioneer. In his letters he is making up a fiction of himself for his correspondents; in his diary he is doing much the same for his own eyes, or perhaps for posterity” (226). To this argument one of the interviewees Sophie Denoël responds: “But what if we are all fictioneers, as you call Coetzee?” (226). She argues that John “believed our life-stories are ours to construct as we wish, within or even against the constraints imposed by the real world” (227). The authorial audience is alerted to the different and often opposing views and motives of the narrators, and since no single narrative can be seen as authoritative, the authorial audience must identify and interpret the “dialogical overtones” present in the overlapping and contesting narratives. At the same time, authorial authority is both affirmed and questioned. If one follows Sophie’s explanation of John’s argument, the author has the right to present his narrative as he wishes, but that does not mean that the narratees (Mr Vincent and past, present and future readers of John’s writing) or the authorial audience (the implied readers of *Summertime*) can take any particular narrative at face value. I will now move on to a closer analysis of the narrative ethics at work in *Summertime*, to see how the flesh-and-blood author of *Summertime* uses the ethical positioning of the characters, the narrators and the implied author in the novel to “evoke/ invoke” “countervoices” in himself and how the reader responds to the ethical positions and values revealed in the process.

The ethical position of the characters in relation to each other – how they behave and how they judge others – is the first ethical position to be considered in Phelan’s model. This ethical position determines, but also self-consciously anticipates the reader’s response to *Summertime*. In the entries in the section titled “Notebooks 1972 – 75”, the authorial audience is introduced to John Coetzee, the fictional author, and to his situation and reaction to events at the time when he wrote these notes. Thus, for example, John writes the following after reading newspaper articles on political violence perpetrated by the state on its own citizens and the state’s “bland denials”, that “[h]e reads the reports and feels soiled” (4). He considers his father’s distaste towards and careful avoidance of news on the crimes of both state and revolutionaries and asks: “As a response to a moral dilemma it is feeble; yet is his own response – fits of rage and despair – any better?” (7). John is troubled by the events around him but feels unable to respond with defiance and scorn as Breyten Breytenbach had done. John is presented as a man of principle, keenly aware of the ethical problems that confront him, but unsure how best to respond to these problems and troubled by his own inability to react in a morally appropriate way. Each diary entry in the notebooks ends with cursory notes written at a later time, addressed to John himself, to be expanded on at a future date. The first, for example, reads “To be expanded on: his father’s response to the times as compared to his own; their differences, their (overriding) similarities” (6). We learn later that these cursory notes were “memos to himself, written in 1999 or 2000, when [John] was thinking of adapting those particular entries for a book” (20). In this fairly “raw” and unfinished form the notebooks present a seemingly candid and authentic narrative, one not necessarily created for the eyes of others, but for personal use. The reader gains insight into the thoughts and concerns of the deceased, and this insight disposes the reader to sympathise with John. The notes also act as a counterpoint to the image of the author as presented in the

interviews to follow. It is the first countervoice evident in the text; two countervoices, in fact, if one considers that time elapsed between the writing of the original notes and the later additions.

The second character we encounter, the first interviewee, is Julia Frankl, a woman with whom John had an affair. She is frustrated at the time, stuck at home with a child and she knows that her husband is being unfaithful to her. She becomes involved in an affair with John, despite the fact that she considers John “socially inept” (20) and feels that he has “no sexual presence whatsoever” (24). Because Julia is so frank about her actions and the events that follow, the reader is moved to admire her for her honesty and self-knowledge and also to accept her account as truthful, even though it presents John as a minor character. Julia’s view of John paints him as a somewhat laughable character, one towards whom the reader, like Julia, might respond with bemused sympathy or irritation.

The second character to be interviewed is Margot Jonker, a cousin with whom John had been very close as a child. Margot is more sympathetic towards John than Julia, but her depiction of John corresponds with that of Julia in many ways. She describes John as “the lost sheep” in the family (90), a viewpoint which confirms her own compassionate nature as the girl who “blocks her ears when the slaughter-lamb bleats in fear” (91). When John and Margot is stranded next to a road for a whole night because he insists on fixing his car himself, even Margot’s patience wears thin. The reader might be moved to be less critical of John and to appreciate Margot’s compassion, even as Margot’s account confirms Julia’s description of John.

The third character to be interviewed is Adriana Nascimento, a Brazilian widow and former dancer. She is concerned because her daughter seems to be enamoured with John, her English tutor. Adriana, like Julia, is scornful about John’s appearance and manners. She

remarks that “he was no god ... badly dressed, with badly cut hair”, he strikes her as “not suited to marriage”, and notes that he has “not learnt to hide his feelings, which is the first step towards civilized manners” (160). Because the narratee (Mr Vincent) and the authorial audience knows Adriana’s situation – she is a woman with two young daughters, stranded in a strange country, constantly wary of being taken advantage of – they might be moved to sympathise with her. The narratee and authorial audience also have prior knowledge provided by the previous two narratives and they are aware that Adriana is biased against John because of her and her daughters’ precarious situation. There is humour at the expense of John to be found in this narrative, as there was in Julia’s. Adriana describes his dancing as follows: “He moved as though his body were a horse that he was riding, a horse that did not like its rider and was resisting” (183). But she also argues that “his presence in the room took away all my pleasure. I tried to ignore him, but he would not be ignored, watching me, devouring my life” (183). This image places John in the role of the predator, even though he means no harm and have thus far been described more as a nuisance than a threat.

The fourth interview starts with Mr Vincent reading from John’s notebooks, which describes the situation in which the fifth character of importance, Martin, met John, namely when they were both candidates competing for a job at the University of Cape Town. Mr Vincent asks Martin to remark on or respond to the diary entries. Martin claims that he can speak on behalf of John, because “he and I shared an attitude toward South Africa” (209). Martin, a fellow academic and friend of John, perhaps provides a more objective view than the women previously interviewed, but he does not shy away from criticism, and his criticism confirms some of the qualities ascribed to John in the previous interviews, such as John’s insistence to do his own manual labour and his general impracticality. He explains the ethical problems he and John shared as white South Africans: “Broadly speaking, he and I

shared an attitude toward South Africa and our continued presence there, a birthright, but the basis of that right was fraudulent. Our presence was grounded in a crime, colonial conquest, perpetuated by apartheid” (208). Mr Vincent asks Martin whether he thinks John’s approach to feelings as “provisional” would have extended to personal relationships. To this Martin answers: “I don’t know. You are the biographer” (211). His refusal to make a judgment based on limited knowledge could be seen as a sign of integrity, a quality that might lead readers to accept his testimony as truthful.

The interview with the last interviewee, Sophie Denoël, confirms Martin’s description of John as an academic, but also the impressions gained from the interviews with the other women in his life. She describes him as a “well-prepared” lecturer (223) and an “idealist” and their relationship as “comico-sentimental” (241). Sophie, like the other interviewees, challenges the biographer on his choice of interviewees and the ethical implications of his approach. Her concern with the ethics of providing information without John’s consent seems honourable and establishes her as a credible witness.

The other character present in the novel is of course Mr Vincent, the biographer. He is not part of John’s past, but through his questions and especially in his response to criticism from the various interviewees, we learn about his character and intentions. Thus he explains to Julia that he did not meet with John while he was alive because he did not want to feel an “obligation towards him” and wanted to be “free to write” what he wanted. Margot’s objections to Mr Vincent’s third-person rendering of her narrative seems to suggest that he might have introduced words and descriptions that she feels are not hers. Later Mr Vincent defends his choice of interviewees to Martin. He explains that “I am not interested in coming to a final judgment on Coetzee. I leave that to history. What I am doing is telling the story of a stage in his life, or if we can’t have a single story then several stories from several

perspectives” (216). In response Martin asks: “And the sources you have selected have no axes to grind, no ambitions of their own to pronounce final judgment on Coetzee?” (217), to which Mr Vincent responds with silence. Martin adds that “It seems strange to be doing the biography of a writer while ignoring his writing. But perhaps I am wrong. Perhaps I am out of date” (218). On the whole Mr Vincent seems to be earnest about his task, but his research strategy is questioned repeatedly and this undermines his credibility. This in turn has implications for the narratees’ and authorial audience’s judgment of the interviews and biography as a balanced and credible account. If the various interviews are mediated by a biographer who cannot be trusted to give a balanced account of events, we have no way of knowing what is true and what is not.

The final section of the book consists of undated fragments from John’s notebook. In this section there is a greater sense of eloquence, as John considers his relationship with his father in an increasingly disconsolate tone, describing his inability to comfort his father in his loneliness and illness. John goes to sports games with his father because it “is the strongest surviving bond between them” (245). John seems particularly self-critical at this time, listing his seemingly futile attempts to provide comfort to his father. At one point he describes himself as a “dull, dutiful son” (247) and later as “a gloomy fellow” (248). To these self-deprecating remarks the authorial audience, like the other characters in the novel, might respond with bemused irritation, but also with sympathy, because John, whatever his faults might be, seems candid in his self-criticism. This section also provides a counterpoint to the interviews, as the first section from the notebooks did. All of the characters discussed in the above section also act as narrators in *Summertime*. This means that the words and actions of the characters in the novel will influence how the reader judges each character as narrator and how the reader judges their narratives. I will therefore use the insights gained

from my analysis of the characters in *Summertime* and employ these to analyse the second ethical position as described by Phelan, the ethical positioning of the narrators.

3

The second ethical position is that of the narrators “in relation to the told, the telling and the audience” (Phelan, 2005:23). There are three levels of narration in *Summertime*. Firstly, there is the meta-narrative about a would-be biographer who has collected material and conducted interviews to provide a narrative about an acclaimed author, now deceased. This meta-narrative is created by the implied author for the authorial audience or implied reader. On this level the distance between narrator and implied author is negligible, the narrator is silent, simply presenting the reader with the materials at hand. On a second level, the fictional biographer encountered in the meta-narrative has created his own narrative about a particular time in the deceased author’s life, by presenting the author’s notebooks, choosing particular interviewees and putting specific questions to the people he interviews. In this narrative the narratees (the future readers of the biography) and the authorial audience are also presented with the reactions of the interviewees to the biographer’s questions and his choice of materials, so that the interaction between biographer and interviewees becomes part of this narrative. On the third narrative level, each interviewee constructs a particular narrative of their own, in which they describe their interaction with the deceased author during the time in question. Their narratives are addressed to the narratees, represented by the interviewer and the potential audience of his biography.

There is no introduction to the first or second level of narration. The nature and purpose of the material presented to the authorial audience and the narratees is only revealed in the first transcribed interview, when the biographer explains the reason for the interview to Dr Julia Frankl. As in Barthes' description of a text in part one of this chapter, these different narratives, these "writings", enter into "mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation with each other" to create the intertwined and layered text of *Summertime*. Thus for example, Julia, the first interviewee, is quite adamant about the fact that she, and not John, is the main subject of her narrative. As she explains:

Mr Vincent, I am perfectly aware it is John you want to hear about, not me. But the only story involving John that I can tell, or the only one I am prepared to tell, is this one, namely the story of my life and his part in it, which is quite different, quite another matter, from the story of his life and my part in it (43).

The "stories" told by Mr Vincent, Julia and the other narrators interact on and across the various levels of narration, informing and influencing the reader's judgment not only of the parts but also of the whole. There is no single authoritative authorial voice to interpret and evaluate characters and events. Without a clear authorial voice, the reader does indeed seem to be the site where the "multiplicity" to be found in the text is "focused" – it is up to the reader to interpret what has been put before him or her. Barthes uses the term "reader", but it is the implied reader or authorial audience he seems to have in mind, rather than the flesh-and-blood reader. He describes the reader as "without history, biography, psychology" and no longer "personal". This is the authorial audience to whom the implied author directs his narrative, the "ideal audience"⁸ of the text, the audience the flesh-and-blood reader attempts to enter when reading the text.

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The definition of the authorial audience is that of James Phelan (2005: 213).

The fact that the various narrators' narratives corroborate each other to some extent, for example in their description of John as an awkward lover and impractical idealist, seems to confirm the narratives to be fairly reliable, even when biased to show the character narrator or John in a particular light. But then all the interviewees also question the methodology of Mr Vincent, casting doubt on his judgment and in turn on the supposed biography, including their own narratives. The result, a continual emphasis on the extremely subjective nature of any personal narrative, might be seen as a warning on the part of the implied author to the authorial audience, not to judge any of the narratives, including the meta-narrative, at face value.

Despite the intimate tone, John's notebooks are not necessarily more authoritative than the narratives of the interviewees, although this is only apparent if the reader knows the biographical details of the real J.M. Coetzee (as discussed in part one of this chapter) or has read as far as the interview with Sophie, in which she and Mr Vincent alert the reader to the author as "fictioneer". But the placement of the extracts from the notebooks at the beginning and end of the text does provide context and a countervoice to the countervoices of others that are found in between. At the same time, at least on the second and third level of narration, that of the biographer and his interviewees, the fact that these notebooks were intended for personal use and were not published before the death of the author, might give them some authority over the narratives of the interviewees to follow, as the interviewees provide their narratives with the knowledge that it will be made public. They are therefore more likely to create their narratives with a future audience in mind. Both the implied author and the biographer as narrator can be seen to be at work here, using the order of presentation to provide both authorial audience and narratees with the absent fictional author's own voice

as countervoice. When the authorial audience and narratees read the interviews to follow, they will read them with the impressions left by the notebooks in mind, while the undated notebook fragments at the end of the text provide a final perspective on what has gone before. The notebooks by no means provide a complete chronological narrative of the author's life during the time in question, nor does it fill the gaps in the interviews to follow. The implied author leaves it to his authorial audience to fill the gaps according to their own knowledge and judgment, inviting them to take part in the communication process and creating what Phelan (2005:59) calls a "feedback loop".

According to Phelan (2005:49), his rhetorical model of narration "focuses on the relations among implied author, narrator, and authorial audience; more specifically on the activities of the narrator as teller and as discloser and on those of the authorial audience as reinterpreter of what is told" (2005:49). The reliability of the narrator greatly influences the authorial audience's ethical engagement with both the narrator and his or her narrative and it is therefore essential to consider this aspect of the narratives in *Summertime*, to consider how the reliability of the various narrators, including the meta-narrator, influences our judgment of the various narratives as well as the whole text. The extent to which the reader accepts Julia's description of John as reliable or unreliable, for example, is influenced by our perception of her own character and her motivation to describe John in a particular light. Phelan defines three roles for narrators, namely "reporting"; "reading" (on the axis of "knowledge and perception") and "regarding" (on the axis of "ethics and evaluation"). In this instance Phelan's terms "reading" and "regarding" obfuscate rather than clarify matters, and I will employ more commonly known terms "interpreting" and "evaluating" in my analysis. Phelan (2005:49) explains that a narrator is considered unreliable when he or she "deviates from the account the implied author would offer". Despite her seeming

forthrightness, it is difficult to judge how close Julia's version of events is to the truth. Julia is aware of her direct audience, the biographer, but also of the possibility of the audience of the biography in future, which is perhaps the reason why she is adamant to tell *her* story. She probably reports facts and events reliably, but is somewhat unreliable when she interprets and evaluates these facts and events, because she wants to emphasise her own role as main character, instead of telling a story about John, as the implied author might have preferred. That the implied author might have preferred a story about John seems credible if one accepts Sophie's argument about John's right to construct his own life story as an argument shared by the implied author. The function of this self-confessed bias seems to be to alert the authorial audience about the potential unreliability of all the narratives to follow, including that of Mr Vincent, the biographer and interviewer. Julia addresses the above argument directly to Mr Vincent in his role as narratee, but at the same time, his own role as narrator highlights the second addressee with whom a narrator is able to communicate, namely the authorial audience. The implied author engages with the authorial audience in this instance, involving them in a continual questioning of the reliability of various narrators and narratives, making it all but impossible to construct a single authoritative narrative or make a precise judgment about John and the other character narrators.

In the transcript of the second interview, Mr Vincent explains to Margot Jonker that he has rewritten their original interview to relay it in the third person, in Margot's "voice", and that he has dramatized her narrative, inventing dialogue where there had been none. He has also left out his own questions, so that the narrative is uninterrupted. Within the first few pages, Margot, the original narrator, objects to Mr Vincent's version of her narrative. Mr Vincent argues that "I have not rewritten it, I have simply recast it as narrative. Changing the form should have no effect on the content" (91). But a little later in the interview Margot

asks: “Did I really tell you that?” (90), and further on once again complains that: “Something sounds wrong, but I can’t put my finger on it. All I can say, your version doesn’t sound like what I told you.” (91). The authorial audience is once again alerted to the possibility of unreliable narration by both Mr Vincent and Margot, but it is difficult to determine which of them is misinterpreting or misevaluating. It illustrates how the differing values, perspectives and aims of different narrators can influence the reporting, interpretation and evaluation of the same narrative.

Casting Margot’s narrative in the third person further complicates matters, because the distance it creates between the original narrator (Margot) and her narrative seems to make her doubt whether it is her own narrative at all. She doubts the reliability of Mr Vincent, but it is not clear to what extent he has really changed her narrative and whether she now simply feels uncomfortable with her own narrative when hearing it rewritten from a more objective distance. Margot has become audience to her own narrative, and at that, one augmented by the biographer. Because of the shift to the third person in Mr. Vincent’s transcription, the narrative is distorted. The voice we hear is not quite that of Margot, despite the fact that Mr Vincent insists that he has only changed the pronouns. The reader is constantly reminded of this distortion, both by Margot’s objections and by the sometimes too eloquent word choices and descriptions of place and context that do not quite fit into the scope of Margot’s narrative, as she herself admits. Thus, for example, the owner of the café is at one stage called “Mevrou the proprietress” and at another stage there is a reference to the “unabashed curiosity” of the children and the fact that they “filch” sugar cubes (103). These words and phrases seem out of place for a rural Afrikaner housewife, even if she is a particularly intelligent and perceptive person. The vocabulary seems more like that of a more objective narrator, someone with more distance from the people and places described. The

term “Mevrou”, for example, suggests the irony perceived by an outsider, rather than a woman like Margot, a woman of a similar background to the person to whom the form of address refers. The description of the changing socio-political situation in small rural towns is similarly not something that Margot would necessarily have mentioned in an interview about her relationship with John, even if she were aware of these changes. Her reaction to the interviewer has shown her to be a guarded person, uncomfortable about the thought that certain parts of her narrative might be published in print. In fact, the version of the narrative provided by Mr. Vincent sounds closer to John’s own musings in his notebooks than anything else. The biographer has assured Margot that she can review the written narrative and indicate which parts should still be changed. The source of the irony and insight displayed at times in Margot’s narrative remains ambiguous, and it is once again difficult to make a definite judgment about either Margot or Mr Vincent as narrators or the narrative as a truthful and credible account of what has happened. This ambiguity creates discomfort and critical distance on the part of the authorial audience. There is no authoritative version of events to rely on, the truth is never clear.

There are some aspects in the narratives of John and Julia that are confirmed in Margot’s narrative, though. These include John’s seeming inability to reach out emotionally and his sometimes elaborate and not always successful attempts to make ethical choices that refuse the role of privileged white male. Despite the lack of a single authoritative version of events, certain characteristics begin to emerge. Here the implied author becomes increasingly visible, exploring the character, thoughts and actions of his fictional alter ego from the perspectives of the people who knew him. The implied author exposes failure and foolishness without hesitation, but not without humour and irony. John might not be J.M. Coetzee, and this book is not an autobiography, but it is easy for the authorial audience to

transfer their appreciation for the honesty perceived in the narratives of both John and the implied author and to react with sympathy and trust towards these two parties, even as they realise that none of the narratives, not even that of the implied author, can be accepted as entirely truthful and unbiased.

The fourth narrator, Adriana, seems reliable enough, less intent on providing just her side of the story than Julia, and, unlike Margot, unencumbered by childhood loyalties or concern about propriety. At the most she is emphatic to show how little influence John had in her life, and so she is perhaps more dismissive of him than she might have been had she not been trying to keep herself and her daughters out of the biography. Thus Adriana warns Mr. Vincent that “[I]t is not such a long story, the story of me and Mr Coetzee. I am sorry if it is a disappointment to you. You come all this way, and now you find there was no grand love affair with a dancer, just a brief infatuation that never grew into anything” (173).

As a colleague and friend of John, Martin proves himself critical enough to see John’s faults and those of the biographer to establish himself as a fairly objective and reliable narrator. Thus his criticism of Mr Vincent’s methodology carries more weight than that of Margot, for example, who is concerned about what people would think if they read her testimony, or the self-confident Julia, adamant to paint herself as the main character in her narrative. Because there is little distance between Martin and the implied author, his criticism of the approach Mr Vincent has chosen in his biography might also be interpreted as a comment by the implied author on the methods of biographers who are more interested in exposing sensational personal information than analysing an author’s writing. Martin’s more critical and objective narrative seems to corroborate some character traits exposed in John’s narrative in his notebooks, such as his concern about his inability to provide an adequate ethical response to the political situation in South Africa. As such, Martin’s

narrative breaks with the focus in the previous narratives on John's interaction with women, providing a further dimension to John's life and character. Martin might also be seen as a proxy for the implied author. Like John and J.M. Coetzee, he is an English white male academic employed in the English department at UCT in the seventies. As such, one could consider his criticism of Mr Vincent as that of the implied author as well, a signal to the authorial audience of the type of critical response a biography like that of Mr Vincent might elicit in academic circles. The authorial audience cannot ignore the impressions of John as a hopeless and clumsy lover, provided in the previous three interviews, but they might judge these narratives and that of the biographer more critically after reading Martin's narrative.

Mr Vincent's reliability as narrator becomes increasingly suspect as we progress from Julia's interview to that of Sophie. What becomes clear here is that Mr Vincent's narrative cannot be trusted any more than that of Julia and Margot, despite his professed quest for objectivity and his good intentions. Phelan (2005:60) argues that, in situations where the implied author "blocks our access to conclusive signals about how to respond, the effect is ... to transfer responsibility for disambiguating the scene to the flesh-and-blood reader, and the deciding factor in how we each carry out that responsibility is *our individual ethical beliefs as they interact with our understanding of [the narrator] as a particular character in a particular situation*".⁹ In his choice of certain interviewees and his decision not to include John's own diaries and letters in his biography, Mr Vincent has allowed his own interests to shape the narrative. Since all the narrators are to some extent proven to be unreliable, the authorial audience cannot make any clear inferences as to what the truth might be. The

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This argument is made in reference to the narrator and implied author in *Remains of the day*, but it seems equally relevant to me in the case of *Summertime*. The emphasis in the quotation is Phelan's.

implied author seems to be at work here, illustrating that no one narrative should be accepted as an absolute truth and that there is no such thing as a truly objective perspective. The ethical position of the implied author has already come into question in the above discussion of the position of the various narrators in *Summertime*, but I will now move on to consider the position of the implied author and the response of the flesh-and blood reader to the ethical positions of characters, narrators and implied author in the following section.

4

All of the narratives in *Summertime* focus to some extent on the fictional author, John Coetzee. They describe his character and his interaction with various people who knew him when he was a young man living in Cape Town. The interviewees are all unreliable narrators to the extent that they insist on interpreting and evaluating the narrative of their interaction with John in a particular way; they often resist the biographer's attempts to shape their narratives with his questions. The narratees and authorial audience are informed about this unreliability from the start, and are therefore able to read the narratives with this subjectivity in mind. The narratees and authorial audience do not react to the subjectivity of the narrators with mistrust and indignation, because the narrators are doing what they have been asked to do and are honest about it.

Despite the isolated and subjective nature of their various narratives, the narrators' opinions of John do correspond to a certain degree. He is described as an awkward lover, exasperating to Julia and his cousin in his impractical insistence to do his own hard labour, an idealist when it came to politics and his view of Africa and Africans, according to his

colleagues, aware of his duties towards family and lovers, but unable to reach out and provide real comfort to those who need it, and a talented but not a great writer. Similarly, all five interviewees criticise Mr Vincent's approach to the biography. The fact that they all judge his choice of material and interviewees as inappropriate or insufficient seems to confirm his unreliability. The authorial audience is dependent on the implied author for signs of reliability and unreliability. We cannot compare the information provided in the interviews and notebooks with outside sources. It is only in the instances where the various narratives of the characters overlap and correspond, that the intentions of the implied author are revealed and we can judge the narrative as a whole. In *Summertime*, as in J.M. Coetzee's other fictional memoirs, the reader is offered a glimpse of Coetzee's exploration of the life of a young man much like himself and the impression left on those who knew him. In an interview with David Attwell, J.M. Coetzee says the following about autobiographical writing:

Let me treat this as a question about telling the truth rather than as a question about autobiography: everything that you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it. Because in a larger sense all writing is autobiography: everything you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it. The real question is: This massive autobiographical writing-enterprise that fills a life, this enterprise of self-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? (Coetzee, 1992:17)

This response seems to me to resonate to what Phelan has to say about the author Kazuo Ishiguro in a discussion of the ethics of *Remains of the Day*:

Ishiguro's communications to us, by contrast with Stevens's, are themselves a generous offer to share human warmth. Although the veil of fiction and the filter of Stevens mean

that Ishiguro is not engaging in direct disclosure about himself, he is, nevertheless, sharing his concerns about lives not lived, sacrifices made for the wrong reasons, whole dreams irredeemably lost. And that sharing is one that implies a deep trust in our ability to read the disclosures behind his many strategies of indirection – and, in the key moment of the narrative, to fend for ourselves. *Remains of the Day*, in that respect, is itself an ethical act of the highest order. (Phelan, 2005:65)

To present a self-reflective text like *Summertime* to the gaze of the flesh-and-blood reader, to leave the final judgment of all ethical positions in that text to the reader, is an act of trust on the implied author's part. To write with the reader's response in mind, to refrain from making judgments on the reader's behalf, is an act of generosity, but also humility. Coetzee the flesh-and-blood author has time and again used fictionalised "versions of self" to awaken the countervoices in himself and to write "truths" about the self, but the issues he explores in *Summertime* are no less personal because they are examined from behind the "veil" of fiction. The issues that the fictional John concerns himself with are ones the real Coetzee has raised before in both his fiction and essays. At the same time J.M. Coetzee uses others, the other narrators encountered in *Summertime*, to tell the story of the fictional John Coetzee's life, or rather, his (often minor) role in the lives of others. This does not seem like a strategy to avoid scrutiny, indeed, John's portrayal is less flattering exactly because most of the narrators consider John as a minor character, and a weak one at that. The author's narrative is refracted and the authority of the authorial voice continually questioned, while the reader's authority is strengthened – it is up to him or her to engage with and in the end to judge characters, narrators and the intentions of the implied author of the text.

In the next chapter I will consider how Marlene van Niekerk in the four interlinked short stories in *Die sneeu-slaper* similarly uses narrative strategies to explore her concerns about the ethics of narration and ethics in general to the gaze of the reader. Using Phelan's

model to analyse the ethical position of characters, narrators and the implied author should enable me to compare how the approaches of Coetzee and Van Niekerk in *Summertime* and *Die sneuslaper* coincide or differ and what insights can be gained from these similarities and differences.

Chapter Two: Writing the ambivalences of being in *Die sneeuslaper*

1

Uiteindelik moet die kunswerk dus funksioneer soos 'n erotiese spel van tergende onthouding en uitstel. Dit is in ieder geval wat ekself wil hê as ek lees: 'n Weiering van sluiting, of dan wel sluiting maar altyd teen die horison van die vitale ekses van Andersheid wat steeds uitgesluit word op die moment as die ingeslotene afgesluit word. (Burger, 2009:156)^{10 11}

Ek sien myself eerder as 'n ondervraer van die stories waarmee mense probeer om die vloed van die tyd en die ambivalensies van die bestaan te probeer bestendig of vereenvoudig, totaliseer of reduceer. Ek verstaan skrywerskap as die opdrag om my, soos die Nederlanders sou sê, teen myself in die weer te stel, van myself te bly verskil, of liever, om die alteriteite in myself so ver as moontlik te probeer mobiliseer, en om so te

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As in the introduction of this dissertation, I include my own free translations of all Afrikaans excerpts for the benefit of English readers who do not have a good grasp of Afrikaans.

11

In the end the artwork must function as an erotic game of teasing withholding and postponement. In any case, this is what I want when I read: A refusal of closure, or closure but then always against the horizon of the vital excess of Otherness that is still excluded during the moment when the included is concluded. (Burger, 2009:156)

probeer skryf dat dit selfs my eie funksionele verstaan van sake ontloop. (Van Niekerk, 2009:134)¹²

The excerpts above are taken from an interview conducted by Willie Burger with Marlene van Niekerk about her writing and Van Niekerk's acceptance speech on being awarded the Helgaard Steyn Prize. The use of terms and phrases such as "totalise", "alterity" and "Otherness that is still excluded", calls to mind Emmanuel Levinas' discussion of ethics as a response to the strangeness of the other, as an understanding that the other is "irreducible to the I" (Levinas, 1991:43). For Van Niekerk, the invocation of the other in writing, even when there is seeming closure, reminds the readers and the author of that which cannot be included. If it is the function of art to refuse closure or provide it only against the horizon of otherness, then it is also the responsibility of the artist, the author in this case, to invoke the other in her writing. But writing about the other is fraught with danger. How should a writer respond to the other and what responsibility does he bear towards the always unknowable other? In this chapter I will consider how Van Niekerk explores questions about the relation between writing and real life and the ethical responsibility of the writer as artist in the four stories in *Die sneuslaper*, narratives that in their very structure refuse closure and through their subject matter and language invoke the alterity of the other, manifested most clearly in the recurring character of the vagrant, but also in other aspects of the stories. The stories all contain frame narratives, narratives within narratives. I believe that these frame narratives are examples of what James Phelan calls "lyrical narrative". In such a text, the "text focuses

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I see myself rather as a questioner of the stories with which people try to stabilise or simplify, totalise or reduce the flood of time and the ambivalences of being. I understand writing as a command ... to differ from myself, or rather, to mobilize the alterities in me as far as possible, and to try and write so that it exceeds even my own functional understanding of things. (Van Niekerk, 2009:134)

on revealing the dynamics of the character narrator's current situation", the present tense dominates in this type of narrative and "directs our primary interest to the present situation of the character narrator" and "the implied author invites the authorial audience to enter sympathetically into the character narrator's perspective but does not ask us to render ethical judgment of that perspective or of the character narrator" but rather "on the underlying value structure of the lyrical narrative" (Phelan, 2005:158).

To analyse aspects such as the influence of these frame narratives on the reader's judgment, I will use a combination of Phelan's and Newton's models, as discussed in part 3 of the introduction to this dissertation. Newton (1995:18) lists three categories of narrative ethics: (1) narrational ethics ("saying", the consequences of the narrative act itself); (2) representational ethics (the costs incurred in fictionalizing oneself and others); and (3) hermeneutic ethics (ethico-critical accountability which acts of reading hold their readers accountable to). Narrational ethics includes two of the ethical positions defined by Phelan, namely the position of the characters and the position of the narrators to the telling, to the told, and to the authorial audience¹³ (Phelan, 2005:23). Representational ethics is the equivalent of the ethical positioning of the implied author to the telling, to the told, and to the authorial audience, while hermeneutic ethics concerns the response of the reader in relation to the set of values, beliefs and locations operating in the positioning of characters, narrators and the implied author. Phelan places an emphasis on close analysis, while Newton takes a more theoretical approach. This combined approach seems necessary because Van Niekerk uses such an explicitly theoretical framework in *Die sneeustlaper*, a framework that

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As mentioned in section 1 of the introduction of this dissertation, Phelan uses the term "authorial audience" to refer to what is also commonly known as the "implied reader", or the ideal audience the flesh-and-blood reader tries to enter when reading a text. (Phelan 2005:213)

is evident in the structure and narrative strategy, but also in the content, in the choice of characters and events that are depicted in the stories.

2

Narrational ethics, according to Newton, is what narratologists call the “narrative situation” or “narrative act”, and which he, following Levinas, refers to as “Saying”, the “dialogic system of exchanges at work among tellers, listeners, and witnesses, and the intersubjective responsibilities and claims that follow from storytelling” (Newton, 1995:18). In *Die sneuslaper*, the narrators often appeal to the narratees¹⁴ and the authorial audience to act as witnesses to a confession; the narratees and authorial audience are expected to listen and respond to an explanatory narrative. The narratees, though, rarely seem to respond appropriately, if at all. The narratees also rely on the narrator to provide insight into a particular matter, but the insight provided is in the end often ambiguous, and there is always a sense of loss, of chances lost, insights only half grasped, and an attempt on the part of the narrator to atone for a failure towards the other. To consider how the author brings this about, I will use Phelan’s model to analyse the positioning of characters and narrators in the four stories in *Die sneuslaper*.

I will first consider the ethical positioning of characters in *Die sneuslaper*, and how this influences the reader’s judgment of these characters. The four stories in *Die sneuslaper*

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I will use the term “narratee(s)” to refer to “the audience directly addressed by the narrator”, as defined by Phelan. The narratee “may or may not coincide with the ideal narrative audience” (Phelan, 2005:217). In *Die sneuslaper* there is a clear distinction between narratee and authorial audience, and the narratees are named and have a specific role to play, even if it is a passive one.

are intertwined, with characters in one story appearing in another story, often unsettling the impressions gained before. In “Die swanefluisteraar” (The swan whisperer) prof. van Niekerk, a fictional version of the flesh-and-blood author and the character narrator in this story, in a lecture on creative writing and the role of art, tells a story about an exchange with a creative writing student of hers. Prof. Van Niekerk (I will call Van Niekerk the character “prof. Van Niekerk” from here on onwards to differentiate between the character and the implied author) encouraged one of her creative writing students, Kasper Olwagen, to take up a writer’s residence in the Netherlands to find inspiration, as she considers him an aesthete too sensitive to write about South African reality. Not long after this, she receives letters from Olwagen, which she initially dismisses, a fact that she admits she later regrets.

Olwagen writes to prof. Van Niekerk, narrating a story of his own. One day, while waiting for inspiration, he spotted a mysterious vagrant outside his window, who seems able to summon swans with his incoherent whisperings and gestures. Olwagen starts following and observing the swan whisperer, recording sightings and events in detail. Finally he takes the man to his house, cleans him, feeds him and studies his every move and sound. But the vagrant’s actions and mutterings remain incoherent to him, until he finally realises that he has come to consider the man his friend, even if he is no closer to understanding him. When the vagrant disappears, Olwagen wanders the streets in search of his friend and ultimately ends up in hospital, exhausted and incoherent. Prof. Van Niekerk tells his story to illustrate both her own teachings, repeated back at her by her student, and the lessons she has learnt from him, interspersing her narrative with extracts from the student’s letters to her. In terms of their search for an ethically acceptable approach to both the art of writing and the content of their writing, prof. Van Niekerk and Olwagen are admirable characters. As Olwagen exclaims in a discussion with prof. Van Niekerk:

Fiksie kan ons nie meer troos nie. Die verskrikkinge van ons vaderland ontnem die verhalende verbeelding haar wil, haar wilskrag. Mens kan niks meer uitdink nie.

Brutalite moet ons daarom word, feiteversamelaars, nie meer storievertellers nie, eerder argivarisse van die onvoorstelbare van die land. Daaruit kan die leser vir sigself vrees en medelye, selfs vermaak en lering wen. (Van Niekerk, 2009:31)¹⁵

Neither prof. Van Niekerk nor Olwage are willing to write “gemoedelike lokale realisme” (genial local realism) and to ignore the terrors around them. Although prof. Van Niekerk, through her initial dismissal of her student’s appeal to her as a “kind of mother” (14) has by her own admission failed him, she is humbled when she realises this and attempts to honour the lesson he has taught her. Olwage’s engagement with the swan whisperer is initially informed by his own need to find a subject to write about, and his actions towards the vagrant are therefore tinged with self-interest and problematically intrusive. The vagrant represents the “radical other” in this story. As much as Olwage tried to understand him and to include him within his own totality, the vagrant’s actions and words remain incomprehensible. When Olwage finally accepts the absolute otherness of the vagrant and realises that he should have responded with friendship rather than scrutiny, it is too late and the vagrant has vanished. As he explains: “Ek soek nie meer na inspirasie of skrywerlike vervulling nie, ek soek my vriend, en elke straathoek en elke weerkaatsing en elke brug spreek van my gemis (38).¹⁶ Prof. Van Niekerk in turn responds too late to Olwage’s appeal

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Fiction can no longer comfort us. The terrors of our fatherland have taken the narrative imagination of her will, her will power. One can no longer invent anything. We must therefore become brutalists, collectors of facts, no longer storytellers, rather archivists of the unimaginable of the country. Out of that of itself the reader can gain fear and compassion, even entertainment and learning for himself or herself. (31)

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I am no longer looking for inspiration or writerly fulfilment, I am looking for my friend, and every street corner and every reflection and every bridge speaks of my longing (38).

to her. When she realises this, she tries to atone by sharing his story and acting on the insight she has gained from his narrative.

The second story, “Die slagwerker” (the percussionist), is once again a story within a story within a story. At the funeral of the writer Willem Oldemarkt, his friend Kippelstein tells the funeral goers about Willem’s last piece of writing, a narrative about a young percussionist on whom Willem spied through binoculars¹⁷. Shortly before his death Willem asked Kippelstein to help him finish the story about the young percussionist’s obsession to create the sounds of the woman he loved, after she has left him. After Willem’s death, Kippelstein finds manuscripts with the titles “Die sneeulaper”, “Die swanefluisteraar” and “Die slagwerker”, a link from this story to the others in the collection. Kippelstein is a tragic figure, one who awakens sympathy and pity. Despite his garrulous complaints about the demands made on him by his friend Willem, he remained at Willem’s side through the years, helping him when he had to move house to find a new subject to write about and providing feedback on Willem’s writing. Willem might at first seem selfish, and his voyeurism suspect, but he admits on his last day that he wrote in an effort to show the shy and reclusive Kippelstein to the world outside.

In “Die sneeulaper” (the snow sleeper) Helena Oldemarkt, a volunteer field researcher and the sister of the writer in the second story, interviews a vagrant who turns out to be the swan whisperer introduced in the first story in the book. The vagrant confesses that he plays tricks on those who observe him. Thus he pretended to be a swan whisperer for the benefit of Olwagen in “Die swanefluisteraar” and tricked a photographer to sleep in his

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According to Thys Human (2010), binoculars often feature in Van Niekerk’s work, and function as symbol for the voyeurism entailed in creative writing.

makeshift bed in an alley in winter. When Helena refuses his attentions, the vagrant becomes angry and vanishes. She believes that he is following her, and so dresses up as a vagrant herself when she goes out looking for him in homeless shelters in the city. The vagrant is a subversive figure, one who by his own admission is not to be trusted. Nonetheless, his resistance towards those who want to turn him into an object of study, is not entirely unreasonable. He is vulnerable in his destitution and thus uses what defences he has to protect himself from the prying eyes of others. Helena is earnest in her dealings with the vagrant, even if he experiences her attention as an intrusion, and she is honest with herself and the narratees about her own motives. She is searching for comfort after the death of her father and brother and admits that the vagrant's sexual overtures are not unwelcome. In the end she refuses to answer the sexual advances of the vagrant and he vanishes once again, leaving her wandering the streets searching for him, like Olwagen before her.

In "Die vriend" (The friend) a fictionalized Van Niekerk once again acts as character narrator (I will call this character narrator "Van" from here on, to differentiate this character from the implied author and the character narrator in the first story). Van presents a lecture on photography, in which she tells the story of how her photographer friend ended up in what seems to be an almost catatonic state in her garden after photographing a vagrant "sneuslaper" in Amsterdam. The photographer initially started photographing the difference in the living conditions of white and black South Africans during Apartheid after Van urged him to document the struggle. When he convinces a young thief, wounded by the photographer's bodyguard after he tried to steal the photographer's phone, to pose for him, it turns out to be a career destroying move. The narrator suggests that he should move his focus to conservation and nature photography, partly to get him out of her life. Not long after this, he leaves the country, until the Dutch government deports him, leaving him in the care

of the narrator, who tries to make up for her role in his unravelling by creating a beautiful garden around him and joining him in his birdsong. Van is once again honest about her own hand in her friend's downfall, her own unwillingness to accept him as he is. The photographer is a tragic figure, but also not without fault. His attempt to turn the young thief into an object to study oversteps the boundaries of acceptable behaviour and he is severely punished for this by society. Similarly, his observation of the vagrant in Amsterdam is ethically suspect. He photographs the man's plight, but he fails to help the vagrant in his suffering. In response the vagrant turns the observer into the observed once more, and the photographer ends up in hospital, like Olwagen before him. Van takes part of the blame on herself for her friend's fate, and tries to make amends, even though it is clearly too late.

In all these stories, then, the characters have good intentions, but their ethical engagement with others is limited by their self-interest or lack of courage in the face of the demands of the other. Our judgment of their behaviour is influenced by their actions and the reactions of other characters, but also by the choice of narrator and the way in which each story is narrated. It is therefore necessary to consider how the position of the narrator influences our judgment of both the characters and narrative situation in these four stories.

The two fictionalized versions of Marlene Van Niekerk address the narratees (academic audiences supposedly present at the lectures themselves) directly in the first and last story. In the second story, "Die slagwerker", the clockmaker Kippelstein shares his memories of his friend Willem Oldemarkt, a writer, with the latter's sister and the funeral goes at the writer's funeral. In "Die sneeuslaper", a volunteer fieldworker addresses a letter containing her observations on and transcriptions of interviews with a particular vagrant to the head of a research team which conducts surveys among the homeless. In all four stories there is a frame narrative in which the various narrators address a monologue to the narratees

and the authorial audience to explain a particular series of events which has led them to a particular insight. The address is made to “you”, a very personal and direct call on the narratees (always a specifically identified but silent audience) and the authorial audience to engage and respond to the narrative presented. In all four stories the character narrators in the frame narrative present a second narrative embedded in the first: the story narrated to them by another character (Olwagen to prof. Van Niekerk, Willem to Kippelstein, the vagrant to Helena and the photographer to Van) and the insights they have gained from their encounter with this other character and narrative. The character narrators present not only the narrative of their experience, but also documents (e.g. letters and transcripts), objects (e.g. a mirror to hypnotize larks) and even music to support their narratives, the kind of “sypaadjeantropologie” (side-walk anthropology) which Olwagen vowed to write in “Die swanefluisteraar”.

As mentioned in the first section of this chapter, I believe that these frame narratives are examples of “lyrical narrative” (Phelan, 2005:158). The direct address and the structure of the narrative (starting with an admission of the narrator’s own complicity in the events) disarm the narratees and authorial audience to some extent. It is easier to forgive a narrator their errors if they show themselves to be aware of their faults and humbled by the experience. Although the character narrators all relate events in the past, we are less interested in judging the actions and choices of the character narrator or other characters in those narratives than in the meaning of these events and the insights the narrator and other characters gain, insights that the authorial audience also attempt to grasp while reading the narrative.

Although each story can be read on its own, the reliability of the various narrators can only be tested once the whole has been taken into account. Thus, for example,

Olwagen's narrative turns out to be unreliable, because he "misreports"¹⁸ the facts about the swan whisperer. We only learn this in hindsight, when we read the third story, "Die sneeuslaper", and find out that the vagrant fooled Olwagen into thinking that he was a swan whisperer. Prof. Van Niekerk, the narratee to whom Olwagen recounts his narrative, and her narratees, the audience who listens to her lecture, do not have this insight, but the authorial audience who has access to the text as a whole does, albeit in hindsight. The distance between the two character narrators (prof. Van Niekerk and Olwagen) and the implied author turns out to be greater than first imagined. What should the authorial audience infer from this? That nothing is as it seems, that there is no "solid ground" (125) in this story or the others in the collection, as the writer Willem Oldemarkt explains at one stage. This unreliability does not necessarily change our ethical judgment of the character narrators in the frame narration or the embedded narration, though. This is because the narrators in both narratives act in good faith, they narrate what they believe to be the truth, based on the information they have. Thus, for example, Van Niekerk's and Olwagen's experience and insights remain unchanged and still valid to some extent, whether the swan whisperer was real or not.

Kippelstein, the clockmaker in "Die slagwerker", narrates the story of his last night with his friend the writer, Willem Oldemarkt, at Willem's funeral. Kippelstein starts his eulogy with a poem by Rumi which was apparently pasted up in Willem's kitchen. It is a love poem and Kippelstein explains his choice to recite the poem as follows:

Ek het dit nooit verstaan nie, maar sedert Willem se dood verlede week lees ek dit oor en oor. Dit is soos 'n ou kledingstuk wat deur baie dra sag en vertrouwd geword het, soos

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Phelan, 2005:51

hierdie jas waarin ek voor u staan, en hierdie hoed, en hierdie ou bruin hemp. Hulle het almal aan Willem behoort. (49)¹⁹

Kippelstein only in his friend's last days and now after his death has begun to understand that the poem might have had a message meant for him. The poem and Kippelstein's intimation of its meaning alerts the reader to the significance of the narrative to follow. Kippelstein's reading and rereading of the poem, as well as his choice to wear the writer's clothes, seems to be his way of acknowledging the importance of the message, even if he does not entirely understand it yet. Kippelstein's narration is restricted²⁰, limited by his earlier ignorance about his friend's true feelings and his own naivety. Kippelstein repeatedly appeals to Willem's sister and the other narratees, the funeral goers, to help him make sense of events, but it is only his voice that we hear – Willem's sister and the other narratees remain silent. We are aware of them only because Kippelstein repeatedly addresses them or remarks on their reactions to his narrative or the progression of the funeral. They remain voiceless and unknown to us. The result is a strange sense of isolation, an awareness that we only have access to that which the implied author wants us to see or hear. As Willem at one stage told Kippelstein: "... behalwe deur die vensters van fiksie wat ek vir jou open, het jy geen sig op wat sodanige uitspattighede in die werklike lewe inhou nie"²¹ (64).

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I never understood [the poem], but since Willem's death last week, I read it over and over again. It is like an old piece of clothing that has become very soft and familiar, like this jacket that I am standing in in front of you, and this hat and this old brown shirt. They all belonged to Willem. (49)

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Phelan, 2005:218

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... except through the windows of fiction which I open for you, you have no view of what so-called excesses of real life holds ... (64)

This isolation, something that is expressly stated and also illustrated through the construction of the stories, is particularly visible in the third story, “Die sneeuslaper”. “Die sneeuslaper” starts with a translation of a poem by Louis MacNeice, called “Conversation”. The first few lines are as follows: “Ordinary people are peculiar too: / Watch the vagrant in their eyes / Who sneaks away while they are talking with you”, an intimation of what is to come. Helena Oldemarkt, sister of Willem Oldemarkt, is a volunteer fieldworker who interviewed the “sneeuslaper”, the same vagrant who appeared in “Die swanefluisteraar”, as part of a survey. As in the previous stories, the introductory letter provides the narratee and authorial audience with the knowledge that the narrator will tell us how she herself came to be a “tassevrouw” (a bag lady) and why she feels it necessary to send a warning about the vagrant. Helena notes that her own voice somehow became lost in the recorded interviews – a sign perhaps of the hypnotising influence the sneeuslaper has cast over her, as she slowly becomes mesmerized by his extravagant and suggestive monologues. The transcriptions of the interviews are annotated with Helena’s memos, but the memos are personal reactions to the narrative of the sneeuslaper, rather than professional observations. They form a counterpoint to the voice of the sneeuslaper, as Helena goes on her own narrative journey, remembering her father’s last years before his death. These two counter narratives remain separate monologues, with Helena’s voice absent in the sneeuslaper’s narrative, and his voice absent in hers. The implication seems to be that these two narratives are too different, one the musings of a middle class woman about family and grief, the other that of a homeless man, his life reduced to eating, defecating and sleeping, his only defence to subvert the intentions of those who would study him and “save” him or befriend him. Friendship would imply that the two parties are at least in some sense “the same”, in Levinasian terms. But there is no real understanding between the sneeuslaper and Helena, or any of the other

narrators who interact with him. They remain “other” to one another, even if it is perhaps a tamer other, and not the “radical other” that Levinas has in mind. There is always a measure of failure to understand the “other”, the kind of admission to failure Levinas considers as the acceptable ethical response to the “other”.

Helena explains that she initially took over her father’s role as volunteer fieldworker in the hope of finding comfort (“troos”) after the death of her father. This “troos” is a theme central to all the stories in *Die sneeuslaper*, a need that compromises the ethical position of the character narrator, but inclines the narratees and authorial audience to be more forgiving about this compromised position than they would otherwise have been. Helena seems more aware of the significance of her own compromised relationship than some of the other character narrators. Thus she recalls the criticism of her brother, Willem, the writer. She notes that Willem argued that she was a voyeur like him, but that she offered it as “noodlening met wetenskaplike onderbou ... as jy gehoor gee aan die hulpeloses maar heimlik teer op hulle ontboeseminge, solank jy nie ryk word daarvan nie”²² (110). Later Helena asks “... en wat is die verlies van geliefdes anders as ’n slepende belang in die hart van die nagelatene? ... Is dit waarom ek daar onder die iep by die blink swerwer alles neerpen wat by my opkom?”²³ (111).

The sneeuslaper tells Helena the details of his everyday life in return for her listening to his story. This narrator needs an audience to tell his story to, and the authorial audience, like Helena, is in a strange interdependent relationship with him. At the same time he

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... presented it as aid to those in need, with a scientific foundation ... if you listen to the helpless, but feed on their confessions, as long as you don’t get rich from it ... (110)

23

... and what else is the loss of loved ones than the lingering interest in the heart of one left behind ... Is this why I write down everything that comes to mind there under the elm with shining wanderer ... (111)

subverts those who want to make a story of him. As he enacted a false narrative for Olwagen and the photographer, we cannot be sure whether the narrative he presents in this story is true or not, or even whether he is who he says he is, as Helena realises when she follows up one particular detail in his narrative. The sneeuslaper is honest about his deception, but one never knows which parts of his story are true and which ones false, leaving him with the upper hand over those who want to reduce him to an object of study or even a friend (“the same” in Levinasian terms).

In the fourth story, a fictional Van Niekerk once again acts as narrator. The distance between implied author and narrator is minimal, except for the fact that the character narrator, although she is meant to represent the flesh-and-blood Van Niekerk in the text, is not the implied author of the text, since she has no knowledge of events outside this particular narrative. This means that she does not know the truth about what had really happened to her photographer friend when he was in Amsterdam. Similarly, while she and the narrator of “Die swanefluisteraar” both represent the flesh-and-blood Van Niekerk, neither exhibits knowledge of the events in the other’s narrative. This Van Niekerk does not seem to be the same person who sent Kasper Olwagen to Amsterdam. This character narrator furthermore mentions a particular object, the lark mirror (“lewerikspieël”) which also appears in “Die slagwerker”. These references designate her as a part of the meta-narrative constructed by the implied author. As in the rest of the text, the mimetic aspect of all the narratives is undermined, and we are made aware of the “synthetic” function of the character, as an “artificial construct” within “the larger construct of the work” (Phelan, 2005:13). The narrative is further presented as the written speech it started out as, with stage instructions such as “stempouse” (pause) and an instruction to piece together the “lewerikspieël” (lark mirror), as well as supposed excerpts from letters from the narrator’s

photographer friend and music to be played at the end of her narrative. The narrator is once again narrating her own experience, but also that of her friend, as related to her in his letters. As before, she uses it to convey a certain insight into the nature of her friend's art, but also to confess her own complicity in his downfall. Her friend in turn narrates his meeting with the sneeuslaper, a meeting that has great significance to the authorial audience, linking this story to the ones before in terms of shared characters, and informing their insight into this story beyond that which the two narrators and the narratees have gained.

3

Representational ethics refer to the “consequence of fictionalizing oneself and others” (Newton, 1995:18). Newton quotes Levinas' discussion of the “duality” of the “face”, which “is itself” and “its image”. This duality “ties acts of representation to responsibilities” and suggests that fiction's “power to represent – at some level gives way before the more severe and plenary power of ethical responsibility” (Newton, 1995:19). In *Die sneeuslaper*, Van Niekerk fictionalises herself and others, so that she can include her own voice and opinions in narrative and so that she has access to a wider range of situations and characters. Willem Oldemarkt and the vagrant repeat this process in their respective ways. Willem and Van Niekerk do this to question their “own functional understanding” (Van Niekerk, 2009:134) of life for their own benefit and for that of their narratees. The vagrant does so to establish his power over his own narrative and to appeal to the affections of Helena Oldemarkt. At the same time Van Niekerk the implied author can still distance her flesh-and-blood self from the narrators and narratives presented to the authorial audience. A true story might have had a

more direct and stronger emotional appeal on an audience, but this emotional appeal does not seem to be what the implied author is interested in.

From the discussion of the position of the narrators in the four stories in *Die sneeuslaper*, it should be clear that they have similar narrative structures and that the narrators are placed in similar ethical positions. In the first and last story, the implied author presents a fictional version of herself as character narrator. These two stories initially served as speeches on creative writing and art, written for specific occasions, but in both cases it would have been clear to the flesh-and-blood audiences that the events related by the author were fictional, even if they might have been inspired by real persons or events. Even when the character narrator is not a fictional version of Van Niekerk, the distance between the implied author and the narrator is fairly close, with only those details revealed in the other stories suggesting the possibility of misreporting because of a lack of information.

The writer Willem Oldemarkt seems closest to the implied author in the two middle stories, and it is in the reported dialogue between Willem and Kippelstein that the authorial audience gains insight into the values and intentions of the implied author in “Die slagwerker”. Thus, for example, Willem states that “die maak van kuns is die enigste betroubare selfvertroosting”²⁴ (74). Like the implied author, Willem uses his own storytelling to explore and illustrate the issues close to his heart. He pleads with Kippelstein to help him finish the story about the percussionist, claiming that it is his “self-portrait” (53). The implied author has constructed “Die slagwerker” in such a way that the narratees and authorial audience are alert to the significance of the night in question. Time and again the disruptive element in the various narratives is the elusive sneeuslaper, the “other” who resists

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... the making of art is the only trustworthy self-consolation ... (74)

objectification by presenting false narratives. These narratives within narratives, layered and intertwined in a complex web of meaning, are not only meant to convey the flesh-and-blood author's ideas on writing, but serves as examples of how a narrative should be written. The implied author uses the words of the character Willem Oldemarkt, addressed to his sister, to describe the ideal fictional narrative:

Aan 'n blote verhaal is daar geen plesier nie ... dis die glipraam van die aanbod wat tel, en die verskole tersydes. Handeling en gebeure moet herhaal wees, of omgekeerd of geminiatueiseerd, of verlangsaamd, of versnel binne-in die omlysting van die verhaal. Die skrywer moet afgebeeld wees in die vertellerkarakter in die verhaal, wat weer 'n verhaal vertel van iemand wat 'n verhaal vertel, ensovoorts ... die inwerkingstelling van 'n onafsiensbare regressie, met die einde ingesluk deur die begin. Niemand moet hulle vir een oomblik waan op vaste grond nie ... ²⁵ (125)

Hambidge (2010) points out that Van Niekerk does little to disguise her own voice in the narratives of the narrators in *Die sneeusalper*. A creative writing student, a writer or a social researcher might use the erudite language of an academic, but in the speech of a clockmaker or a vagrant, this language becomes strange. The clockmaker, for example, uses words like “rekwisiet” (requisite), “verpulwer” (pulverized), “godbetert” (God forbid), “strawaas” (radiation haze), the vagrant utters words such as “fluoresente” (fluorescent) and “armetierige” (miserable).

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In a simple story there is no pleasure ... it is the slip frame of the presentation that counts, and the hidden remark made in passing. Actions and events must be repeated, or reversed or miniaturised, or slowed down, or quickened within the frame of the story. The author must be imprinted in the character narrator in the story, who must once again tell a story of someone telling a story, and so forth ... the implementation of an immeasurable regression, with the end swallowed by the beginning. No one should imagine themselves on solid ground for one moment. (125)

The writer character, Willem Oldemarkt, also acts as “mask narrator” in “Die slagwerker” and “Die sneeuslaper”, where the author herself is not present as a character. “Mask narration” is the technique where an author uses a character as mouthpiece to voice her own opinions (Phelan, 2005:216). The choice not to camouflage the voice of the implied author in the middle stories and the use of a writer character as mask narrator seems to be deliberate. It emphasizes the double-voicedness of the narrative, although it is perhaps double-voicedness not as Bakhtin meant it when referring to the work of Dostoevsky, but in the sense that J.M. Coetzee uses the term when he claims that: “There is a true sense in which writing is dialogic: a matter of awakening the countervoices in oneself and embarking upon speech with them. It is some measure of a writer’s seriousness whether he does evoke/invoke those countervoices in himself, that is, step down from the position of what Lacan calls “the subject supposed to know” (Coetzee, 1992:65). Van Niekerk uses mask narrators to make her own voice strange, to the reader, but also to herself. She is writing for an audience, but she is also writing for herself. The use of these mask narrators create a break with the entirely mimetic, they serve as a constant reminder from the implied author to the authorial audience that there is a meta-narrative in each story and in the text as a whole in which the implied author explores and illustrates the art of writing fiction and that all fiction is artifice.

One possible purpose of these constant reminders of the synthetic²⁶ nature of the characters in the four stories in *Die sneeuslaper*, is to guide the authorial audience to read the narratives not only for the sake of the stories alone, although the lyrical style and elliptical nature of the narrative is mesmerizing as it is. But the flesh-and-blood author wrote these

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The synthetic nature of a character is “that component of character directed to its role as artificial construct in the larger construction of the text”. (Phelan, 2005:218).

stories in response to requests to provide her opinions on creative writing and art in general and the stories were constructed to explore these issues not only as themes, but through their structure and their narrative strategy. Thus themes such as voyeurism, the other as subject, social and political concerns as “suitable” topics for art and writing and stories as a form of self-consolation in the face of loss should be considered as part of the author’s engagement with the ethics of narration and the narration of ethics.

There are two themes that recur repeatedly in all the stories and in their very structure. The first theme is the act of narration and storytelling as a response to loss or as consolation in the absence of the beloved. Thus Olwagen writes his story in response to the loss of his “friend”, the swan whisperer; Kippelstein narrates the story of his friendship with Willem in an effort to understand what he has lost. Helena remembers the loss of her father as the sneeuslaper tells his stories and, when he vanishes, she also seems to feel loss, as she goes out in search of him.

In “Die vriend”, the final story, “Van” learns that the true subject of her friend the photographer’s photographs was the loss of the subject, branches and perches empty of birds, taking part in the escape/slipping away (“deelneem aan die ontglijping” (186)), the release/setting loose of all from their outline, the negative absence/way (“die verlossing van alles uit hulle buitelyne, die negatiewe weg” (186)). In the face of these elements Van Niekerk the character narrator (and through her the implied author) concludes that the author’s responsibility is towards “die misterieuse oppervlakke van die dinge, die afgrondelikheid van die bestaan”²⁷ (187). She also confesses her own failure: “Die afgrond was veel nader, dit was ekself, my afgrondelike onvermoë tot kameraadskap, tot

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... the mysterious surfaces of things, the abysmal nature of existence ... (187)

bondgenootskap”²⁸ (187). “Van” ends her narrative with the image of herself in the garden with her photographer friend and his now perpetually vacant smile. When he sings to the birds, she accompanies him, adding her voice to the *melée*. She describes her role as follows: “’n roeper, ’n respondent en ’n getuie”²⁹ (188). This image, that of caller, respondent and witness, calls into mind “response” and “responsibility” as described by Levinas. Failure in this instance is the correct ethical response to the radical other, if one follows Levinas’ argument, and it certainly seems as if this is what the implied author has in mind. In each story failure leads to a measure of insight and an attempt to make amends by following the insight gained.

The second theme that is repeatedly confirmed, is that of the utter strangeness and absolute alterity of the other. This other is manifest in the enigmatic figure of the vagrant, a figure who remains unintelligible to Olwage (try as he may to interpret the man’s words and actions), whose stories, even when he supposedly confesses to Helena, remains ambiguous, whose true identity and motives remain undecipherable. The response to this absolute other is one of hospitality, a hospitality which in the narratives in question seems always to be inadequate. Olwage befriends the sneuslaper, even invites him into his house, but with the ulterior motive of unravelling the mystery of the man and in the end the vagrant vanishes, leaving Olwage bereft and left “... net met my storie en my behoefte om dit te vertel aan die een persoon op aarde wat dit sou verstaan”³⁰ (39). In the face of the inadequate and always compromised hospitality of others, the sneuslaper becomes subversive, tricking

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The abyss was much closer, it was myself, my abysmal inability to camaraderie, to partnership... (187)

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... a caller, a respondent and a witness ... (188)

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... with only my story and my need to tell it to the one person on earth who will understand it ... (39)

those who want to observe and understand him. As he explains in his own words about his treatment of the photographer:

Maar toe wil iemand skielik 'n kunswerk maak van my. Wil my beter rangskik as wat ek self gedoen het, 'n model met 'n verdwynpunt vir 'n ander se oog, nog 'n kunstenaar wat nie die moed het om homself in sy eie binnekamer te kannibaliseer nie, maar 'n ander se ellende gebruik vir sy eksperimente in selfinsig (134).³¹

4

The responsibilities inherent in hermeneutic ethics are twofold, according to Newton. In the first place, it means “learning the paradoxical lesson that ‘getting’ someone’s story is also a way of losing the person as ‘real’, as what he is; it is a way of appropriating or allegorizing that endangers both intimacy and ethical duty. At the same time, however, one’s responsibility consists of responding to just this paradox” (Newton, 1995:20). Newton (1995:22) explains that “like persons, texts present and expose themselves; the claims they make on me does not begin with me dedicating myself to them, but rather precedes my discovery of the claim ... it is our staring, our looking for enlightenment, and our witnessing of [a character] which the story ‘knows’ beforehand, and will hold us accountable for”.

These definitions are used in relation to a particular short story by Sherwood Anderson, but they also resonate with Van Niekerk’s discussion of her own work in the quotations at the

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But then someone suddenly wanted to make an artwork of me. Wanted to arrange me better than I had done it myself, a model with a vanishing point, another artist who doesn’t have the guts to cannibalise himself in his own inner room, but uses another’s misfortune for his own experiments in self knowledge. (134)

beginning of this chapter and in the narratives presented in *Die sneeulaper*. The narrators in the stories tell a story, but do not offer an exact answer to the questions they ask. Close scrutiny will offer up certain patterns, but the final “truth” eludes the reader, as the truth about the real identity and actions of the sneeulaper eludes us until the end. The use of the pronoun “you” in all four stories creates the illusion that the flesh-and-blood reader is included amongst the narratees, and the flesh-and-blood-reader in response attempts to enter the authorial audiences of the various narratives. The reader in most instances has superior knowledge to that of the character narrators and the narratees. The only exception is the vagrant who remains as mysterious and elusive as ever, even when we know him in more than one disguise. All the narrators are flawed, but they appeal to the reader’s sympathy by exposing their own failings and their loss to the narratees and authorial audience. The result is that the authorial audience focuses on the message or insight to be gained in each narrative, and the values and intentions of the implied author. Kippelstein asks Oldemarkt’s sister to help him make sense of Willem’s manuscripts, but she does not respond. Olwagen, Helena Oldemarkt and the photographer wander the streets searching for the elusive vagrant, but do not find him. Like the narrators and narratees in the four stories we, the readers, become part of “... ’n stille prosesie van soekers en vermistes in die stad, almal van ons aan die pols gebind aan dieselfde eindelose swart lint, almal mense wat dink dat hulle ’n weggeloopte ... dalk gevind het, en te bang is om dié hoop kenbaar te maak ... en liewer meeloop in die troos van ... die broederskap van agtergeblewenes”³² (39).

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... silent procession of searchers and missing persons in the city, all of us bound at the wrist to the same endless black ribbon, all people who think that they recognise a runaway ... but too scared to make that hope knowable ... but rather walk together in the comfort ... that you belong to ... the brotherhood of those left behind ... (39)

In the concluding chapter of this dissertation, I will compare the narrative strategies and exploration of the ethics of writing and ethics in general which has come to the fore in my analysis of *Summertime* and *Die sneeuslaper*, to see what insight might be gained from such a comparison. I will also attempt to link critical discourse on Coetzee's and Van Niekerk's work.

Conclusion: Countervoices and alterities, making the self strange

1

In all, such cultural and interlingual translations go to the core of the transitive zone in which subjectivities are lured into transitional modalities of cultural and material practice, belief and value systems. What is at stake is so much more than a literary act alone; the very matter of subjectivity and identity are under translation, in transit, a shuttling of being which is engaged in complex trade-offs and double binds, promises and compromises. There remains rich material for deeper and further research in areas such as this. (De Kock, cited in Attwell & Attridge, 2012:754)

The gauntlet thrown down by Leon de Kock in the above quotation is something I will take up in this final chapter of my dissertation. De Kock writes specifically about translation, but it is not just “interlingual” translation that he is concerned with, but also “cultural” translation between the various cultures in South Africa. This call for studies of cultural and interlingual analysis is put forward within the context of *The Cambridge History of South African Literature* (2012), a work which aims to consider not only the “archipelagos” of various literary traditions in South Africa, but also “how each of the islands was shaped by the forces that linked them” (Gray, cited in Attwell & Attridge, 2012:3). Much has been written about the literary oeuvres of both Coetzee and Van Niekerk, including studies of the translations of Van Niekerk’s Afrikaans novels into English. There are few “interlingual” comparative studies of contemporary works in Afrikaans and English, however, and certainly none to my knowledge which compares the work of Coetzee and Van Niekerk. My contribution to the conversation about Coetzee and Van Niekerk’s work, but also about an

increasingly multilingual and interconnected South African literary criticism, will be a comparison of the work of these two authors, written respectively in English and Afrikaans.

The scope of this dissertation limited me to just one work by each author and a very precise research question, but it also allowed a very specific and close analysis of the works, which might be less feasible in studies with a broader scope. In the previous two chapters I analysed the narrative strategies and narration of ethics in *Summertime* and *Die sneeuslaper*. In this concluding chapter, I will consider how the narrative ethics and the narration of ethics in *Summertime* and *Die sneeuslaper*, as identified and discussed in the previous chapters, converge or diverge, to see what insight can be gained from these similarities and differences.

Although Coetzee and Van Niekerk follow very different narrative approaches in *Summertime* and *Die sneeuslaper*, certain similarities emerge. In both texts the self is fictionalised in a self-reflective and explicit way. These fictional selves share a name and certain biographical details with the flesh-and-blood authors. In *Summertime*, the protagonist, like the author, is a writer of fiction, who grew up in similar circumstances in South Africa and was a lecturer at the University of Cape Town before he moved to Australia. In *Die sneeuslaper*, the fictional prof. Van Niekerk in “Die swanefluisteraar” and the character called “Van” or “Van Niekerk” in “Die vriend” are both lecturers in creative writing like the flesh-and-blood author. But Coetzee and Van Niekerk also provide clear indications that these fictional selves are *not* the flesh-and-blood authors. Coetzee’s protagonist in *Summertime* is already deceased at the time of the novel’s publication and certain biographical details differ greatly from those of the flesh-and-blood author. The two fictional Van Niekerks in *Die sneeuslaper* seem unaware of the events in the narrative of the

other, marking them as fictional constructs within their particular narratives and within the larger narrative of the collection.

The purpose of a narrative strategy in which the self is fictionalised might be deduced by considering the representational ethics at work in both texts. Newton (1995:18) describes representational ethics as “the costs incurred in fictionalising oneself or others by exchanging ‘person’ for ‘character’”. In his discussion of this category of narrative ethics, Newton (1995:18) uses Levinas’ description of the “nudity” of “the face”, which brings a “duality” in this “person” or “thing” which makes it “what it is” and “a stranger to itself”.³³ To fictionalise a person is to foreground his or her defining characteristics and at the same time to make it strange. It also provides the author and in turn the authorial audience with the means to confront these “images” of the self and others. This “face” of the other, or at least the “image” of it requires a response from the “self”, an appeal to the ethical responsibilities of the “self” (of the author and of the authorial audience) towards “the other”.

Fictionalisation of the “self” and “the other” provides Coetzee and Van Niekerk with the means to “make the self strange”, to “awaken” the “countervoices in oneself” (Coetzee, 1992:65) and to “mobilise the alterities in me” (Van Niekerk, 2009:134). It enables the authors to present a “face”, or at least its “image” to the authorial audience in anticipation of the response of the authorial audience. It also requires a response from the authorial audience, an ethical engagement with the author and his or her characters as “others”. In *Summertime*, the scrutiny falls on particularly intimate and potentially embarrassing details in the life of Coetzee’s fictional namesake, such as his love life and his relationship with his father. These are not the actual experiences of the flesh-and-blood J.M. Coetzee, but the

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Newton quotes Levinas’ “Reality and Its Shadow” from *Collected Philosophical Papers*, ed. Alphonso Lingis, 1981.

issues explored in the novel must still be of concern to him to move him to write a novel such as *Summertime* and to link it to his other fictional memoirs with the subtitle “Scenes from Pastoral Life”. Coetzee’s attempt to make the self “strange” to himself is a very personal act, and exposing this strange self to the gaze of others is an act of humility to which the authorial audience might feel compelled to respond.

Coetzee (1992:17) argues that an author can have many selves, but in this instance we deal with a fictional self that is emphatically differentiated from the flesh-and-blood Coetzee through the differences in the biographical details of Coetzee and his protagonist in *Summertime*, and not the selves presented by the flesh-and-blood author in his writing or in interviews. The implied author invites the reader’s sympathy towards the fictional John through self-deprecation and, because of the shared name (and in spite of the biographical differences), by proxy towards the flesh-and-blood author. At the same time the author creates a “veil of fiction” (Phelan, 2005:65), which protects the privacy of the flesh-and-blood author.

Van Niekerk also invites sympathy towards her fictional selves, but by a more explicit method. Her fictional selves and other character narrators openly admit to their failures and clearly state that their narratives are attempts to explain and to gain insight into the meaning of the events that led to their failures. Thus “Van” in the last story confesses “Schreuder se loopbaan het ek help maak, maar sy lewe het ek, nou ja, vernietig”³⁴ (Van Niekerk, 2009:186). The main purpose of Van Niekerk’s creation of fictional selves seems to be to “refuse closure”³⁵. Van Niekerk writes the type of “self-reflexive writing” that

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Schreuder’s career I helped make, but his life I , well, destroyed. (Van Niekerk, 2009:186)

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I discuss the term “refusal of closure” in the first section of Chapter Two. Van Niekerk used this term in an interview with Willie Burger (Burger, 2009:156).

Hambidge (2010) refers to, writing that allows a freer exploration of questions about narration and ethics than autobiography or non-fiction would have allowed. But this kind of “lyrical narrative” (Phelan, 2005:158) also shifts the focus of readers towards understanding the meaning of the narrated events rather than judgment of the actions of the character narrators.

These different approaches might be linked to each author’s academic and cultural background. Although Coetzee and Van Niekerk have different mother tongues, they were both educated at South African universities that still have a strong Eurocentric focus. Coetzee refers to linguists like Barthes and Bakhtin in interviews, while Van Niekerk’s background in philosophy is evident in her use of concepts and terms associated with Emmanuel Levinas. To me Coetzee’s English upbringing is evident in his indirect and self-deprecating manner of writing, while Van Niekerk’s more direct voice is closer to that of Dutch writers still included in the syllabuses of Afrikaans departments at Afrikaans universities.

In Chapter Two I argued that Marlene van Niekerk considers the refusal of closure as an ethical response of the writer towards the other. The use of this term and others such as “totality” and “alterities” is linked to Levinas’ concept of the “radical other”, and invites a “Levinasian” reading of Van Niekerk’s work. These references are useful to my comparison of Coetzee and Van Niekerk’s works because it makes it possible to put the discourse of critics such as Derek Attridge and Mike Marais, who have drawn on Levinas’ theory about the ethical response to the other to analyse Coetzee’s work, in conversation with Van Niekerk’s own discourse about the ethics of narration and her own work.

In my discussion of *Summertime* in Chapter One, I illustrated how the novel explores the notion of “the death of the Author” and the “birth of the reader” (Barthes, 1978:148).

The author protagonist is dead and only “traces” of him are to be found in the writing he has left behind and his narrative has become a small part in the lives of others. He becomes “strange” and the “other” in the lives of others. But one can also see *Summertime* as an ethical response to the reader as “other”, especially when one reads both *Summertime* and *Die sneeuslaper* with Coetzee’s understanding of dialogism in mind. When Coetzee and Van Niekerk write, they write the kind of “utterance” which already carries the “dialogic overtones”, as described by Bakhtin (1986:92-94), the kind of writing which is “constructed” with “possible responsive reactions” of the reader already taken into account.

Such dialogic writing, writing with the response of the reader in mind seems to be the ethical response toward the “other” which both Coetzee and Van Niekerk have in mind in *Summertime* and *Die sneeuslaper*. The response to “the other” is not only addressed in the content of *Summertime* and *Die sneeuslaper*, but also in the narrative structure of and narrative strategy in both texts. By using many narrators and narrative layers which sometimes overlap and at other times contradict each other, Coetzee and Van Niekerk refrain from providing a single authoritative narrative, but rather create several “countervoices”, countervoices that question and often contradict each other. The ambiguity created by this “refusal of closure” and the contradictory “countervoices” in the texts compels the reader to engage with and judge the texts and to respond according to his or her own judgment.

Although both authors refuse to provide a single authoritative narrative in their texts, neither Coetzee nor Van Niekerk attempt to conceal their own voices in *Summertime* and *Die sneeuslaper* either. The vocabulary and voices of the characters are often infused with that of the implied author, stressing the synthetic nature of the narratives. The authorial voices of the authors might be refracted and undermined, but they are not totally absent. Thus the narrative of Margot Jonker becomes more lyrical and ironic at times, making her accuse the

biographer of changing her narrative. This questioning of the credibility of the narrative at hand alerts the reader to the possibility of other infidelities in the other interviews in the supposed biography. In *Die sneeusalper*, narrators such as Kippelstein and the vagrant are also often more erudite than they should be. Both Coetzee and Van Niekerk draw further attention to the synthetic nature of the texts by including supposed transcripts, letters and even props (the “lark mirror”) in the case of Van Niekerk. The flesh-and-blood authors use their characters as proxies to convey their intentions and values, and the reader, aware of this fact, read the narratives as indirect communication from the implied author via the characters and narrators, even if that communication is refracted into countervoices.

In the previous chapters of this dissertation I illustrated how both Coetzee and Van Niekerk are concerned with the ethics of creative writing and the ethical responsibilities of a writer towards his or her subject and towards the country and society they live in. Thus Sophie Denoël, one of the interviewees in *Summertime*, argues that the fictional John Coetzee believed that “our life-stories are ours to construct as we wish, within or even against the constraints imposed upon us by the real world” (226). In *Die sneeusalper*, the vagrant undermines those who try to appropriate his narrative, while Helena Oldemarkt remembers her brother, the author Willem Oldemarkt’s comments about the writer as “voyeur” (110), a term with negative connotations which suggest that writing can be an ethically compromised vocation.

Both *Summertime* and *Die sneeusalper* make reference to the ethical dilemmas writers face in South Africa, especially those writers who come from the previously privileged white community. Thus, for example, the fictional John Coetzee despairs of his own feeble response to the injustice in South Africa, and the young author Olwagen in *Die sneeusalper* believes that side-walk anthropology (31) is the only response possible for

writers in a violent South Africa, while his professor believes it better for an aesthete like him to go to a country like the Netherlands. Although both John Coetzee and Kasper Olwagen struggle with the injustices in their environment and consider their own responses inadequate, their reactions are not judged as unethical by their fellow characters. John's response is seen as too idealistic and impractical by the various interviewees who knew him, but they mostly acknowledge that his intentions were good. Thus Sophie calls him "idealistic" (228). The flesh-and-blood Coetzee in an interview with David Attwell argues that a "literary life ... which "provides an interrogation of our existence" is an "ethically responsible life" (Coetzee & Attwell, 2003). This argument seems to support what the implied author of *Summertime* is concerned with: that a writer such as John, despite his weaknesses and idealism, must interrogate his own compromised position as dutiful son to his father, as South African and as writer. In *Die sneeuslaper*, prof. Van Niekerk, the narrator in "Die swanefluisteraar", seems to approve of Olwagen's acknowledgement of his own failure towards his friend and his attempt to atone for his failure and she attempts to make penance in turn for her failure towards Olwagen. Such actions agree with with the belief expressed by the flesh-and-blood Van Niekerk that the confession and demonstration of the limits of writerly power is an ethical response (Burger, 2009:156).

In *Summertime*, John ends up leaving South Africa because he believes that there is no place for him there. Olwagen and his creative writing professor turn towards nature, transcribing the sounds into nonsense poetry, rather than writing about the violence in South Africa, certainly as a protest of some sorts. In Chapter Two and earlier in this chapter, I discussed Van Niekerk's references in interviews to Levinas' "radically other" and her literal creation of the subversive "sneuslaper" as that incomprehensible other. If the ethical response towards the "other" is indeed the acceptance of one's own failure to comprehend

the other, to refrain from trying to understand the other and include him in the totality of the “same”, both Coetzee and Van Niekerk evince the ethically correct response in their writing, at least as far as Levinas is concerned, a similarity that is certainly not insignificant, considering their stature as writers and their preoccupation with the ethics of writing fiction. With this in mind, I will now consider the differences in the narrative strategy and the narration of ethics displayed in *Summertime* and *Die sneeuslaper*.

2

The differences in Coetzee’s and Van Niekerk’s narrative strategies are perhaps more telling than their similarities. Coetzee lets his protagonist narrate in the third person through his notebooks, as Coetzee did in his other fictional memoirs, a narrative strategy that creates distance between the narrator and his narrative. Why this indirect appeal? The answer can perhaps be found in an anecdote from the protagonist’s notebooks about a movie in which a man who learns that he has cancer takes his secretary out to tea. When he grips her arm and says “I want to be like you!”, she is “repelled by the nakedness of his appeal” (Coetzee, 2009:9). This reference to “nakedness” calls to mind Levinas’ “nudity” of the “face” (Newton, 1995:18). Writing in the third person allows the flesh-and-blood author objective distance and differentiates him from the narrative voice, a voice that explores personal issues that are relevant to the flesh-and-blood Coetzee. It also shelters readers from an appeal which might be repelling because of its nakedness.

Coetzee’s exploration of specific themes and ideas is less overt than that of Van Niekerk, and the uninformed reader might easily be fooled to read *Summertime* as a semi-autobiographical account of the life of the flesh-and-blood author or as an entertaining story

about an author's life. Van Niekerk has a more direct approach. She uses lyrical narratives, letting her character narrators speak in the first person to launch a direct appeal for a response from the authorial audience, which the flesh-and-blood reader "overhears" when reading. Thus for example, the narrator of "Die swanefluisteraar" states that she wants to explain why questions about the purpose of creative writing has become irrelevant to her. She argues as follows: "Miskien, het ek gedink, sal hierdie hele episode vir my duidelik word as ek die volgorde van my student se vreemde posstukke en my reaksies daarop noukeurig rekonstrueer; meer nog, ek doen dit voor 'n kritiese gehoor"³⁶. Then she invites the audience to judge for themselves, to "oordeel self" (9).

The first and last stories in *Die sneuslaper* are narrated by creative writing professors named Van Niekerk, who state the issues to be explored in their stories beforehand, preparing the reader to read the narratives to follow with the narrators' stated objectives in mind. The ethical issues explored in the stories are universal, even if they mainly reflect the flesh-and-blood Van Niekerk's personal concerns about the ethics of creative writing. Despite the direct appeal to the authorial audience, the revelations by the various narrators in *Die sneuslaper* are less intimate and uncomfortable for both reader and author alike, than in *Summertime*. In the stories in which her namesakes are narrators, it is issues such as writing and friendship which are foregrounded. Thus the character narrator Van Niekerk in "Die swanefluisteraar" explains why questions such as "Wat doseer mens as jy 'n dosent is van Skeppende Skryfkunde?"³⁷ (9) and "Is 'n verhaal iets wat 'n mens kan

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Maybe, I thought, this whole episode will become clearer to me if I reconstruct the order of my student's strange pieces of mail and my reactions to it carefully. (9)

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What does one teach if you are a lecturer in Creative Writing? (9)

troos?”³⁸ (9) has become irrelevant to her. *Die sneeuslaper* is more overtly synthetic, less mimetic, and aimed more specifically at answering specific theoretical questions than *Summertime*. The flesh-and-blood author remains the enigmatic, unknowable other, like the “sneuslaper” in her stories, despite her supposed confessions and explanations.

In *Summertime* Coetzee uses many “countervoices” to explore the character and experiences of a single man, but he allows his character narrators to question the right of this particular man to be the main character in *their* narratives. At the same time he undermines the narratives of all the characters in the novel, revealing each one to be subjective to some extent. Van Niekerk, on the other hand, uses various narratives and narrators to explore the same questions from different angles. The result is that the narratives in *Die sneeuslaper* become allegories, partly because of the otherworldly atmosphere of the narratives in question – made so by the strange characters, arcane word choices and objects that populate *Die sneeuslaper* – but also because they are so clearly intended to explore specific theoretical questions. This is not to say that the narratives do not have a powerful personal appeal, dealing with issues such as love, friendship and loss in the lives of characters who, despite their strangeness are indisputably human. The reader instinctively responds to the “nudity” of the character narrators’ “faces”, a response the author seems to have anticipated when she chose her narrative strategy.

Coetzee makes the deceased author “other” in *Summertime* by presenting him through the narratives of others. Except for his writing, all that remains of the deceased author are the “traces” left in the memories and narratives of others. The aim seems to be twofold. By making his alter ego “other”, Coetzee creates distance to explore the

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Is a story something that can console a person? (9)

countervoices in himself and he provides the reader with insight into the issues that he as author is concerned with. Van Niekerk more closely models her concept of “the other” on the “radical other” imagined by Levinas, as discussed in Chapter Two and the first section of this chapter. Van Niekerk’s other, the “sneuslaper”, by his very presence seems to evoke an ethical response in those around him, but he remains elusive and strange, try as they may to understand him. It is in their very acknowledgement of their failure that they gain a certain sense of insight and humility. The repeated ritual of confession of failure in all the narratives in *Die sneuslaper* seem to model Levinas’ idea of the ethical response to the other.

The narratee to whom the narrators in *Summertime* address their narratives is the biographer, Mr Vincent. He has a voice of his own – we read his questions and responses to the various interviewees in the transcriptions of the interviews. In *Die sneuslaper*, the narratees are also supposedly present, but they are silent and mainly unresponsive. We are only aware of their presence at all because the various narrators address them directly and even remark on their reactions, in the case of Kippelstein and Helena Oldemarkt and the other funeral goers in “Die slagwerker”. The effect of using character narrators in this way in both *Summertime* and *Die sneuslaper* is that the reader has a sense of being part of the audience of narratees. But in *Die sneuslaper* the appeal to the reader seems to be more pressing, there is a greater compulsion for the reader to respond because of the silence of the narratees. This passivity creates the kind of silence in which one feels obliged to respond, so as not to be rude. The second reason for this sense of personal appeal is the “refusal of closure” discussed in Chapter Two and part one of this chapter. There is a sense of questions that remain unanswered, and the response of the reader is to attempt to respond to these questions, in an attempt to find some measure of closure for him or herself.

J.M. Coetzee and Marlene van Niekerk, among the most renowned living South African authors from the English and Afrikaans literary traditions respectively, are concerned about very similar issues in their writing, even if they use different narrative strategies to do so. Both consciously and explicitly position their characters, narrators and the implied reader to provoke particular ethical responses from their readers. Coetzee's approach is more self-deprecating and ironic, leading to a sympathetic response from the reader, while Van Niekerk launches a more direct appeal to the reader, with a directness and intensity to which the reader feels compelled to respond.

In this dissertation I attempted to analyse the narrative strategies of both authors and to contemplate the impact of such strategies on the reader's judgement of the narratives in question and the ethical issues explored in those narratives. I stopped short of analysing the validity of the political and ethical ideas espoused in *Summertime* and *Die sneeuslaper*. I believe there is room to broaden an analysis of the narrative strategies in these two works to the narrative strategies followed in other works by the same authors, a more in-depth analysis which falls outside the scope of this particular dissertation.

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