

Displaced Romanticism:
Searching for the Self in J.M. Coetzee's
Autobiographical Fiction

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a literary critical investigation into the strategies of self-definition at work in the autobiographical fiction of J.M. Coetzee. My focus falls on those of his novels that have a more-or-less explicit autobiographical resonance (*Boyhood*, *Youth*, *Elizabeth Costello*, *Diary of a Bad Year*, *Summertime*), with supplementary forays into two additional books (*Age of Iron* and *The Childhood of Jesus*). My argument centres on the observation that Coetzee's work derives its affective force from the conflict he stages, time and again, between the desire for a transcendent sense of being, Romantic in origin, and the realization that being derives its co-ordinates from the discursive formations – ideological, socio-historical, philosophical, linguistic – that provide the structure of meaning for self-expression in writing.

I introduce my argument by situating Coetzee's work according to a poststructuralist critical framework that emphasizes his strategies of subjective displacement. Our reading of his work, I then suggest, might benefit from a more considered evaluation of the persistent influence of a Romantic ideal concerning the primacy of subjective experience. In the first chapter I explore the conceptual tension that derives from these contrasting points of view by considering Coetzee's engagement with the tradition of confessional writing, arguing that he foregrounds the textual subject as the locus in which the truth of the self is to be sought. The second chapter examines the central role of the Karoo farm in the formation of the autobiographical subject in Coetzee's writing, and links it to a Romantic model of identification between the self and nature. In the third chapter I argue that Coetzee's awareness of socio-political realities inhibits the Romantic yearning for an authentic sense of self, even while he reformulates the idea of authentic voice as the expression of a politically and historically compromised subjectivity. Finally, in the last chapter I turn my attention to the authorial imprint that derives from the consistency of Coetzee's depiction of conflict between transcendent and contextual realities, and conclude by tracing the afterlife of this dynamic in his most recent novel, *The Childhood of Jesus*.

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INTRODUCTION:

VATIC SPEAKING AND THE QUESTION OF AUTHORITY

1. The Return of the Author

In the first part of J.M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year* – the part containing the so-called “Strong Opinions” – in a section entitled “On authority in fiction”, JC, the author-protagonist, makes a pronouncement that strikes the reader as somewhat disingenuous. “Announcements of the death of the author and of authorship made by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault a quarter of a century ago,” he says, “came down to the claim that the authority of the author has never amounted to anything more than a bagful of rhetorical tricks” (Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* 149). By situating these claims about the death of the author squarely in a historical context (“a quarter of a century ago”), JC appears to be suggesting that their time has passed. That this is indeed his opinion is confirmed when he carries on: “Now that the dust has settled, the mystery of Tolstoy's authority, and of the authority of the other great writers, remains untouched” (150). Despite the best efforts of the poststructuralists (and before them the Russian formalists) to expose the figure of the author as a myth, the masters of realism have emerged with their authority intact, and JC continues to read them with “shamefaced absorption” (150).

This is an unusual sentiment to emerge from the pages of a writer who is so clearly indebted to the intellectual tradition that is being discredited here. Ever since the appearance in the late 1980s of the first book-length study of Coetzee's fiction (Teresa Dovey's *The Novels of J.M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories*), the prevailing opinion among critics has been that Coetzee is, in the first place, an author who is finely attuned to the metafictional aspects of writing. Dovey sets the tone when she argues that the novels should be read as deliberate theoretical interventions into the novelistic models they inhabit: “fiction-as-criticism” is the term she uses (*The Novels of J.M. Coetzee* 9). In

her reading she pays particular attention to Coetzee's "self-deconstructive mode of writing" (49) and argues that it prevents him from falling into the trap of "a false and falsifying gesture of mastery," thus protecting the text itself "from a diagnosis that should be directed at the system in which the textual subject is constituted". Dovey's insistence on the diagnostic value of Coetzee's writing – her recognition that a substantial part of its meaning lies in exposing the ideological fault lines that run through traditional forms of novelistic discourse, and her belief that this salutary effect goes hand-in-hand with the self-effacement of the author-subject in his writing – inaugurates a long-lasting and productive association, in the critical community, between Coetzee's fiction and poststructuralist thought.¹

Dovey's approbation of the poststructuralist elements in Coetzee's writing – her insistence that its metafictional complexity is exactly where its value lies – announced itself against the grain of what David Attwell has called the "materialist" reading of Coetzee's work: a critical approach, fairly common in the 1980s,² that took issue with Coetzee's "privileging of metaphysics and individual consciousness over historical forces" (Review 518) and agitated for a more committed stance on the part of the author against the specific ills that afflicted South Africa during the apartheid years. The tenor of these criticisms, writes Dovey, was that Coetzee had not gone far enough "in deploring the system, in delineating the historical and economic bases of oppression, or in projecting the ultimate triumph of the oppressed peoples of South Africa" (*The Novels of J.M. Coetzee* 52). One of the

¹ Dovey's method of reading Coetzee from a broadly poststructuralist (and narrowly Lacanian) perspective is not without its drawbacks. As David Attwell points out in an early review of her book: "What this study does – and this is acknowledged when the mode is described as 'criticism-as-pastiche' – ... is to show how Coetzee's fiction replicates the arguments of poststructuralism. This is either a form of propaganda for poststructuralism, or a form of reassurance to those who dislike being on the periphery" (Review 518). What Attwell calls for instead is a critical framework that shows how "the categories of structuralism and poststructuralism are recharged, perhaps even challenged, in and by Coetzee, by being brought into relationship with a new and problematic discursive and historical context" (519). It is a task that Attwell took upon himself, and achieved convincingly, in his own book, *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (1993). More recently, in *Countervoices* (2009), Carrol Clarkson has taken up the challenge of analysing Coetzee's active contribution to poststructuralist questions surrounding the position (or the non-position) of the subject in language.

² According to Attwell, the material criticism of Coetzee's work was especially prevalent after the publication of *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), a novel whose "unnatural, almost inhuman" protagonist (quoted from Z.N., *African Communist* 103), and the determinedly anti-political stance he appeared to represent, incensed a number of socially-minded reviewers and critics (Attwell, *South Africa and the Politics of Writing* 92-93).

emblematic instances of such an approach is Nadine Gordimer's 1984 review of *Life & Times of Michael K*, in which she argues that the self-consciously allegorical mode of the novel detracts from what is most important about it, namely its depiction, through the ordeals of Michael K, of a struggle that is shared by "hundreds of thousands of black South Africans" ("The Idea of Gardening"). While Gordimer is satisfied that the "truth and meaning of what white has done to black stands out on every page," she is nevertheless troubled by the impression that the elusive authorial stance Coetzee achieves in the novel is a betrayal of the "the integral relation between private and social destiny ... more than is allowed for by the subjectivity that is in every writer." Gordimer is critical of precisely that which Dovey celebrates: the refusal of the author to respond in his own voice, from a clearly demarcated subject position, to the distortions of power he depicts so incisively in his work. Thus, even while they may have disagreed vehemently on the relative merits of his style,³ critics from both camps were eager to identify Coetzee's indebtedness to a theoretical tradition that goes out of its way to foreground the structural contingency of the author-subject, and that draws attention to the unstable discursive grounds on which that subject bases his or her authority.

In recent years, the tendency among critics to recognize and applaud Coetzee's metafictional approach has evolved into a more refined position concerning the ethical importance of his work.⁴ Mike Marais, for example, argues in his book, *Secretary of the Invisible: The Idea of Hospitality in the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee* (2009), that Coetzee's methods of self-negation can be read as an existential move, one that is motivated by the desire to realize an ethics of "otherness". So, in *Disgrace* (the argument goes) David Lurie must learn to overcome his entrenched sense of self in order to experience the fundamental (and fundamentally other) reality of those around him: a "self-

³ In *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, David Attwell notes Michael Chapman's strongly worded indictment of Coetzee's style as "a kind of masturbatory release, in this country, for the Europeanizing dreams of an intellectual coterie" (*South Africa and the Politics of Writing* 127; quoted from Chapman, Review 335).

⁴ It is worth noting that, since the publication of Dovey's book in the late 1980s, the critical industry around Coetzee's work has grown at an astonishing rate. In his recent biography of Coetzee, *J.M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing* (2012), John Kannemeyer notes that "[a]bout 500 M.A. and doctoral dissertations on his work have been completed while new books on his novels are appearing all the time in various languages" (7).

effacing form of identification” that aims to bring an end to the cyclical violence that characterizes historical progress in Coetzee’s writing (Marais, *Secretary of the Invisible* 161).⁵ What emerges strongly from Marais’s work is a sense of Coetzee as an author who refrains from asserting his own subjective will on the fiction he produces. It is this recognition, namely a recognition of Coetzee as a writer who self-consciously abstains from imposing authorial meaning and provokes the reader into a confrontation with his or her own methods of signification instead, that marks the common ground between those readers who have been sceptical about Coetzee’s political non-affiliation and those who have argued for the ethical importance of his methods. Coetzee’s refusal to assume a position of authority in relation to his work – a refusal that reveals a marked debt to poststructuralism⁶ – has arguably become one of the defining characteristics of his reception in the critical community over the years.

How, then, do we account for JC’s disavowal, in *Diary of a Bad Year*, of those metafictional techniques that have proven to be such a productive method for both Coetzee and his critics (and of which JC himself is a product)? Has Coetzee decided, at this late stage in his career, to pay mind to Gordimer’s warning that the gap he has been sustaining so fastidiously between his private and his public self is a betrayal of “the subjectivity that is in every writer” (Gordimer, “The Idea of Gardening”)? Has he left behind his patrician abode in the smoke-and-mirrors country of postmodernism to announce, finally, that he is ready to speak in his own voice? Can we understand JC’s “rejection of the Barthesian credo” as an “abjuration on Coetzee’s part,” as David Attwell suggests (“Mastering authority” 220) – a signal of a growing fatigue with the “anguish of self-division, a longing that the separate spheres might be brought together” (218)?

⁵ I take up this point again in chapter three. See section 4 – “The Sympathetic Imagination”.

⁶ In *Secretary of the Invisible*, Mike Marais refers extensively to the work of Derrida, Levinas and Blanchot to elucidate his argument concerning Coetzee’s literary-aesthetic confrontations with alterity. The theme of hospitality – of hosting, in writing, that which exceeds the limits of representation, or of giving a form of purchase to the irreducible other that arrives from beyond the “visible” realm of history (*Secretary of the Invisible* xiii) – is of particular interest to Marais in his readings of these poststructuralist writers.

It is among these questions that I would like to situate my own contribution to Coetzee scholarship. Alongside the well-established critical approach that concerns itself with Coetzee's metafictional strategies of displacement, and that argues for the ethical importance of those strategies – a history in which JC's (and arguably Coetzee's) enthusiastic celebration of the authority of the great masters (“*Slava, Fyodor Michailovich! May your name resound forever in the halls of fame!*” he writes in *Diary of a Bad Year*, 226) sits rather incongruously – I want to argue that there is (and has been) in Coetzee's work a much more considered awareness of the persistence of an authorial self than he is usually given credit for. Accordingly, the general aim of my thesis is to extend the reach of our critical awareness of Coetzee by paying sustained attention to that which Derek Attridge refers to, in his introduction to *Inner Workings*, as “gleams of transcendence in Coetzee's novels” (Introduction xiv): the sense one has of an outré, extra-textual, subjective reality that occasionally breaks through the careful architecture of his writing. My argument sets out from the impression that the tenacity of the author-subject in Coetzee's work – that which stakes its claim in opposition to the poststructuralist notion that the self-in-writing is purely a matter of textual or ideological contingency – has its roots in the Romantic heritage, and particularly in the Romantic belief that the reality of one's subjective experience forms the basis for what constitutes value in literary expression. Coetzee's notable predecessor in this regard is Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose influence is perhaps stronger than one would infer from the critical view of his confessional project Coetzee expresses in his well-known essay, “Confession and Double Thoughts”, and in his inaugural professorial lecture, “Truth in Autobiography”⁷. A more diffuse presence is the figure of Wordsworth, whose devotion to subjective experience as a source of authority in writing has influenced Coetzee in a number of ways.⁸

My thesis traces the various ways in which Coetzee has woven these Romantic ideas concerning the

⁷ Rousseau, and more precisely the question of Coetzee's engagement with his *Confessions*, features prominently in chapter one (“The Subject of Confession”).

⁸ I discuss Wordsworth's influence on Coetzee in some detail in chapter two (see especially section 2 – “Wollstonecraft, Wordsworth and the Natural Subject of the Romantics”).

importance of subjective experience into the fabric of his fiction. The poststructuralist praxis of writing that defines Coetzee's ongoing oeuvre, and that informs much of the criticism around his work, is marked, or altered by the equally strong insistence of longings and desires that cannot easily be accounted for in the language of metafictional device, and that calls for a more nuanced consideration of the persistence of subjective concerns (or of the continued presence of an author-subject) in his work. I do not mean to suggest that Coetzee has been a closet Romantic all along; but rather that the strategies of deferral we have grown accustomed to noticing in his writing gain their profoundly affective power from the extent to which they hinge on a constant yearning for what has been left behind, namely a unified, discoverable sense of self. Coetzee's novels derive their meaning chiefly from the conflict he stages, time and again, between the mediated nature of experience – the self-in-writing as a linguistic and ideological construct – and the intimation of a subjective truth that needs to be told – the sustained belief in the intrinsic value of subjective experience that frequently bubbles up through the surface of his prose. My thesis is devoted to exploring the centripetal force of the conflict that arises between these two opposing notions of the self in Coetzee's literary project, and to demonstrating its usefulness as a conceptual framework for making sense of the powerful effects of his writing.

First, however, it is necessary to substantiate some of the claims I have been making so far concerning Coetzee's indebtedness to poststructuralism. I would like to do so by investigating his engagement with the thought and writing of Roland Barthes more carefully.⁹ What is at stake in Coetzee's investment in the intellectual heritage of poststructuralism? And what does it mean to speak, in such a milieu, about the re-emergence of the author-subject? Is it feasible to conceive of Coetzee as a writer who occupies a kind of fold between poststructuralist and Romantic ideas of

⁹ In an early interview with Stephen Watson (1978), Coetzee has the following to say about Barthes: "I have the greatest admiration for Barthes as someone who has experienced what I regard as the fundamental movements in modern criticism in a very intense and very intelligent way, and really has much to say to practising writers" (Coetzee and Watson, "Speaking: J.M. Coetzee" 6). My focus in the following section ("Coetzee and Barthes") falls on three of Barthes's texts (*Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, "La mort de l'auteur" and *S/Z*) that were produced during what we could term the "poststructuralist" phase of his career (i.e. the period following the publication of "The Death of the Author" in 1967, marking a departure from his earlier, structuralist work).

authorship and authority? And, indeed, is there a sense in which Coetzee's indebtedness to Barthes already prefigures the ambivalent return of the author-self?

2. Coetzee and Barthes

In her book *J.M. Coetzee: Countervoices*, Carrol Clarkson analyses the linguistic and philosophical underpinnings of Coetzee's preoccupation, throughout his career, with the implications of stylistic choice for an ethics of writing (style being understood here specifically as "the complex sequence of empirical linguistic choices on the part of the writer that produces certain literary-aesthetic effects," Clarkson, *Countervoices* 5).¹⁰ Clarkson's argument is rooted in the observation that Coetzee's sustained consideration of "the grammar of subject positions" (I's, you's and we's) has "profoundly ethical ramifications – especially in relation to questions about the authority, and hence the responsibility, on the part of the writer" (2). The first chapter of Clarkson's book ('Not I') probes the way in which Coetzee's frequent use of the third person, in *Boyhood* and *Youth*, but also in the interviews in *Doubling the Point*, works to strip the 'I' that is implied in a narrative utterance of its authority.¹¹

Coetzee, through the use of the third person, throws the balance of the speech utterance off-centre; where we would expect to find 'I' we now have 'he' – the one who is absent ... but at the same time, the one who seems to hold authority in relation to the narrative

¹⁰ In her introduction, Clarkson elaborates on what she means by "the ethics and aesthetics of literary address": "[I]n what ways do seemingly innocent linguistic choices on the part of the writer have ethical consequences for the position of the speaking or 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 recreate in writing?" (*Countervoices* 1)

¹¹ Clarkson refers to Benveniste to demonstrate the need for an 'I' in linguistic utterance (*Countervoices* 25); she argues, furthermore (with reference to Susan Barton's crippling realization, once she has taken up the pen in *Foe*, that she cannot truly write before she has found a way to tell the story of Friday's muteness) that "[I]nguistic exigency dictates that the position of pre-eminence and control goes to the speaker, and this is in keeping with the long history in Western thinking that associates language with the expression of reason – and hence dominion – over other forms of consciousness" (37). The point, for Clarkson, is that the linguistic 'I', which comes into being as a matter of definition – "the one who speaks," according to Benveniste's Arab grammarians (25) – is traditionally also the site of authority, or the site from which the "one who writes" deploys his authority (i.e. asserts control over the meaning of and in his writing) (43). Coetzee's "careful exploration of the grammar of person" (18) thus extends into an ethical consideration of the traditional authority of the author-subject (or the writer-self) over that which (or whom) is represented in his writing.

recounted. What does this imply for the authority of the implied ‘I’ of the anonymous narrator, the ‘I’ of the writer? Thus the use of ‘he’ seems to proliferate the possible sites of occupation for ‘I’ – but the result is that the position of ‘I’, usually the position of authority with respect to the utterance is one that has been destabilized.” (Clarkson, *Countervoices* 37)

Clarkson thus describes how the positing of an absent, nebulous ‘he’ as the nominal patron of the narrating voice (a voice that, in the case of *Life & Times of Michael K*, “seems to vibrate *between* a narrating and narrated consciousness,” *Countervoices* 30) causes a dispersion or fragmentation in the linguistically implied ‘I’ of the narrative, and suspends the convention by which the author-self (the one who would occupy the terrain of the ‘I’) claims a position of authority in relation to his writing: “the written site of that self is internally and dialogically split across self and other, present and past, writer and protagonist,” she writes (39).

The disaggregation of the site of the “I” in Coetzee’s writing, and the consequent severance of the author-self from his position of authority, calls into question the assumed presence of an *a priori* subject as a point of cohesion (or source of authority) for the narrative. This is a thought that emerges, for Clarkson, in Coetzee’s reflections on Roland Barthes. In reference to Coetzee’s short essay on Barthes, “A Note on Writing” (which was first written in 1984 and collected in *Doubling the Point* in 1992), Clarkson notes Coetzee’s identification, via Barthes, of the ghost-like presence of a “middle voice” in certain verb forms (i.e. “to write”) (*Countervoices* 44). If we think of the verb “to write” as being in the active voice – that is to say, as a transitive verbal construction that takes a subject as the agent of the action, e.g. ‘John writes a book’ – then we are implicitly relying on “an unspoken conception of the subject” (44): a subject that is “prior to, independent of, and untouched by the verb” (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 95). If, however, we think of the verb “to write” as situated somewhere between the active and the passive voice – as existing in the “middle voice” – then we would have a subject that is “both agent and patient” of the action (Clarkson,

Countervoices 43): a subject, in other words, that is written as much as it writes. Unlike the active voice, in which the subject remains “untouched” by the verb he or she performs, “to write” in the middle voice implies a two-way traffic between the self who writes and the activity of writing, thus transforming the “act” of writing into an “experience of writing” (43) – with all the implications of retroactive self-constitution that accompanies the idea of “experience”.

Clarkson draws a link between this discussion and Coetzee's insistence that one does not always know beforehand what one is going to write – that the writing “writes you as you write it” (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 17) – and makes the point that, for Coetzee as for Barthes, “the subject does not have an *a priori* existence apart from the instant of the discourse; *the writing results in the emergence of a subject*” (Clarkson, *Countervoices* 44, my emphasis). What Clarkson’s analysis here brings to the fore is the extent to which Coetzee’s reading of Barthes entails a shared scepticism between the two writers: a scepticism that is rooted in a mutual appreciation of grammatical, or linguistic nuance, and that is directed toward the notion of an independently existing author-subject as the source of authority in writing. However, in the very notion of the subject as a *function* of the writing – as something that emerges from the writing, rather than precedes it – Clarkson also suggests a qualified sort of return to the idea of an author-self in Coetzee’s work. Or, as she puts it elsewhere:

[W]e see in Coetzee an attentiveness and a return to the idea of authorial consciousness – and the ethical implications attendant upon that. These preoccupations constitute a break with more programmatic structuralist conceptions of authorship, authority and authorial consciousness. (Clarkson, *Countervoices* 9)¹²

Thus, even while Coetzee is indebted to Barthes for pointing the way to a critical-linguistic

¹² Clarkson discusses the return of authorial consciousness in Coetzee’s work more directly in relation to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, and the idea of the cultural contingency of the self. I return to these questions in chapter three (“Politics, Voice and the Self”). See especially section 2 – “Echoes of Negative Capability”.

interrogation of the authority that has traditionally been the province of an *a priori* author-self, he never wears (so to speak) the cloak of an acolyte: his professional interest in the underlying ideological assumptions and rhetorical niceties involved in the practice of writing, and his keen attentiveness to the ethical implications of stylistic choice, do not quite entail a wholesale subscription to the structuralist- and poststructuralist tendency, embodied so eloquently by Barthes, to champion the removal of the author-self. Clarkson's work allows us to appreciate Coetzee's investment in poststructuralist writing techniques (with a special emphasis, in this case, on Roland Barthes) while keeping alive, at the back of our minds, the lingering presence of an author-subject in his writing. Conversely, when we trace the implications of JC's rejection of Barthes in *Diary of a Bad Year*, we are able to consider the ways in which that rejection, and its consequent suggestion of the return of an author-self, still reveals the influence of the poststructuralist tendencies that are evinced in Barthes's announcement of the death of the author.

The structure of the novel in which JC presents his opinion of Barthes (i.e. *Diary of a Bad Year*) is an unconventional one. Visually, its most conspicuous feature is the division of the narrative into three separate tracts, or bands. While JC's opinion pieces occupy the top band, the other bands represent the story of his relationship with Anya, a Filipina woman who lives in an apartment downstairs and whom he enlists – motivated more by erotic longing than by any pragmatic concerns – as a typist. For the first few pages we are given only JC's perspective on their relationship, but Anya's voice soon emerges in a third band to give her distinct outlook on events. "This hypertextual polyphony," writes Boyd Tonkin, "becomes a source of poignancy, even pleasure, as human factors messily revise all the dogmas booming out above" ("*Diary of a Bad Year*, by J.M. Coetzee").¹³ On a more technical level, Johan Geertsema points out how the obtrusive layering of the text ("like the news crawl on a TV screen," writes James Wood in *The New Yorker*, "Squall Lines") challenges the reader to question the status of the relationship between the different modes of discourse – the

¹³ "Meanwhile, in the basement, a kind of novel begins," is another way that Tonkin puts it in the same review ("*Diary of a Bad Year*, by J.M. Coetzee").

didactic and the literary – that are at work in the separate bands (Geertsema, “Coetzee's Diary of a Bad Year, Politics, and the Problem of Position” 71). As a result of this discursive uncertainty, when JC puts forward his observation that the value of certain great novels is the result of the authority of their authors, it is not possible separate his statement from the textual framework in which it occurs – a framework that undercuts the authority of his strong opinion by foregrounding the role of the reader in determining how much weight it should be given among the other narrative bands that make up the text. The novel thus creates a discursive moment in which Barthes's call for the death of the author is refused (in JC's bold opinion) at the same time as it is affirmed (in the grounds for interpretive freedom produced by the porous structure of the narrative).

The open-ended, fragmentary structure of Coetzee's novel – a novel that self-consciously inhabits the borderland between fiction and autobiography¹⁴ – can already be seen as a kind of veiled homage to Barthes's own evasion of autobiographical pressure in his book *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, first published in 1975. The body of that book is divided into two parts: a kind of symbolic image-vault (“*l'imaginaire des images*,” *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* 4) which consists mostly of photographic reproductions focusing on the young Barthes and his early family life; and – more to the point for our discussion of *Diary of a Bad Year* – a collection of short written pieces, or fragments, that range from theoretical reflection to personal anecdote, often blending the two in highly innovative ways. The self-effacing gesture of authorship to which *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* bears testimony is already evident in the reproduced segment of handwriting that serves as the book's motto: *Tout ceci doit être considéré comme dit par un personnage de roman* (“All this must be considered as if it were said by a character in a novel”)¹⁵. Barthes makes it clear, from the start, that he renounces any claims to a superior knowledge of himself; that, on the

¹⁴ David Attwell, for one, is quite convinced that the opinions expressed in the second part of the book, despite their “framing in the narrative of JC,” are “unreservedly autobiographical on Coetzee's part” (“Mastering Authority” 215). He is also keen to note the autobiographical resonance of the book as a whole: “The initials J.C., together with many other clues, imply that the text is to be taken as autobiographical, though in a sharply qualified sense” (214).

¹⁵ The translations from Barthes are my own; I have, however, referred to existing translations to check the accuracy of my efforts. These are listed in my bibliography (for *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, I have consulted Richard Howard's translation).

contrary, the persona that emerges in the writing (or the self that is produced in the text) also identifies the persona (or self) that is the nominal subject of the autobiography. In contrast to what the reader would expect from an autobiography, Barthes refuses to participate in the convention that would situate the autobiographical text as an explanation or illumination of the antecedent being of the author. These thoughts are focalized explicitly in one of the fragments that occurs in the second part of the book (*La coincidence*, “Coincidence”):

I do not seek to put my present expression in the service of my previous truth (in classical terms, one would sanctify this task under the name of *authenticity*), I renounce the exhausting pursuit of a former piece of myself, I do not seek to *restore* myself (as one says of a monument). I do not say, “I am going to describe myself,” but: “I write a text, and I call it R.B.” (Barthes, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* 60)

The dream of a purely textual self – a self that is not merely the symbolic representation of an *a priori* subject, but that is born, and that lives, in the “pure materiality” of the text (*Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* 60): a textual self that identifies with nothing but itself – is figured, for Barthes, in the fragmentary structure of the writing in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*. The absence of a conjunctive grammar between the different fragments of the text, as well as the internal “parataxis” of the fragments themselves (i.e. the contrived, “heteroclite”, anti-natural form of association that governs, for Barthes, the arrangement of the internal elements of the fragment, 97)¹⁶, make it an ideal vehicle for approximating a condition of non-referentiality. A text that is composed entirely of fragments, in this sense, is like a piece of music composed entirely of “intermezzos”: “each piece is sufficient unto itself, and yet it is never anything but the interstice of its neighbours” (98). By composing an autobiography entirely of fragments, then, Barthes supposes that he might “cease to discourse about himself in imaginary terms” and thus “attenuate the risk of transcendence” (99). The fragmented text is the mark of the autobiographer's desire to remove himself as an antecedent

¹⁶ The descriptive syntax of the fragment would appear to demand a Greek vocabulary: “asyndeton”, “anacoluthon”, “parataxis” and “heteroclite” are some of the terms Barthes uses to describe it (*Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* 97).

source of authority over the meaning of his writing – a desire that finds an echo in the fragmentary structure of *Diary of a Bad Year*.

Although Barthes briefly toys with the idea, in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, that his fixation on fragment, and his career-long penchant for exposing the rhetorical and ideological conventions that give rise to apparently “natural” forms of expression, might finally be nothing more than a mask for his own secret desire to write a journal,¹⁷ it is important to note (and especially so in relation to Coetzee) that there is also a strong ethical dimension to his efforts to discredit the authority of an *a priori* author-self. This aspect of his thought emerges quite prominently in the text that serves as an immediate point of reference for JC's renunciation of Barthes in *Diary of a Bad Year*, namely “La mort de l'auteur” (“The Death of the Author”). In it, Barthes declares that the reader should replace the author as the figure who brings cohesion to the meaning of a text: “[W]e know that, in order to return to writing its future, it is necessary to reverse the myth: the birth of the reader must happen at the cost of the death of the author” (“La mort de l'auteur” 69). The myth of which he speaks is the myth of the Author with a capital “A”, that grand figure who arose in modern times as a result of the prestige accorded to the individual by “English empiricism, French rationalism, and the personal faith of the Reformation” (64). This godlike persona exists in an antecedent relationship to the text. He is conceived of as the past of his own writing (like a father is conceived of as the past of his child, 66), and the task of criticism, more often than not, is to discover the author's true, inner voice through the “more or less transparent allegory of the fiction” (64).

¹⁷ “Under the alibi of the destroyed dissertation, one has arrived at the regular practice of the fragment; then from the fragment, one slides into the 'journal',” writes Barthes (*Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* 99). “Is not the point of all this to give oneself the right to write a 'journal'? Am I not justified in considering all that I have written as a clandestine and obstinate effort to effect the reappearance, one day, freely, of the theme of the Gidean journal?” (99). The point is not lost that Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*, with its fragmented structure, is in fact presented as a journal (or “diary”) – an eventuality that brings into focus precisely the tension between self-effacement and the desire for a less circuitous, more conventionally autobiographical form of self-expression that is implicit in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*.

The motivation for Barthes's denunciation of the author lies in his refusal to see the text as a window onto a fixed social reality (“La mort de l'auteur” 67), of which said author becomes the spokesperson, based on the quality of his genius. Following Austin,¹⁸ Barthes argues that a text should rather be thought as a kind of performative act, an “enunciation that has no other content than the act of its own saying”, as for example the “I declare” of a king or the “I sing” of the ancient poet (69). “We know now that a text is not made up of a line of words, sending out a single meaning, in a sense that is almost theological (which would be the 'message' of the Author-God),” he says, “but a space of multiple dimensions, where various writings join and contest each other, none of which is original: the text is a tissue of citations, issuing from a thousand cultural sources” (67). The place where all these jostling traces are held in simultaneous tension – the place where they engage with each other “in dialogue, in parody, in contestation” (69) – is in the figure of the reader. It is important for Barthes to prevent the reader from becoming a symbol in the service of the cult of the individual (which is the legacy of the author) and he takes care to define him as “a man without history, without biography, without psychology; he is only that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces of which the writing is constituted” (69).

The active role Barthes envisions for the reader in “La mort de l'auteur” – and which informs the fragmentary structure of a novel like *Diary of a Bad Year* – corresponds quite closely to the notion of the “texte scriptible” (or “writerly text”) that he develops in *S/Z*. The writerliness of a text, Barthes tells us, is that value which provokes in us the desire to construct and reconstruct its meaning with each successive reading. It is, in a word, the method or approach that strives to make of the reader “no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (Barthes, *S/Z* 10). The opposite value to the writerly text – that against which it reacts or agitates – is the “texte lisible”, or readerly text. The problem with readerly texts, says Barthes, is that they enforce the great divide that exists in the literary industry (or existed in the late 1960s in France) between those who manufacture texts

¹⁸ See Austin, J.L., *How To Do Things With Words* (1962). Austin's text returns as a part of my argument in the next chapter (see section 4 – “Quaquaqu”).

(“le fabricant”) and those who merely consume them (“l’usager”), thereby turning the reader into a sort of passive recipient of meaning for whom “nothing remains but the paltry freedom either to accept or reject the text” (10). The ideological conceit (or, to use the proper Barthesian term, the “myth”) that sanctions the reductive reading habits encouraged by these so-called *textes lisibles* is, for Barthes, an important one. At its heart, he says, the ideal of fixing the meaning of a text to a stable referent is no less than an attempt “to return to the closure of Western discourse (scientific, critical or philosophical), to its central organisation, to arrange all the meanings of a text in a circle around the hearth of denotation” (13). The author, in this ideological vision, is the master of truth, and his writing is to be taken as the encoding of an essential meaning that precedes the utterance of the text. The reader, by contrast, is the one who works back from the text in order to decode the original truth of which the writer is the authority and master. And the critic happens to be the exemplary reader:

The mastery of meaning, a veritable semiurgy, is a divine attribute, insofar as this meaning is defined as an overflow, an emission, a spiritual emanation that spills over from the signified to the signifier: the *author* is a god (his place of origin is the signified); as for the critic, he is the priest, attentively deciphering the Writing of the god. (Barthes, *S/Z* 166)

Against the background of these reasons for Barthes's denunciation of the author – reasons which have to do with the emancipation of literary meaning from its roots in the positivist traditions of Western thought – JC's opinion on the persistence of authorship begins to take on a somewhat altered significance. The author is not dead, he says, but nor should the author be restored to his pre-Barthesian role as a speaker of universal truths.

In a language that echoes the religious register used by Barthes to describe the hermeneutic practices that grew up around the once-revered “Author-God”, JC mentions the adulation bestowed

upon certain 19th century authors by their devotees (he speaks of Tolstoy and Whitman in particular). The “disciples who swarmed [to these authors] in quest of enlightenment,” he says, were missing the point, because apart from their ability as poets, they were “ordinary men with ordinary, fallible opinions” (Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* 151). They did not have access to a truth beyond their art, of which their writing is merely a diluted form (“wisdom was not what they dealt in,” 151). JC, like his author, appears to have taken the lessons of the French iconoclasts to heart, and when he makes his case for the staying power of great authors, we should not read it as an atavistic return of the Author-God. On the contrary, it leaves us with the problem of having to work out what it means to speak of authorship, and of the persistence of an author-self, from within an intellectual framework that denies the universal legitimacy of those subjective experiences a writer may lay claim to as the basis for his art.

3. A Close Reading of Authority

In a manner that is typical of Coetzee's writing in general, and of the opinion pieces in *Diary of a Bad Year* especially, the answer JC provides to the question of what sets certain authors apart is suggestive rather than definitive. The passage that forms the crux of his opinion is brief, but if we look at it closely it reveals much that is relevant to our understanding of the relationship between the self and writing in Coetzee's work. What JC has to say is the following:

What the great masters are masters of is authority. What is the source of authority, or of what the formalists call the authority effect? If authority could be achieved simply by tricks of rhetoric, then Plato was surely justified in expelling poets from his ideal republic. But what if authority can be attained only by opening the poet-self to some higher force, by ceasing to be oneself and beginning to speak vatically? (Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* 151)

The quality or value that JC singles out as the defining characteristic of those works of literature

that continue to affect us, then – the quality of which their authors are possessed to a very high degree – is “authority”. However, the simple declarative sentence in which he makes this statement (“What the great masters are masters of is authority”) belies the fact that it is not at all obvious what he is talking about. Nor does the rest of the paragraph clarify the matter in any straightforward way. Instead, we are given three speculative sentences, each suggesting a range of implications for the notion of authority that JC wishes to advance as a standard or marker of quality in authorship. I would like to consider each of these sentences in turn, and then to suggest how the conceptual force that gathers around the idea of authority points us toward a way in which to understand the peculiar manifestation of an authorial presence in Coetzee's work.

1. *What is the source of authority, or of what the formalists call the authority effect?*

The first sentence of JC's speculative answer takes the form of a question, which immediately places the notion of authority under a certain interrogative pressure. This is not an unusual stylistic progression in Coetzee's writing, where a word or concept is often subjected to scrutiny the moment it has been used (think, for example, of the sequence friend/freond/freon in *Disgrace*, 120; or of Elizabeth Costello's defence of her vocation, in *Elizabeth Costello*, as a matter of testing the soundness of words, 199). In this instance the interrogative mode invites the reader to question the claim JC makes for authority, thereby introducing a moment of hesitation, or a lacuna in the association between JC the author and the substance of his strong opinion. The authorial voice produces at once the ideal of authority and a gesture of scepticism towards that ideal. From the outset, the reader is alerted to the idea that the authority JC is talking about might be thought of as a contested space (or a space of contestation) in which the force of a statement arrives along with the conditions for its own undermining.

The question itself is made up of two distinct, yet related parts. They are related in the sense that the

second part modifies the first (linguistically, it functions as a dependent clause) and they are distinct in the sense that they work in separate directions, or refer to separate connotative fields. The first part (“What is the source of authority”) refers to the as-yet-unmentioned conceptual framework that JC brings to bear on the notion of authority in the sentences that follow, whereas the second part (“of what the formalists call the authority effect”) points back to those intellectual traditions (the Russian formalists, Barthes, Foucault)¹⁹ from which he has distanced himself in the earlier stages of his strong opinion. The equivocal nature of the relationship between these two parts of the sentence is compounded by the conjunction that links them, “or”. The grammatical double function of “or” means that it supports both the separation of the two parts (in which case the sentence would imply something like, “The authority of which I am speaking is an alternative to what the formalists call the authority effect”) and their convergence (in which case “what the formalists call the authority effect” becomes an elaboration or explanation of the authority mentioned in the first part). Semantically, both of these possibilities occur at once, which signals the latent ambivalence of JC's attitude toward the proclamations of the end of authorship that are encapsulated in the second part of the sentence. In other words, the structure of the sentence conveys the curious position that JC occupies in relation to those theories which informed the early part of his author's career: he does not quite accept them, but he never loses sight of them either.

What the sentence asks us to consider is the “source” of authority. But even before JC gives us his thoughts on this source – the condition or activity from which authority draws its force and on which it depends for its existence – we notice that he has, despite his dismissive attitude, not severed himself entirely from those relativist theories that would describe authority as no more than

¹⁹ “The Russian formalist critics of the 1920s, from whom Barthes in particular learned much, concentrated their efforts on exposing Tolstoy, above all other writers, as a rhetorician. Tolstoy became their exemplary target because Tolstoy's storytelling seemed so natural, that is to say, concealed it's rhetorical artistry so well,” writes JC in his opinion piece on authority (Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* 150). For an example of the kind of criticism JC has in mind here, we might look to Viktor Shklovsky, an important figure in Russian formalist circles whose influential essay from 1917, “Art as Technique”, describes the extent to which Tolstoy's work depends on the technique of “defamiliarization” to achieve its rhetorical effect. Shklovsky is careful to note that this technique is not Tolstoy's alone – that it “is found almost everywhere form is found” (“Art as Technique” 781) – thus resisting the notion that literary accomplishment depends on some kind of special quality in the individual author.

a misleading ideological construct. The declamatory tone of his strong opinion overshadows the realization, based on the nuance of his style, that his attitude takes the form of a more tentative kind of scepticism, one that does not seem quite ready yet to abandon those rhetorical practices he has inherited from the tradition he criticizes. In the light of these observations, the conditional mood of the next sentence (“*If authority could be achieved simply by tricks of rhetoric, then Plato was surely justified in expelling poets from his ideal republic,*” *Diary of a Bad Year* 151, my emphasis) takes on a more pointed significance. JC would like to suggest an alternative source for authority, but he cannot give himself over to it unconditionally. For that he is too conscious of the ways in which a writer can manipulate his material (i.e. language) in order to create the illusion of truth.

2. If authority could be achieved simply by tricks of rhetoric, then Plato was surely justified in expelling poets from his ideal republic.

In the introduction to his translation of *Republic*, Robin Waterfield warns against the tendency of modern readers to soften the blow of Plato’s attack on the literary arts. Contemporary audiences have long since grown used to the idea of “art for art’s sake” (or to the idea that aesthetics might be thought of as a value in itself), but we must not forget that poets in Ancient Greece took themselves seriously as educators, or that “the overriding purpose of [their] poetry was didactic” (Waterfield, Introduction xxx). Thus, when Plato claims that “representational poetry can deform minds (§595b), he means it; and when he says that avoiding such poetry is critical if one wants to be a good person (§608b), he means that too” (Introduction xxix). Despite his “fascinated admiration” for Homer, Plato’s Socrates concludes that it would be better to “detach” himself from his youthful crush on tragic poetry, like a lover who realizes that “a love affair he’s involved in is no good for him” (Plato, *Republic* §607e). His polemic against the seductive rhetoric of poetry is rooted in one of the central metaphysical lines of thought in *Republic*, namely the argument for the existence of ideal forms

from which things in the world derive their particular qualities.²⁰ The representational arts, says Plato, are concerned with the appearance of things rather than with their reality, and hence lead the mind astray from a proper knowledge of the truth. He makes his point by referring to the example of a bed: God has made the original, true bed (the ideal type); a joiner who makes a bed manufactures a copy of that original; and an artist produces a mere imitation of the joiner's copy: a copy of a copy, or an image that is at a second remove from the original bed (§597b-598b). In like fashion (according to Plato), a poet's depiction of good deeds (or of any other activity in the sphere of human existence) is a mere imitation, at a second remove, of the true goodness that exists in its original form as an ideal type (§598d-602b). Poets deal in appearance only; reality is beyond their reach, and the pleasure one derives from their poems has nothing at all to do with truth – on the contrary, it compromises the felicitous functioning of “one's own inner political system” (to take the moral analogy of *Republic* at face value, §608a). When JC speaks about “tricks of rhetoric” in his speculative passage on the nature of authority, he appears to have in mind this aspect of Plato's argument, with its description of poets as mere imitators of reality who have no real knowledge of the things they depict in their work:

[The poet] uses words and phrases to block in some of the colours of each area of expertise, although all he understands is how to represent things in a way which makes other superficial people, who base their conclusions on the words they can hear, think that he's written a really good poem about shoemaking or military command or whatever else it is that he's set to metre, rhythm, and music. It only takes these features to cast this powerful a spell: that's what they're for. But when the poets' work is stripped of its musical hues and expressed in plain words, I think you've seen what kind of impression it gives... (Plato, *Republic* §601a-b)

Poets are able to cast their “powerful spell” without having to be involved in what they are saying in any substantial way. All they need to do is master the trick of arranging language (“metre, rhythm,

²⁰ A famous invocation of this theory in Plato's *Republic* is the allegory of the cave (see §514a-518b). I return to the cave-allegory in the final part of my conclusion (see section 4 – “Reality Check: *The Childhood of Jesus*”).

and music”) in such a way as to give a “superficial” form of pleasure or satisfaction. Authority in the literary arts, in such a view, derives from the poet's ability to dupe his audience into believing that his patterned imitations of reality are tantamount to the real thing, and that the poet himself has “mastered every craft, and is the world's leading expert in absolutely every branch of human knowledge” (Plato, *Republic* §598d) – a claim that Homer's disciples were wont to make for him (§598e). One of Plato's chief objections to this duplicitous form of authority (or “sorcery”, as he calls it elsewhere, §602d) is that it appeals to “the petulant and varied side of our characters” (§605a). It feeds (or fattens up) the low, irrational part of the mind (§605b) and inhibits the cultivation of the rational part – that part which encourages us to remain stable under emotional duress and that enables the steadfast pursuit of truth and knowledge. “If you admit the entertaining Muse of lyric and epic poetry, then instead of law and the shared acceptance of reason as the best guide, the kings of your community will be pleasure and pain,” he writes (§607a).

But why does JC invoke Plato to qualify his idea of authority? If it were indeed true, as Plato argues, that authority could be achieved merely through “tricks of rhetoric” (Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* 151) – or, more precisely, if authority in poetry were simply a side-effect of rhetorical affect, having no source other than the pleasing arrangement of patterns (or “musical hues,” Plato, *Republic* §601b), then JC would agree with Plato that literature has no rightful claim to our attention, and that the truth would be better served if poets (after being anointed with myrrh and given a “chaplet of wool” in honour of their admirable, but finally quite suspect skill at representing things, Plato, *Republic* §398a-b) were banned from the city gates. But if rhetoric in writing (and hence the authority-effect) required something *more* than mere skilfulness in arranging words, then perhaps it would not be so expedient to get rid of the poets. JC appears to be using Plato's indictment of poetry, in other words, to set off his suggestion that the relationship between a writer and the rhetorical effect of his writing is somehow more involved (and less chameleon-like) than the relationship of imitation described by Plato. He is preparing the ground for his view that the

arresting force of literature is not merely the result of rhetorical trickery or verbal sleight-of-hand, which would indeed justify its condemnation on ethical grounds, but that it involves the being of those who are involved in it in a more comprehensive way.

The extent to which JC's position constitutes a challenge to Plato is more plainly visible in his final diary entry in the second part of *Diary of a Bad Year* ("On Dostoevsky"). In it he tries to account for the strong feelings that overwhelm him upon re-reading a certain passage from Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, namely the climactic moment in the long confessional speech Ivan Karamazov makes to his brother Alyosha, wherein he states that he would like to give back his entry ticket to the world created by God. The "uneasy, even shamefaced absorption" of JC's earlier response to Tolstoy (Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* 150) has now evolved (or devolved, depending on your point of view) to the point that he finds himself "sobbing uncontrollably" at Ivan's bitter anguish (223). In scrutinizing his own emotional reaction – a reaction that occurs despite his formal disagreement with Ivan's "rather vengeful views" (224) – JC comes to the conclusion that it has "nothing to do with ethics or politics," and "everything to do with rhetoric" (225): "It is the voice of Ivan, as realized by Dostoevsky, not his reasoning, that sweeps me along," he says (225). JC's subsequent expression of admiration for the powerful affect of the work casts some light on his thoughts concerning the role of rhetorical persuasion in literature:

What one recognizes, even as one hears Ivan's words, even as one asks whether he genuinely believes what he says, even as one asks whether one wants to rise up and follow him and give back one's ticket too, even as one asks whether it is not mere rhetoric ("mere" rhetoric) that one is reading, even as one asks, shocked, how a Christian, Dostoevsky, a follower of Christ, could allow Ivan such powerful words – even in the midst of all this there is space enough to think too, *Glory be! At last I see it before me, the battle pitched on the highest ground! If to anyone (Alyosha, for instance) it shall be given to vanquish Ivan, by word or by example, then indeed the word of Christ will be forever vindicated!* And therefore one thinks, *Slava, Fyodor*

Michailovich! May your name resound forever in the halls of fame! (Coetzee, Diary of a Bad Year 226)

There are two aspects of the passage that mark, to my mind, the grounds on which JC argues for the rightful place of rhetorical persuasion in literature. The first of these is the realization (the “shocked” realization) that Dostoevsky gives voice to a passionate diatribe against Christendom despite the fact that it runs counter to his personal beliefs. The implication here is a far-reaching one. What it suggests is that authority derives, at least in part, from the extent to which an author is willing, or able, to submit his or her personal ethos to the destabilizing procedures of fiction. To think of writing as an activity that cancels or nullifies the author, or that reduces him or her to an empty marker whose sole purpose is to set in motion the textual play of signifiers, is an idea that has had its historical moment, as JC is well aware.²¹ But this kind of annulment of the author-concept does not seem to be quite what he has in mind here. Rather, he appears to be suggesting that the author – Dostoevsky, in this case – becomes personally involved precisely to the extent that he subjects his own values and beliefs to the creative process, or to that which we may call (in the spirit of one of Coetzee's comments in an interview in *Doubling the Point*)²² the art of the possible – an art that involves a certain investment in the power of rhetorical evocation. The author is thus no longer the singular source of authority in the work, but he is nevertheless an important condition for that authority to come into being, in the sense that he submits himself and his belief system to the speculative nature of the work he produces.

The second aspect of the passage I would like to draw attention to presents us with an opportunity to elaborate on the previous point. “*Glory be!*” says JC, “*At last I see it before me, the battle pitched*

²¹ Michel Foucault perhaps captures this moment best when he writes, in 1969, that “criticism and philosophy took note of the disappearance – or death – of the author some time ago,” and describes the prevailing tendency in *la nouvelle critique* to conceive of writing as “a question of creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears,” with the result that “the mark of the writer is reduced to nothing more than the singularity of his absence” (Foucault, “What Is an Author” 102-103).

²² “Stories are defined by their irresponsibility: they are, in the judgment of Swift's Houynnhms, “that which is not.” The *feel* of writing fiction is one of freedom, of irresponsibility, or better, of responsibility toward something that has not yet emerged, that lies somewhere at the end of the road” (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 246).

on the highest ground!” JC's exclamation here has all the force of a revelation, not least because he has prepared for it, rhetorically speaking, by situating it at the end of an unusually long sentence, one that winds its way rhapsodically through wave after wave of pre-emptive criticism before delivering its final pronouncement. But what battle is he talking about? And where is the “highest ground” on which it is pitched? The terms of the conflict, I would suggest, derive from the ambivalent nature of his response to Ivan's speech. In principle he does not agree with it. Ethically and politically he finds himself at a remove from Ivan's point of view, and the easy sentiment of the argument – its reference to “cruel landowners” and “martyred children” (Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* 225) – leaves him unconvinced. Nevertheless he cannot deny that the feelings elicited by the speech – the “tones of anguish” that strike through despite the deficiency of the argument (226) – are real. They are real in the sense that they are ontologically certain: they are “really” real (226). The reality they signify is “the personal anguish of a soul unable to bear the horrors of this world” (225). The source of conflict in the speech, or the “battle” to which JC bears witness, thus appears to lie in the intimation of a wholly subjective reality (the “personal anguish of a soul”) that struggles to define itself, or make itself heard against the pressures of a discursive framework that is not accepting of its grief.

The tension between the subjective nature of Ivan's plea and the constraints of rational accountability is already visible in the substance of the speech itself. Ivan prepares for his confession by telling Alyosha that even though he knows that God exists, and even if he were to witness for himself the “moment of eternal harmony” at the end of time in which all mankind's evil is redeemed by the grace of God (Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* 308) – that is to say, even though he acknowledges that there is an underlying order to things, an order that justifies human suffering according to some absolute good, and even though he concedes, in the abstract, the truth of this order – he still “cannot agree to live by it” (318). “So let me tell you,” he says, “that in the last analysis, this world of God's – I don't accept it, even though I know that it exists, and I don't

admit its validity in any way” (308). Accordingly, the “battle” JC refers to is made manifest not only in the opposition between his own and Ivan's ethico-political points of view, or in the extent to which Ivan's passionate tirade departs from the religious beliefs of his author, but is the lifeblood of the speech itself, in the sense that its meaning, or its affective force, derives from the contest in Ivan's delivery between the appeal of an abstract, rational sense of good and the rhetorical urgency of his entirely subjective feelings of outrage. The “highest ground” on which the battle occurs, it would seem, is the degree of success with which Dostoevsky has managed to embody the unceasing, generative nature of this conflict in his writing.

The value of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, JC tells us, is that they set the standard according to which an artist might become “ethically better” (Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* 227). The vehement tone of his defence of these authors carries through into his observation that “[t]hey annihilate one's impurer pretensions; they clear one's eyesight; they fortify one's arm” (227). What I have been arguing here is that authority, for JC, involves the level or degree to which an author is able to give voice, in his or her writing, to the fraught and often antagonistic relationship between subjective impulse and those discursive formations – ideological, socio-historical, philosophical – that provide the structure of meaning in literary representation. The ethical aspect of such a notion of the source of authority in literature – that which vindicates it against the accusation that it is the result of mere rhetorical trickery, as Plato argues – would appear to lie in the fact that an important part of the conflict is precisely the measure to which an author is invested in his work. However, as I hope I have made clear, the way in which authorial investment plays out in Coetzee's writing is not to be taken as a reversion to the antiquated image of the author as a unitary representative of a singular truth. The special, qualified sense in which we might talk about the persistence of an authorial presence in the work is the focus of my analysis of the third, and last sentence in the paragraph containing JC's speculation about the source of authority.

3. *But what if authority can be attained only by opening the poet-self to some higher force, by ceasing to be oneself and beginning to speak vatically?*

What, precisely, is the meaning of “vatic”? The word derives from the Latin *vates*, for prophet, and it means “of or pertaining to, characteristic of, a prophet or seer; prophetic, inspired” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Setting aside for a moment the discomfiting thought that JC is asking us to credit writers with having occult abilities, I would suggest that this locution, with its reference to the “poet-self” becoming infused with a “higher force”, gives us an opportunity to mark the influence on Coetzee's work of an idea that traces its way to the Romantic heritage. The enduring image of the Romantic poet as a seer-like figure first became prominent in the 1970s, thanks in no small part to the efforts of M.H. Abrams. In *Natural Supernaturalism*, Abrams's influential study of the patterns of creative production that characterized much of the poetry produced during the Romantic period, he speaks of the “vatic stance” taken up by the emblematic poets of the age (*Natural Supernaturalism* 13):

They represented themselves in the traditional persona of the philosopher-seer or the poet-prophet (in England, the chief model was Milton, the great “bard” of what Shelley called “the last national struggle for civil and religious liberty”), and they set out, in various yet recognizably parallel ways, to reconstitute the grounds of hope and to announce the certainty, or at least the possibility, of a rebirth in which a renewed mankind will inhabit a renovated earth where he will find himself thoroughly at home. (Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* 12)

One of the key figures in Abrams's portrayal of the Romantic poets as vatic speakers is William Wordsworth, who claims, in a verse preceding his *Prospectus*, that he has been chosen as the “poet-prophet” of his times (quoted in Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* 21). The theory of authorship that underlies Wordsworth's writing practice can be found in the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, where he addresses the public on what he perceives to be their lack of sympathy for his poetic

mission. He devotes considerable attention to justifying his stylistic preference for “simple and unelaborated” language – the language “really used by men” – as well as his choice of subject matter, namely “incidents and situations from common life,” based on the premise that this approach grants him closer access to the “elementary feelings” that make up what is lasting and valuable in human experience (Wordsworth, Preface 21). What sets his poetry apart most strongly from the supposedly misguided capriciousness of his contemporaries, however, is “that each of [his poems] has a worthy *purpose*” (22). The terms in which Wordsworth conceives of the purpose of poetry are grandiose, and indeed he warns us that he suffers from no sense of “false modesty” concerning the importance of the subject (24). Against the influence of the national events of the day, he writes, it is the duty of the poet to return to public consciousness those “inherent and indestructible qualities of the human mind, and likewise of certain powers in the great and permanent objects that act upon it which are equally indestructible” (25). Wordsworth considers himself, in his capacity as poet, to be a conduit for those energies of the human spirit that transcend the vagaries of historical circumstance. The vatic posture of his calling is embellished by his prophetic-sounding statement that “the time is approaching when the evil will be systematically opposed by men of greater powers, and with far more distinguished success” (25).

However, there is also a different sense in which we might understand the vatic nature of Wordsworth's calling. This sense is personified in the writings of his contemporary William Hazlitt, who is of the opinion that Wordsworth's genius “is a pure emanation of the Spirit of the Age” (Hazlitt, “Mr. Wordsworth” 252). Hazlitt connects the uncompromising simplicity of Wordsworth's style to the iconoclastic fervour that swept through Europe at the time of the French Revolution:

All the common-place figures of poetry, tropes, allegories, personifications, with the whole heathen mythology, were instantly discarded; a classical allusion was considered as a piece of antiquated foppery; capital letters were no more allowed in print, than letters-patent of nobility were permitted in real life; kings and queens were dethroned

from their rank and station in legitimate tragedy or epic poetry, as they were decapitated elsewhere; rhyme was looked upon as a relic of the feudal system, and regular metre was abolished along with regular government. (Hazlitt, "On the Living Poets" 162)

In Hazlitt's view, the originality of Wordsworth's poetry, which derives from the intensity of his absorption in natural scenes and the loftiness of his contemplation of the basic elements of humanity he discovers there ("He gathers manna in the wilderness, he strikes the barren rock for the gushing moisture," Hazlitt, "Mr. Wordsworth" 254), is in accordance with the absolute rejection of decorum that characterizes the revolutionary spirit. These similarities are not merely coincidental: "[his poetry] partakes of, and is carried along with, the revolutionary movement of our age: the political changes of the day were the model on which he formed and conducted his poetical experiments" (253). In this sense, the vatic nature of Wordsworth's poetry is a result of the extent to which he embodies, in his approach, the socio-political climate of his times. At the moment in history when he wrote his poems ("Had he lived in any other period of the world, he would never have been heard of," claims Hazlitt, 252), his devotion to the elemental truths of human nature coincided with a widespread disillusionment with the bloody aftermath of the French Revolution, and a consequent urge to provide a new home for what John Beer calls "the great wave of idealism that had been released among young men by those same events" (*Romanticism, Revolution and Language* 50). Wordsworth's personal belief in the prophetic nature of his calling, then, overlapped with a larger historical situation in which the old social order had been irrevocably upset, but a new one had not yet been envisioned. Or, to put it differently, it was by placing himself in the vatic position of someone who communes with a lasting and humane natural order that Wordsworth proved himself to be a most fitting spokesperson for the untethered idealism that animated his times.

This sense of fusion that we discern in Wordsworth between the transcendent ideals of Romantic authorship and the socio-historical context in which the author has his or her existence – a fusion

that occurs under the banner of “vatic speaking”, and that is the source of the Romantic poet's authority – has a complex and often quite unsettling afterlife in Coetzee's writing. One way of describing it is to say that the ideal of transcendent value has become separated, in Coetzee, from the material and socio-historical terrain of the text, but still inhabits it in a ghostly, or disembodied form. Like the camp doctor calling out in desperation to Michael K in the eponymous novel, we could refer to something that, “scandalously” and “outrageously”, “take[s] up residence in a system without becoming a term in it” (Coetzee, *Life & Times of Michael K* 166). The presence of Wordsworth in *Disgrace* – arguably Coetzee's most widely read novel – is one of the most readily accessible examples of the way in which Coetzee's work interrogates and re-situates the Romantic notion of authority that I have been describing here (that is to say, authority as a kind of fusion between the transcendent and the socio-historical that occurs through the agency of the “vatic” author-subject). Lurie's proposed opera about Byron and Theresa is an important subtext for the narrative, but it is Wordsworth who is singled out as spiritual forebear for the embattled professor. “Wordsworth has been one of my masters,” Lurie tells Melanie after inviting her into his home for the first time (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 13); later, after he has been found guilty of sexual misconduct, he describes himself as a “disgraced disciple” of the nature poet (46). It is no accident, I think, that a novel which speaks so directly to the historical present in which it was written (the period following the first democratic elections in South Africa) presents the figure of Wordsworth as a strong cultural influence on its protagonist. In the first place, the image of Wordsworth as a prophetic figure, or as someone who spends his days contemplating nature and giving voice to the sublime truths he finds there, signals the severely anachronistic position that his disciple Lurie occupies in the socio-political climate of post-apartheid South Africa. A useful metaphor for Lurie's disengagement from the social fabric of his environment is the look of “[b]lank incomprehension” on the faces of his students when he tries to explain Book 6 of *The Prelude* to them (22).

On quite another level, however, the presence of Wordsworth in the book is also an indication of

how deeply Coetzee has been influenced by the notion of an author as someone who gives voice, though his writing, to the historical pressures that distinguish his milieu, in the “vatic” sense that Hazlitt describes above. We might recall at this stage that one of the three books Lurie published during his undistinguished career is specifically about “Wordsworth and history” (it is entitled “Wordsworth and the Burden of the Past”, Coetzee, *Disgrace* 4). The sustained reference to Wordsworth in *Disgrace* – a reference which I am taking here as an instance of symbolic, or allegorical allusion – is thus deeply ambivalent: it signals at once the persistence of Lurie’s allegiance to an outmoded, transcendental form of value, and his awareness, on the other hand, of the degree to which that allegiance is challenged by the reality of his historical situation. The uneasy coexistence of both these allusions is given purchase in the lecture mentioned above, when Lurie describes the central problem of Wordsworth’s *Prelude* as an unresolved tension between the “pure idea”, which resides in the imagination, and the “sense-image”, which comes from the outside to encroach upon that idea: “The question is not, How can we keep the imagination pure, protected from the onslaught of reality? The question has to be, can we find a way for the two to coexist?” he says (22).

When JC speaks of the vatic origins of authority in *Diary of a Bad Year*, then, we might understand it in this double sense. It alludes to the Romantic notion of the author as someone who gives voice, in aesthetic form, to values that lie beyond the reach of historically determining factors; but it also refers to the writer as someone who channels – perhaps unconsciously – the historically determined social reality in which he or she lives. So even while JC is feeling his way toward what seems to be a rather antiquated solution to the problem of authority, we are not able to forget that few writers are as conscious as Coetzee of the ways in which aesthetic value depends on historical circumstance,²³ or indeed of the implications for textual practice that are raised by the socio-historical situation of

²³ See especially Coetzee’s essay, “What is a Classic? A Lecture.” I discuss this essay at some length in my conclusion in section 3 – “The Seduction of Music”.

the writer.²⁴ It is pertinent at this juncture to point out that while JC is making his case for authority in the top band of the novel, in the bottom band – the band that is written in Anya's voice – an argument is raging, between Anya and her husband, Alan, about his proposed scheme to steal JC's money, rather than let it fall into the hands of the Anti-Vivisection League of Australia (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 121). Conceptually, the argument revolves around Alan's insistence that materialistic interests outweigh the negligible concerns of “a bunch of rats and cats and dogs and monkeys” (125), and Anya's strong feeling that there is something intrinsically evil about his proposal. Textually, the argument serves as a kind of real-world counterpoint to JC's suggestive reference to an intangible “higher force” as the source of authority. The point is that even while JC invokes a seemingly ahistorical conception of value in his opinion on authority, Coetzee's writing never allows one to stray too far into the immaterial. Instead, the reader is absorbed into the relentless conflict the writing stages between an alluded to, and indeed elusive reality that transcends the scope of the representable, and the immediate, material nature of the representation itself, that derives its meaning not only from the socio-historical paradigm to which it gives voice, but also from its own internally signifying structures.

4. Conflicting Sources of the Self

The vatic notion of authority that JC holds up for consideration – suggestively, tenuously, with a question mark at the end – and that is from the very moment of its utterance inseparable from a narrative structure that impedes its potentially radical implications, resurfaces in a context that has a

²⁴ See especially Coetzee's “Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech” in the collection *Doubling the Point*, in which he deplores the unavoidable effects of the socio-political situation in South Africa on the practice of the writer:

The deformed and stunted relations between human beings that were created under colonialism and exacerbated under what is loosely called apartheid have their psychic representations in a deformed and stunted inner life. All expressions of that inner life, no matter how intense, no matter how pierced with exultation of despair, suffer from the same stuntedness and deformity. I make this observation with due deliberation, and in the fullest awareness that it applies to myself and my own writing as much as to anyone else. (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 98)

more direct bearing on the question of authorial presence as it relates to Coetzee himself, albeit in a no less ambiguous way. The book in question is *Summertime*, the third instalment in Coetzee's series of autobiographical fictions, which appeared two years after the publication of *Diary of a Bad Year* and revisits the 1970s South Africa in which the young writer first struggled to make a name for himself.²⁵ In the fourth interview in the book, Mr Vincent, the prospective biographer, talks to Martin (or “MJ”, as John refers to him in his notebook entries, Coetzee, *Summertime* 208), a former colleague of John in the English Department at the University of Cape Town. The interview revolves mainly around John's persona as a teacher – he was, according to Martin, “a little dry and reserved” (212) in his pedagogic approach – and the observation is made that “a strain of secretiveness that seemed to be ingrained in him, part of his character, extended to his teaching too” (212). Thus, when Martin co-teaches a poetry course with John and his subject is Pablo Neruda, we learn that even though Neruda “may have mattered a great deal to him” he treated his “connection with the poet as a personal secret to be closely guarded” (214) and that he consequently did not inspire much enthusiasm for the material in his students. Martin elaborates on the nature of John's secretiveness when he considers his “fondness” for “lush poetry” (213):

Without being a Dionysian himself, he approved in principle of Dionysianism.

²⁵ Although *Summertime* was recently included, along with *Boyhood* and *Youth*, in the collection *Scenes From Provincial Life* (2011) – a move that lends some institutional clout to the practice of reading those three books as a trilogy – it has to be noted that the narrative of *Summertime* departs from those earlier works by venturing more overtly into fictional terrain. John Kannemeyer, Coetzee's biographer, who depends rather heavily (and perhaps somewhat problematically) on *Boyhood* and *Youth* for his account of the early years of his subject's life, is noticeably flustered by the unverifiable nature of the events portrayed in *Summertime*. Although Kannemeyer is at pains to point out the “ludic element” of the narrative (*J.M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing* 215) – or its “engrossing blend of fact and fiction” (27) – and even though he states quite baldly that “anybody who reads [*Summertime*] as 'truth' will have been gulled” (607), he is nevertheless loath to abandon it as a credible source for his portrayal of Coetzee's life. So, for example, when he draws on the notebook entry in *Summertime* describing John's cement laying labours (Coetzee *Summertime* 7) to give a sense of Coetzee's actual home life in the early 1970s in Tokai, he justifies his usage of the text for biographical purposes with the revealing admonition that “[w]hether everything happened in just this way is less important than the spirit that this activity conveys to the reader of *Summertime*” (Kannemeyer, *A Life in Writing*, 233). One may well wonder what a scholar of Kannemeyer's ilk – his monumental biographies of Afrikaans writers are renowned for their scrupulous archival research, their unwillingness to stray too far from the certainties of documented and verifiable source material – one may well wonder what he has in mind when he speaks of the “spirit” that is conveyed by a fictional account as a measure of the truth of a real-life situation. For the purposes of my thesis, at any rate, what is telling (and not to say uncanny) about Kannemeyer's method here is that Coetzee's insistence on the autonomy of fiction, with all the ambiguities and uncertainties that it entails, seems to have penetrated deeply enough to have infiltrated this first, authoritative biography of his life and times, thus becoming part, in a very real sense, of the historical version of his self.

Approved in principle of letting oneself go, though I don't think he ever let himself go – would probably not have known how to. *He had a need to believe in the resources of the unconscious, in the creative force of unconscious processes. Hence his inclination toward the more vatic poets.* (Coetzee, *Summertime* 213, my emphasis)

John's inclination toward the vatic poets – his need to believe in the “creative force of unconscious processes” – is closely associated, furthermore, with the source of his own creative inspiration:

You must have noted how rarely he discussed the sources of his own creativity. In part that came out of the native secretiveness I mentioned. But in part it also suggests a reluctance to probe the sources of his inspiration, as if being too self-aware might cripple him. (Coetzee, *Summertime* 213)

On the one hand, then, we have John's professional persona: the literature specialist who concerns himself, at least on the surface, with the technical aspects of the writer's craft – a preoccupation that is testified to, inasmuch as one is willing to read John as a reliable autobiographical version of his author, by Coetzee's own formidable body of critical writing on writers that have interested him throughout his career, exemplified in collections like *White Writing* (1988), *Giving Offense* (1996), *Stranger Shores* (2001) and *Inner Workings* (2007), as well as in various other uncollected pieces written for the *New York Review of Books* between 1985 and the present – and on the other hand we are given an intimation of another, undisclosed version of the same person, someone who, Martin would have us believe, carries around within him a dark and unexamined source of creative inspiration, a source, furthermore, that is strictly cordoned off from the probing of the analytical mind that has written so perceptively about the writer's craft.²⁶ As in *Diary of a Bad Year*, the

²⁶ This tension between the technical aspects of the literary craft and the intimation of a darker, unplumbed source of creative inspiration is prefigured in a passage in *Boyhood*, in which John despairs at the monotony of the essays that he is required to write in school:

What he would write if he could, if it were not for Mr Whelan reading it, would be something darker, something that, once it began to flow from his pen, would spread across the page out of control, like spilt ink. Like spilt ink, like shadows racing across the face of still water, like lightning crackling across the sky. (Coetzee, *Boyhood* 140)

suggestive glimpse we are given here of a secret, “vatic” core that is the wellspring and the lifeblood of the author's creative activity – or the source of the author's “authority” – arrives in a narrative form that undermines its legitimacy even as it is being spoken. That is to say, the author to whom this atavistic sense of communion with a transcendent reality is meant to apply, namely John Coetzee (and behind him, the shadow figure of the real author, J.M. Coetzee), is filtered through a circuitous network of discursive layers, each one putting us at a further remove from the situation the text purports to be describing, namely the life (or, more ambiguously, the “life-story”, *Summertime* 216) of the autobiographical subject. Mr Vincent reports an interview he had with Martin, who recollects, many years after the fact, his impressions of his colleague John, whom he is at pains to remind us he knew chiefly in a professional capacity (“John and I were colleagues. We were friends. We got on well together. But I can't say I knew him intimately,” 216).

Summertime thus presents us with two contesting approaches to the reality of John's self, or to the substance of his “life-story”. The first approach sees the self (the self that is the narrative point around which the events of a life coalesce and cohere – the autobiographical self as a kind of organized agglomeration of perceptions and memories) as a composition of the traces he has left behind him in the world (the various portraits of John given in the interviews speak deliberately to this notion of the self: “The only story involving John that I can tell ... is this one, namely the story of my life and his part in it,” says Julia in the first interview, *Summertime* 43). We can understand the reality of such a self – a “discursive” self – as no more than the sum of the various perspectives on him provided by the different interviewees.²⁷ The other, contrasting approach to John's self – the

The passage is likewise connected to John's sense of self, when he complains that the limitations of the school environment in which he writes his essays is compromising the realization of his true self:

Whoever he truly is, whoever the true “I” is that ought to be rising out of the ashes of his childhood, is not being allowed to be born, is being kept puny and stunted. (Coetzee, *Boyhood* 140)

²⁷ This notion of the self appears to match the biographer's sense of what he is doing: “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,” says Mr Vincent to Martin (Coetzee, *Summertime* 217).

approach that is linked explicitly to his authorial self in the Martin-interview – is the idea that there is a secret essence that defines him, a quality that falls outside the ambit of the self presented as a confluence of traces and that lays claim to an independent, or a transcendent subjective identity. This notion of the self resists the instrumentalist tendencies of the discursive model of self-representation, to the extent that it remains beyond the scope even of John's own “self-awareness” (213). The point is that it is not simply a matter of choosing between these two versions of the self – of deciding which one constitutes the “real” John – but of realizing that both of them occur simultaneously (in the same way that the two sides of a fast-spinning coin might be said to occur simultaneously, i.e. appearing to manifest in the same field of perception even while they remain cognately separate).

An early essay by Coetzee provides us with a clue toward understanding the incessant, vacillating conflict between these two incongruous notions of the self in his writing. The essay in question, “Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* and the Primacy of Art,” was published in *UCT Studies in English* in October 1974, and is an attempt to untangle, systematically, but also perhaps mock-systematically, the various layers of illusion at work in Nabokov’s inventive story about critical interpretation gone awry. There is no space here to go into the details of the ailing émigré Charles Kinbote’s misguided attempt to read his own life story into a long poem written by his famous-poet neighbour, John Shade (an exegesis that makes up the main portion of the story, and that concerns Kinbote’s supposed previous existence as a monarch in the fantastical Northern kingdom of Zembla), or to give a comprehensive overview of Coetzee’s reading of the novel (which is made up of thirteen numbered paragraphs, echoing the writing technique he would employ in his next novel, *In the Heart of the Country*). What I would like to draw attention to instead is the extent to which Coetzee is preoccupied, even at this early stage in his career (*Dusklands* appeared in the same year as the essay; *In the Heart of the Country* was still three years off from publication), with the question of the relationship between the “planes of reality” that constitute the internal structure of the text

(“planes in the same way that the surface of a mirror is a plane,” writes Coetzee in the opening paragraph, “Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and the Primacy of Art” 1) and the field of reality that lies outside, or beyond the text (“the bedrock of a real sense of the real,” 4). Nabokov’s novel, writes Coetzee, makes use of a double irony (it pokes fun at its own conspicuous method of writing a novel that consists almost entirely of exegesis, 6) in order to protect itself from literary-critical interpretations that would seek to explicate it (or “reduce” it, 4) according to some other, external field of meaning (the main culprit in this case being psychoanalysis, 4). Coetzee’s verdict is that the true hero of Nabokov’s novel, lurking behind the layers of irony, is “the imagination personified and triumphant”:

The ideal of *Pale Fire* is a Symbolist ideal: a state of being in which, having incorporated into itself all possible interpretations of itself, the work of art has, like a closed system of mirrors, shut itself off forever from interpretation and become a monument of unageing intellect.²⁸ (Coetzee, “Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* and the Primacy of Art” 6)

However, it turns out that Nabokov's clever method for resisting the reduction of a work of art to an auxiliary role within a larger explicatory framework – his anti-reductionism, we might say – is at best a temporary measure. Every act of exegesis, including Nabokov's ironically subversive application of it in *Pale Fire*, is itself open to “the endless exegesis of the meta-myth we call history,” and “[b]y incorporating the exegesis into the fiction we do not escape history, we merely pre-empt its first stage” (Coetzee, “Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and the Primacy of Art” 6). What is relevant here is the extent to which Coetzee's reading of *Pale Fire* stakes out a confrontational

²⁸ Coetzee's phrasing here (“monuments of unageing intellect”) echoes Yeats's “Sailing to Byzantium”, in which the speaker, who has grown too old to participate in the sensual rituals of youth, yearns to leave behind his ailing body and to enter into a realm of pure imagination, the mythical Byzantium, where the fires of art will purge him of his corporeal form and put him at a distance from the ravages of history. It is a poem that resurfaces in Coetzee's *Disgrace*, when David Lurie speculates on his own banishment from the realm of youthful lovemaking: “He sighs. The young in one another's arms, heedless, engrossed in the sensual music. No country, this, for old men” (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 190). In Coetzee's reading of Nabokov, as well as in the story of David Lurie's fall from grace, the invocation of Yeats's emblematic poem occurs in a literary paradigm that is deeply critical of the transcendent rights of the imagination; nevertheless it is telling that Coetzee's literary sensibility continues to be informed by questions that revolve around the possibility of just such a form of transcendence.

relationship between the autonomy of the creative imagination, on the one hand, and the force of history, on the other – a force, in Coetzee's view, that neuters the potency of the imagination by roping it in as a supplement to its own material ends. The essay on Nabokov confirms Coetzee's well-documented interest in what has since become familiar, from the vantage point of the present, as the literary techniques of postmodernism, but it also suggests that there has been from the start of his career a certain scepticism concerning the efficacy of those techniques (irony, self-parody, pastiche, paradox: in short, the whole web of internally signifying elements that works to sever the text from easy associations with the field of the real) in achieving the ideal of artistic autonomy to which, in Coetzee's reading, they bear witness.

It is in the light of these preoccupations that we begin to discern something that resembles a purpose – or perhaps we might simply call it a point of departure – behind the conflicted sense of self that emerges in a book like *Summertime*. The insular approach described above (the “closed system of mirrors”), and the dream of a transcendent truth to which it testifies – a truth of the imagination that does not need to justify itself according to an external measure of value, that carves out a niche for itself in opposition to the demands of historical or socio-material demands of accountability – is discernible in Coetzee's work, but it does not delimit the boundaries of his creative project, or does not describe the limits of the field of play in which his work occurs. Instead, we could say that Coetzee's fiction (autobiographical and otherwise) zeroes in on the sense of antagonism that he perceives between the push for artistic autonomy (a push that he explicitly associates, in his essay on *Pale Fire*, with Romanticism, and with the Romantic appropriation of the myth that “the madman is the greatest truth-teller,” Coetzee, “Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and the Primacy of Art” 6), and the encroachment of history, or the incessant interrogation at the hands of history of any truth-claims made on behalf of the creative imagination. That is to say, Coetzee's work does not erect itself as a monument against the onslaught of a reality that lies somewhere beyond the text, but is rather, in the very fibre of its being, an *expression* of the antinomy between the ideal of self-

sufficient powers of creative inspiration (“the divine and exhilarating fire of creativity,” or “the sacred fire of art,” as the protagonist of *Youth* envisions it, Coetzee, *Youth* 66) and the indifferent, yet insistent mechanisms of the world in which that ideal has its existence, and that does not spare it from scrutiny (“Now and again, for an instant, it is given to him to see himself from the outside: a whispering, worried boy-man, so dull and ordinary that you would not spare him a second glance,” remarks the narrator about the same protagonist in *Youth*, 116). *Summertime*, with its two versions of the author-self (one that is aligned with the “divine” spirit of creative inspiration, and the other that takes its form as a confluence of historical traces), presents us with the idea that this sharp note of dissonance, reverberating throughout Coetzee’s work, can be taken as a source or origin for his creative output, or as the grounds in which the subject in his writing has its foundation.

5. A Word on Method

That, at least, is the main conceit, or the principle of organization around which my thesis is arranged. It is in the perpetual staging of conflict – a conflict that makes itself felt at every level of the writing, from the larger structural organization of the text to the minutiae of the language, and that involves, at its most basic level, an ideal of autonomous creative purpose that is incommensurate with a discursive framework that speaks to a historicized sense of reality – that we can begin to speak of the persistence of an authorial presence in Coetzee’s work. If we take into account the series of qualifying assertions that JC brings to bear on the notion of authority in *Diary of a Bad Year*, and the seam that each of them exposes between the intimation of a transcendent subjective reality, on the one hand, and the awareness, on the other, that meaning – including subjective meaning – always depends on contextual, or material frameworks of understanding, then we begin to realize that authorial voice in Coetzee's work is constructed in a very peculiar way. For Coetzee, we might say, the source of authority in writing lies in the measure to which the text accommodates both the subjective desire to speak and the composite discursive layers that

determine, for better or worse, the way in which that voice is heard (or not heard).

The emphasis here is very much on the conflict rather than on its resolution. In one of the interviews in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee indicates how deeply his sense of what it means to be a writer has been influenced by the notion of giving voice to an unresolved state of conflict, when he says about his novel *Age of Iron*:

So a contest is staged, not only in the dramatic construction of the novel but also within Elizabeth's – what shall I say? – soul, a contest about having a say. To me as a writer, as *the* writer in this case, the outcome of this contest – what is to count as a classic in South Africa – is irrelevant. What matters is that the contest is staged, that the dead have their say, even those who speak from a totally untenable historical position.²⁹ (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 250)

The rest of my thesis is devoted to exploring the nature of this conflict (or staging of conflict) that is such a central feature of Coetzee's writing, and that occupies the space that is more conventionally consigned to the presence of an authorial voice. As I mentioned earlier, I will do so by tracing its development through a range of thematic concerns, or recurring preoccupations, that come to the fore throughout Coetzee's oeuvre. My focus falls quite strongly (although not exclusively) on those of his novels that have been inflected, to a greater or lesser degree, by autobiographical concerns: *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime*, but also *Diary of a Bad Year* and *Elizabeth Costello*. The reason for this is that I hope to show that the centripetal force of conflict in his work has significant implications for the notion of the self that emerges in his writing – and more explicitly for the relationship between the author-self and the self that inhabits the writing – and this is a project to which the autobiographical slant of those novels is most obviously amenable. In two instances I depart (strictly speaking) from the “autobiographical” cast of the novels I have chosen for

²⁹ The peculiar texture of the conflict that runs through *Age of Iron*, and the bearing of that conflict on the realization of authorial voice, receives a more thorough treatment in the third chapter of my thesis (see section 3 – “*Age of Iron* and the Question of Voice”).

investigation. In the third chapter, I devote considerable space to *Age of Iron*, on the grounds that that novel presents a sustained portrayal of the theme of voice as it arises from the dynamic tension between transcendent and socio-historical demands; and in the final chapter I conclude with a reading of Coetzee's most recent novel, *The Childhood of Jesus*, with the aim of presenting a retrospective view on the conflicted source of authority that I identify, over the course of my thesis, as a defining feature of Coetzee's literary oeuvre.

I have attempted, in the chapter to follow, to draw the terms of the conflict in Coetzee's work from a Romantic ideology and practice of writing, for the reasons I have mentioned in this introduction, but also because, with Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, I think that "Romanticism does not lead us to anything that one might imitate or that one might be 'inspired by', and this is because ... it 'leads' us first of all to ourselves" (*The Literary Absolute* 2). That is to say, I have chosen to focalize my discussion of the dynamics of selfhood and self-representation in Coetzee's writing by associating it variously with the origins of those ideas in the Romantic period, because I think those ideas are still an important and productive resource for making sense of contemporary literary questions, and especially so for Coetzee.

Thus, in the first chapter, which is an exploration of Coetzee's engagement with the question of self-expression as it emerges from the tradition of confessional writing, Jean-Jacques Rousseau figures quite prominently as a point of departure for the antagonism that prevails in Coetzee's writing between the desire for self-expression and the realization that that desire is usurped by the discursive requirements of self-representation in literature. Likewise, in the second chapter, which considers the importance of the farm in the formation of the self in Coetzee's autobiographical fiction, I trace the protagonist's conflicted sense of displacement in the landscape of his youth to the Romantic expression of a unified sense of self that is achieved through communion with the natural environment, a situation for which Wordsworth is the most obvious spokesperson. In chapter three,

where the discussion shifts to an investigation of the influence of the socio-historical environment on the self that inhabits Coetzee's writing, I refer to Blake and Keats to provide a context for Coetzee's strategic portrayal of the rights of the aesthetic imagination, which forms part, in turn, of the larger argument concerning the peculiar realization of voice in his writing. Finally, in the conclusion, I tie together the various strands of my argument by tracing the measure to which Coetzee's literary practice, and the sense of self that derives from that practice, can be thought of as a sustained expression of the ideal of transcendence in the face of the antagonistic pressure that the historical context of and in his work exerts on that ideal.

My purpose, as I hope will become clear in the course of the thesis, has not been to give a definitive account of the Romantic heritage, or even a comprehensive sense of its continued influence in the literary milieu in which Coetzee's writing has its place. Rather, I have used certain influential Romantic ideas as mooring points for my argument surrounding the centrality of conflict in Coetzee's explorations of self-expression, and of what it means to write about the self. Most often, the point is to demonstrate his departure from these mooring points: it is a departure, however, that retains the memory of the unified sense of self that those ideas represent. This memory of an earlier, authentic sense of self, and Coetzee's interrogation of that memory at the hand of an analysis of certain important moments in the heritage of confessional writing, is the point at which the first chapter of my thesis begins.

CHAPTER ONE: THE SUBJECT OF CONFESSION

1. Coetzee, Rousseau and the Problem of the Self

In 1984, when J.M. Coetzee became the Professor of General Literature at the University of Cape Town, he chose as the topic for his inaugural lecture the problem of truth in autobiography. At the time he had not yet embarked on his own autobiographical venture – *Boyhood* would only appear some thirteen years later – but the lecture foreshadows, or coincides with his well-known essay “Confession and Double Thoughts,” which first appeared in 1985 and is likewise concerned with the problem of getting to the truth of the self in writing. In that essay, says Coetzee in an interview with David Attwell, he sees himself “getting away from microenvironments and taking on broader critical themes” (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 243). The implication is that his investigation into what it means to tell the truth about the self constitutes an important moment in his evolution as a writer and critical thinker.³⁰ My aim in this chapter is to explore Coetzee's investment in the idea of truthful self-expression by considering his engagement with certain aspects of the tradition of confessional writing. What I hope to demonstrate is that Coetzee's work, and especially his autobiographical fiction (*Boyhood*, *Youth*, *Summertime*), collapses the distinction between the confessional subject as a primary and the confessional text as a secondary source of interest, and points us toward the idea that the truth of the self cannot be thought separately from the being that it acquires in writing: that it is in the conflict between transcendent and discursive notions of subjective experience that the self has its grounding in Coetzee's work.

In the introduction I argued that the interrogation of an authentic, integral self that precedes the text – an interrogation that draws quite heavily on a poststructuralist animosity towards the idea of an *a*

³⁰ “More and more I see the essay on Tolstoy, Rousseau and Dostoevsky emerging as pivotal,” Coetzee reflects in the final, retrospective interview in *Doubling the Point* (391).

a priori author-subject, and from Roland Barthes in particular³¹ – constitutes an important point of departure in Coetzee’s writing. In both of the aforementioned critical pieces dealing with the problem of the true self in writing, the *Confessions* of Jean-Jacques Rousseau forms the basis for Coetzee’s interrogation of the ideal of an *a priori* author-self. The particular kind of writing Coetzee is concerned with in those pieces is the *secular confession*, of which Rousseau’s compulsive memoir is the historical prototype. The conceit, or mechanism underlying the secular confession, Coetzee explains, is that it has replaced a faith in divine grace as the source of absolution with a belief that a true representation of the self, or a representation of the true self, is *in itself* enough to absolve the confessant from the burden of guilt that compels the writing in the first place (*Doubling the Point* 252). However, as Coetzee demonstrates through a conceptual analysis of Rousseau’s attitude toward money (269-272), the problem with this belief is that it is always possible to read a submerged truth behind the truth that is proffered in the confession,³² hence casting doubt either on the confessant’s sincerity, or on his fitness as the author of his own truth (273). In both cases the veracity of the confessant is brought into question, and the possibility of absolution is undone by the endless deferral of the truth of the self (274).

Despite his thoughts concerning the problems surrounding the integrity of the true self in Rousseau’s *Confessions*, Coetzee is reluctant to dismiss the idea of truthfulness in writing per se. In an interview with David Attwell that precedes the confession essay (“Confession and Double Thoughts”) in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee has the following to say about his continued admiration for Dostoevsky and Tolstoy: “I read them on what I take to be their own terms, that is, in terms of their power to tell the truth as well as to subvert secular scepticism about the truth, getting behind sceptical ploys to get behind them” (*Doubling the Point* 245). Later in the same interview he states

³¹ See Introduction, section 2 – “Coetzee and Barthes.”

³² The submerged truth in this case, Coetzee explains, is that what really drives Rousseau is not the desire to confess his awkward relationship with money. Instead, Rousseau presents us with a contradictory truth about that relationship, which reveals a deeper desire on his part to retain shameful truths about himself in order to keep on having something to confess (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 271). The more profound truth about Rousseau – that which is omitted from his confession – is then his deep-seated urge to “expose himself” (267).

his belief that if “stories must aspire to be more than merely interesting, then one must go beyond psychology” (245). I make these observations because I would like to raise the point that for Coetzee the structural complexities of self-consciousness in Rousseau's *Confessions* appear to be of more than merely rhetorical concern. What Coetzee is interrogating is not so much, or not only the peculiar shortcomings of Rousseau's confessional procedure, but rather the extent to which Rousseau relies on the ideal of an essential self to give his narrative the ring of authenticity. If one cannot rely on sincere self-knowledge – on that which Coetzee calls in his inaugural lecture “the immediate presence of the moral self to the self” (“Truth in Autobiography” 4) – to supply an autobiographical narrative with the force of truth, if the essential truth of the self is to remain forever sealed off from the author who is writing the story of his or her own life, as Coetzee argues in his reading of Rousseau, then it becomes pertinent to conceive of another grounds for determining the truth-value of the relationship between the experience of being a self and the narrative in which that self accounts for his or her existence.

Before we move on to a more detailed consideration of Coetzee's engagement with the heritage of confessional writing, it is worth pointing out that the value Rousseau attaches to the ideal of an original, authentic self is not limited to his confessional project, but appears to have had a strong influence on his political thought as well. So, in chapter six of the first book of *The Social Contract*, Rousseau defines the “fundamental problem” (*Social Contract* 55) to which the contract proposes an answer as follows:

[To] find a form of association which will defend and protect, with the whole of its joint strength, the person and property of each associate, and under which each of them, uniting himself to all, *will obey himself alone, and remain free as before.* (Rousseau, *Social Contract* 54, my emphasis)

The essence of this formulation, or the essence of the problem with which Rousseau thus confronts

himself, is the injunction to safeguard as far as possible the “original state” (*Social Contract* 54) of the individual, which is expressed here in terms of the rights of that individual to live according to his own person in total freedom. What is startling about Rousseau's definition of the problem is the extent to which he bends the requirements of the social pact to conform to his beliefs in the sovereignty of individual being. Even while he concedes the need for establishing a form of social organization, we can perceive from his definition of the “general will” that is brought about by such an organization that it is important for him to maintain the sacrosanct rights of the individual: “[E]ach in giving himself to all *gives himself to none*, and since there are no associates over whom he does not acquire the rights as he cedes, *he gains the equivalent of all that he loses*, and greater strength for the conservation of what he possesses” (55, my emphasis).

The force of this belief finds a more comprehensive expression in Rousseau's *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*, in which he argues, not without controversy and perhaps more abrasively than in *The Social Contract*, that man has been incorrigibly corrupted by the advent of society. The image that has entered the popular imagination from the *Discours* is that of the so-called “noble savage”, a primitive man who exists, according to Rousseau, in a state of unconscious equanimity with nature, wholly untroubled by the problems that arise from self-reflexive thought (*Discours* 31). From this ideal, and indeed heavily idealized original state the savage man is lured, in time, by the vanity that accompanies the first crude cultural awakenings – Rousseau mentions in particular the desire for self-esteem that goes along with the emergence of communal song and dance (73) – until finally he is so consumed by an entirely negative “amour-propre”, or self-love, that he becomes trapped in capricious vice and estranged from his own true being (Dent, *A Rousseau Dictionary* 33).

What I would like to draw from these brief extrapolations from Rousseau's political writing is his sustained belief in a version of the self that is somehow truer, or more authentic, than the self as it

has been shaped by society. Seen in the light of this belief, Rousseau's self-proclaimed purpose in the *Confessions* to show us a “portrait” of himself that is “in every way true to nature” (*Confessions* 17) takes on a philosophical slant that throws into relief the ways in which Coetzee departs from it in his own writing. One of the more significant instances of this departure, to my mind, comes from the opening pages of Coetzee’s *Diary of Bad Year*, in which JC, the author-narrator, voices his opinion on the origins of the state. The immediate point of reference in his discussion of what it entails to be a subject of the state is Hobbes's *Leviathan*, but it is hard not to hear echoes of Rousseau in his observation that “[f]rom the moment of our birth we are subject” (Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* 4). Whereas it is important for Rousseau to maintain that, despite the fact that he finds himself everywhere in chains, man is essentially born free (“L'homme est né libre, et par-tout il est dans les fers”, *Du contrat social* 173), JC has a rather more fatalistic sense of things: man is born into chains – the chains of the “certificate of birth” (Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* 4) – and there he will remain until his death.

What JC's resignation to a condition of inherent subjecthood begins to reveal is a notion of the self as *always already compromised* by the circumstances under which he or she comes into existence. Just as there does not exist, for JC, a position outside politics from which to speak about politics (Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* 9), there does not appear to be a position available to him from which to discern in its essential form the contours of his own self. And yet, in the very expression of his condition as a condition of compromise, we hear lingering traces of regret: regret that something fundamental and inalienable has been lost. It is within this hollow created by the absence of an integral self that JC articulates his invective against the totality of the state. In similar fashion, I think, it is in the absence of an ideal knowledge of the self that we can discern in Coetzee a reworking of the terms under which truthful self-expression may occur.

2. Shameful Incidents

Coetzee's autobiographical fictions are punctuated with episodes that would make rich material for a conventional confessional narrative. In *Boyhood*, for example, we read how John crushed his brother's hand in a mealie-grinding machine, and never apologized (Coetzee, *Boyhood* 119); or of the burden of guilt he feels toward Eddie, the coloured boy from Ida's Valley who worked for his family, and who was flogged senseless by the boarder, Trevelyan, for trying to run away (77). *Youth* contains numerous accounts of John's ignominious conduct in matters of sex: his immature response to Sally's abortion (Coetzee, *Youth* 35); his tactical withdrawal from his cousin's friend, Marianne, when he takes her virginity and cannot deal with the bloody aftermath (130).³³ In this section, I would like to focus on one such shameful incident in *Summertime*. My aim is to give a sense of the curious double function of the confessional moment in Coetzee's work: the way in which it produces a heightened emotional effect even while it reveals a conceptual reworking of the terms of self-expression in writing.

The incident in question is from one of the undated notebook fragments that comprise the last part of *Summertime*. When he was sixteen years old, John reports, he was a devout admirer of Bach, and he could not tolerate his father's preference for Italian music:

For its sensuality and decadence – that was how, at the age of sixteen, he saw it – he resolved he would for ever hate and despise Italian opera. That he might despise it simply because his father loved it, that he would have resolved to hate and despise anything in the world that his father loved, was a possibility he would not admit.

One day, while no one was around, he took the Tebaldi record out of its sleeve and with a razor blade drew a deep score across its surface.

On Sunday evening his father put on the record. With each revolution the needle jumped. 'Who has done this?' he demanded. But no one, it seemed, had done it. It had

³³ The theme of sexual misadventure receives a more considered treatment in the conclusion of my thesis. See section 2 – "Erotic Encounters".

just happened.

Thus ended Tibaldi; now Bach could reign unchallenged. (Coetzee, *Summertime* 249)

The focal aspect of the incident is the sentence that describes the way in which John inflicts damage on the record. This sentence (“One day, while no one was around, he took the Tebaldi record out of its sleeve and with a razor blade drew a deep score across its surface”) claims its own paragraph; its separation enhances the impact of words that are at once explicit and allusive in their effect. The locution “razor blade” in particular elicits a wince: we are struck both by its aural effect (the deceptive sibilant, the drawn-out violence of the “blade”) and by the sense of surgical detachment that it imparts to John's ruining of his father's music. The visceral impact of the sentence provides an intimation of the malice that prompted the misdeed and contributes to the sense of shame we discern in the protagonist's recollection of it.

Quite beyond the sensory impact of the words, however, the incident betrays an even more shameful aspect. It was not necessary for John to damage the record in order to prevent it from being played (and so to free the house of the despised Italian influence). It would have been simpler to get rid of the record somehow, to hide it under a mattress or to bury it in the backyard, for example. The point is that by damaging the record and leaving it for his father to find, John reveals that his real intention was to communicate his hatred for the music to his father. The specific means by which he gains his triumph adds a dimension of personal hatred to the incident that enhances its shamefulness and makes it more valuable as something to confess, at a future date, when he appears to be experimenting with things to write about in his notebook.

In this regard, we may note that the incriminating passage is carefully staged to produce a heightened emotional effect. The notebook entry in which it appears begins with a long description of a visit to a rugby match at Newlands, in which John goes to some lengths to establish an image of his father as a figure of pity. “His father has no friends,” we read (Coetzee, *Summertime* 245). He

belongs to a club of “sad old men” (247): “solitary men in grey gabardine raincoats in the twilight of their lives, keeping to themselves as if their loneliness were a shameful disease” (246). Like the rest of the men in his family, he is “without any passion that he [John] can put his finger on” (247). Even though the scoring of the record took place many years earlier, it is this image of his father as a sad, friendless man with no discernible passions that lingers in the mind when we read about the crime his son committed against him. Along with the sympathy-inducing image of the victim, then, the gravity of the confession is amplified by the meaning that resides in the object of the crime, namely music: the one thing John knew without a doubt his father had a passion for.

The fact that John chooses music as the platform on which to enact his vendetta against his father is in itself highly significant, and provides us with an opportunity to move away from the emotional impact of the confession to a discussion of its conceptual implications. Firstly, we note the extent to which John avoids taking personal responsibility for his actions. When his father discovers the ruined record and asks, “Who has done this?” John remains silent (Coetzee, *Summertime* 249); he does not wish to bring the confrontation out into the open. Instead, he gets his point across by meddling with the aesthetic medium in which both of them have a vested interest, namely the medium of music. Both of them derive pleasure from music – in both of them it evokes a passionate response – and rather than engaging directly with his father, John prefers to claim control over this common ground between them.

Music, and especially Bach – the composer whom John pits against his father’s beloved Tebaldi – occupies a privileged place in Coetzee’s work. In *Diary of a Bad Year*, for example, we find the following emphatic adulation of Bach: “The best proof we have that life is good, and therefore that there may perhaps be a God after all, who has our welfare at heart, is that to each of us, on the day we are born, comes the music of Johann Sebastian Bach” (Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* 221). In the same passage, JC, the protagonist, asks himself whether he might be naming Bach as his “spiritual

father”, and whether this claim might not be related to the fact that he was, in his own life, “such a bad son” (222). Curiously, then, we notice that the conceptual triad of “autobiographical protagonist”, “father” and “Bach” do not feature in *Summertime* only: they are connected by various strands to Coetzee's previous work (like the passage from *Diary of a Bad Year* cited above). What begins to emerge is that the focal point of the confession, the “razor blade” that elicits such a pointed response from the reader, cannot be taken in isolation. It rests on a deeply complex engagement, spanning across Coetzee's oeuvre, with the way in which personal feeling – the traditional stuff of confession – weaves itself into the aesthetic material that constitutes the common ground of the text.

It is on this level that Coetzee's work reveals most profoundly the coterminous presence of the emotional need to confess, or to speak truthfully about the self, with a conceptual awareness of the dynamics of textual representation that enable (or disable) the possibility of self-expression. The point is brought home when we consider the way in which John's admiration for Bach also finds its way into a critical essay that Coetzee writes on the question of the classic:

One Sunday afternoon in the summer of 1955, when I was fifteen years old, I was mooning around our back garden in the suburbs of Cape Town, wondering what to do, boredom being the main problem of existence in those days, when from the house next door I heard music. As long as the music lasted, I was frozen, I dared not breathe. I was being spoken to by the music as music had never spoken to me before.

What I was listening to was a recording of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, played on the harpsichord. (Coetzee, “What is a Classic? A Lecture” 9)

This “moment of revelation” was significant to him, says Coetzee, because “for the first time in [his] life [he] was undergoing the impact of the classic” (“What is a Classic? A Lecture” 10). In the essay he uses this autobiographical moment to stake out a middle ground between two opposing notions of the classic, namely the “transcendental-poetic” (the classic as an essential quality) and

the “socio-cultural” (the classic as historically determined) (9), and finally to suggest that the classic in art is that which survives the most stringent critical and historical interrogation (19). Without going into the detail of the argument,³⁴ we may remark on the peculiarity of an autobiographical moment – a refreshingly unambiguous autobiographical moment, written in the first person – informing a critical investigation into what constitutes lasting value in art. This realization, along with the fact that it is once again Bach who scores the passage, alters our understanding of the confessional passage in *Summertime* somewhat. It begins to seem as if that passage, in which John takes a calculated step towards asserting his aesthetic preference by replacing his father's music with his own, has as much to do with the relationship between father and son and the emotional carriage of that relationship, as it has to do with a performative acknowledgement, and confession perhaps, of an aesthetic predisposition that has informed Coetzee's approach to the business of writing throughout his career. It becomes more and more difficult, in a word, to disentangle the personal content of the confession, as it pertains to John, from the stylistic implications of the textual structure in which it appears, as it pertains to Coetzee, the writer of the book. What begins to emerge is the notion that the truth of the self, in Coetzee's work, is somehow vested in the textual practice that informs his writing. In the next section, I will elaborate on this idea by describing its germination in a selection of works from the history of confessional writing.

3. The Subjective Dynamics of Confession

A crucial element in a confessional narrative is for the reader to be convinced of the authenticity of the confessant's remorse. That is to say, in order for a confession to signal the possibility of moral absolution, we expect a certain level of demonstrative culpability on the part of the person who is making the confession. We expect, in other words, for a confession to be made in a spirit of sincerity. We might even say that the spirit of sincerity counts for more, in the moral exchange

³⁴ I return to this essay in the conclusion of my thesis. See section 3 – “The Seduction of Music”.

between confessant and confessor, than the quantitative cost of the misdeed the confession describes. This dynamic is already evident in one of the foundational texts of confessional literature, namely the *Confessions* of St. Augustine – a text that forms an important mooring point for Coetzee's thoughts on confession in his essay “Confession and Double Thoughts” (*Doubling the Point* 251), and that is also the starting point for my investigation into the dynamics of subjective truth-telling in the tradition of confessional literature (the other two being Romantic texts: Rousseau's *Confessions* and Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*).

In his sixteenth year,³⁵ writes Augustine in Book II of his *Confessions*, he was living in an “abominable” state, “floundering and broiling in the sea of [his] fornication” (*Confessions* 43). Living thus, at a remove from God and caring for nothing “but to love and be loved” (43) by his friends, he goes out one night to steal some pears from a tree growing near the family vineyard:

Late one night a band of ruffians, myself included, went off to shake down the fruit and carry it away, for we had continued our games out of doors until well after dark, as was our pernicious habit. We took away an enormous quantity of pears, not to eat them ourselves, but simply to throw them to the pigs. Perhaps we ate some of them, but our real pleasure consisted in doing something that was forbidden. (Augustine, *Confessions* 47)

Augustine goes on to beg the Lord to look into his heart and to discover the secret reason behind his mischief. “I loved my own perdition and my own faults, not the things for which I committed wrong, but the wrong itself”, he says, and adds that he was “looking for no profit in disgrace but

³⁵ Sixteen also happens to be John's age in *Summertime* when he commits the crime for which he would later feel “the bitterest remorse,” namely the scratching of his father's Tebaldi record (Coetzee, *Summertime* 249). The numerical coincidence of John's and Augustine's ages when they commit their respective life-defining crimes (the crimes that would become for both of them emblematic of a lifelong guilt) might of course be no more than that, a coincidence – but in this particular instance the coincidence fits in quite neatly with my larger argument that Coetzee's autobiographical fiction can be read as an imaginative reworking of the conceptual framework that underlies the tradition of confessional writing. By refiguring, through the magic of numerical coincidence, Augustine's youthful crime in a story about a transgression committed by a fictional version of his own teenage self, Coetzee implicitly draws the Augustinian notion of grace (and the ideal of transcendence that lies behind it) into the discursive field that usurps (as we shall see) the conventional notion of an *a priori* subject as the measure of truth in confessional writing.

only for disgrace itself” (Augustine, *Confessions* 47). What is interesting about this confession is not so much the nature of the crime (in fact, one is hard put to think of a less harmful crime than a childish theft of fruit), but rather the moral economy that underlies it. What is shameful about the transgression, says Augustine, is not an abject desire for his neighbour's pears, or the fact that he caused his neighbour grief by diminishing his fruit harvest, or even the offence that he may have caused God by committing the sin of theft. What is shameful, rather, is that he was willing to follow the inclinations of his own corrupt heart.

In this regard it is significant that Augustine chooses so modest a crime to confess.³⁶ The patent lack of potential material consequences resulting from his petty theft emphasizes that what is at stake is not the degree of the transgression, but rather the moral constitution of the self who commits that transgression. Nor is his remorse directed so much at the disgraceful condition of his heart, but rather at the fact that he took the leanings of that heart as a principle for guiding his actions. The shame lies in the self that has not yet prostrated itself in order to better serve God, but is on the contrary still enthralled by the fluctuations of its own desire. It is not my intention here to enter into a discussion of early Christian theology, but we may venture to say that for Augustine, the essence of sinfulness, and hence the kernel of his confession, is a self that accepts its own fickle being as a source of authority. This observation fits in with Augustine's doctrine of salvation: the belief, as Bertrand Russell explains, that all humankind descends from Adam's original sin, and hence that “we all deserve eternal damnation”; that no one has it in their power to abstain from sin of their own accord; that it is only the elect few that are chosen, through the mercy of God, to be saved (Russell, “St Augustine's Philosophy and Theology” 339). The only way to bring an end to the inbred sinfulness of the human condition, then, is to give oneself over unconditionally to God, or to step away entirely from the “twisted tangle of knots” that makes up one's own efforts to account for

³⁶ For modern readers, Augustine's ardent self-flagellation before so paltry a crime – the handwringing and exclamations of remorse carry on for seven pages – comes across as misplaced, or even “morbid,” as Bertrand Russell notes, but “in his own age it seemed right and a mark of holiness” (Russell, “Three Doctors of the Church” 323). Russell goes on to observe, rather ominously, that “[a] great deal of what is most ferocious in the medieval Church is traceable to [Augustine's] sense of universal guilt” (“St Augustine's Philosophy and Theology” 340).

sinfulness (Augustine, *Confessions* 52).

The sequence of chapters that describes Augustine's final struggle against the shackles of his divided will, and the epiphanic moment of conversion that takes place at the end of it (Book VIII, chapters 6-12), posits the advent of grace quite firmly as a necessary step in achieving the self-transcendence that is needed to bring about the confessional procedure. Events are set in motion when Augustine (who has primed himself for his Damascus moment by reading the epistles of Paul, *Confessions* 166) hears a story from his friend Ponticianus about the recent conversion of two men that had taken place in a house near the city walls of Trêve (modern-day Trier). A strange thing happens to Augustine while he is listening to the story:

[W]hile he was speaking, O Lord, you were turning me around to look at myself. For I had placed myself behind my own back, refusing to see myself. You were setting me before my own eyes so that I could see how sordid I was, how deformed and squalid, how tainted with ulcers and sores. (Augustine, *Confessions* 169)

The process that is set in motion here is one of separation: Augustine, in being able to see himself (“how deformed and squalid, how tainted with ulcers and sores”), is slowly becoming divorced from himself. The pages that follow are an agonizing – and rhetorically captivating – description of the trauma of self-detachment. Augustine is quite literally deformed by the agony of “the fierce conflict which [he] had stirred up against [his] soul in [their] common abode, [his] heart” (*Confessions* 170).³⁷ He is driven to seek refuge in the garden outside, where no one “could interrupt that fierce struggle, in which [he] was [his] own contestant” (171). The self from whom he is trying so painfully to divest himself is a self that is beset by a sense of its own inner conflict:

When I was trying to reach a decision about serving the Lord my God, as I had long

³⁷ “For my voice sounded strange and the expression of my face and eyes, my flushed cheeks, and the pitch of my voice told him more of the state of my mind than the actual words that I spoke.” (Augustine, *Confessions* 170)

intended to do, it was I who willed to take this course and again it was I who willed not to take it. It was I and I alone. But I neither willed to do it nor refused to do it with my full will. So I was at odds with myself. I was throwing myself into confusion.

(Augustine, *Confessions* 173)

And, later:

In this way I wrangled with myself, in my own heart, about my own self. (Augustine, *Confessions* 177)

Augustine's struggle against his own self gradually builds up in intensity, until he has gone some distance toward leaving his "old attachments" behind ("They no longer barred my way, blatantly contradictorily, but their mutterings seemed to reach me from behind, as though they were stealthily plucking at my back," *Confessions* 176), and until he has reached the very edge of the boundary that separates him from God ("I had turned my eyes elsewhere, and while I stood trembling at the barrier, on the other side I could see the chaste beauty of Continence in all her serene, unsullied joy, as she modestly beckoned to me to cross over and to hesitate no more," 176). Yet that is as far as his own efforts – his own frantic self-reproaches and cross-examinations – are able to take him. Finally he is so ravished by internal conflict that he breaks down in a flood of tears, and that is the exact moment when grace intervenes: the "sing-song voice of a child," drifting from afar, compels him to pick up a book and to read the first passage he finds (177). The book at hand is Paul's epistle to the Romans, and the passage is an exhortation to leave behind the wanton ways of the world and to follow Christ without delay.³⁸ As soon as he has finished reading it, Augustine's doubts are dispelled, "the light of confidence" floods into his heart, and his conversion is complete (178).

In terms of the subjective dynamics of confession, grace is the name that is given here to the

³⁸ "Not in revelling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and rivalries. Rather, arm yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ; spend no more thought on nature and nature's appetites" (Rom. 13: 13, 14, quoted in Augustine, *Confessions* 178).

inexplicable leap by which the self is finally jettisoned from the endless process of self-interrogation by which it can do no more than circle helplessly around the fact of its own moral corruption. The authenticity of Augustine's confession depends on this movement away from the self: a movement that is occasioned by the miraculous intervention of grace, and that underscores the sense that he is, at the time of writing, in a position of superior knowledge over the self he has left behind. Grace, in this sense, becomes the mechanism that enables a distinction between the author of the confession and the subject of his confessional text (which is also himself, but not in the same way that the author is himself – it is a previous version of himself: grace is what allows the yearned-for self to become the present self, and the present self to become the remembered self).³⁹ Coetzee's work on confession likewise reveals a preoccupation with the workings of grace in the dynamics of self-expression, but in a way that departs quite fundamentally from the Augustinian notion of grace as a mechanism that allows the author to distinguish himself, implicitly, from the morally decrepit being of his confessional subject, and hence to tell the truth about that subject. In Coetzee's thought, the great divide that exists between the author and the subject of the confessional text – the divide that it is given to Augustine to leap across on the wings of grace – has become internalized, as a divide that exists between the two polarized notions of the self that inhabit the confessional text itself. The point comes across in Coetzee's final interview in *Doubling the Point*, in which he has the following to say about his essay on confession (“Confession and Double Thoughts”):

What was going on in that essay? In the present retrospect I see in it a submerged dialogue between two persons. One is a person I desired to be and was feeling my way toward. The other is more shadowy: let us call him the person I then was, though he may be the person I still am. The field of their debate is truth in autobiography. [...] In the terms brought into prominence in the essay, the debate is between cynicism and grace. Cynicism: the denial of any ultimate basis for values. Grace: a condition in which

³⁹ I have adapted this thought from Bertrand Russell's discussion of Augustine's philosophy of time, which can be found in Book XI of the *Confessions* (Russell, “St Augustine's Philosophy and Theology” 330-331).

the truth can be told clearly, without blindness. (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 392)

Coetzee's observation here suggests that the subject in his own writing is constituted in equal measure by the pull of grace, on the one hand, and by the endless cycle of self-interrogation that is the only discernible measure of the self's reality, on the other. In Coetzee's writing, then, grace does not act as a guarantor for a true moral knowledge of the self, as it does for Augustine, but forms part of an interminable present of self-expression: an immediate, unattainable horizon against which the self's abysmal ("truly abysmal," Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 251) interrogation of its own moral character attempts to set itself in relief.

Augustine stands at the head of the tradition that locates a moral knowledge of the self as the decisive condition for authentic, or genuine remorse. Whereas this knowledge is only available to Augustine retrospectively (in which sense the subject of his confession is not, properly speaking, himself, but rather an earlier version of that self) we find a remarkable shift in emphasis some 1400 years later, in the *Confessions* of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (the two parts of which were published in 1782 and 1789 respectively). Isaiah Berlin describes the emergence during that period of the Romantic belief that sincerity in and of itself is sufficient to guarantee the moral value of a pronouncement (*The Roots of Romanticism* 9)⁴⁰ – a belief that becomes manifest in Rousseau's departure from the Augustinian credo that it is necessary to leave the self behind in order for the confessional procedure to be set into motion. Rousseau's purpose, by contrast, is no more and no less than "to show to his kind a man in all the truth of his nature; and that man, it will be me" (Rousseau, *Les Confessions* 5).⁴¹ Furthermore, he goes on to assert:

⁴⁰ Berlin notes that what the Romantics admired most was "wholeheartedness, sincerity, purity of soul, the ability and readiness to dedicate yourself to your idea, no matter what it was" (*The Roots of Romanticism* 9). The implication is that for the Romantics, the willingness to become absorbed in an impulse or an idea counted for more than whatever the merits of that idea or impulse might have been.

⁴¹ The translations from Rousseau's *Confessions* are my own; I have, however, used J.M. Cohen's 1953 translation to compare for accuracy.

Let the trumpet of the final judgment sound when it will; I will come with this book in my hand to present myself before the Sovereign Judge. I will say proudly: look at what I have done, at what I have thought, at what I have been. I have told the good and the evil with the same frankness. I have not concealed anything bad, nor have I added anything good, and if I have added some small embellishments, this has only been to fill up the occasional gap in my faulty memory; I may have taken as true that which I know to be probable, but never that which I know to be false. I have shown myself such as I was, contemptible and base when I have been so, good, generous and sublime when such: I have unveiled my inner being as You yourself have seen it. Eternal Being, gather around me the innumerable crowd of my fellow men: let them listen to my confessions, let them groan at my shameful deeds, let them blush at my woes. Let each of them uncover in turn their heart at your feet with the same sincerity; and then let any one of them say, if he dares: *I was a better man than he.* (Rousseau, *Les Confessions* 5)

Augustine, we have seen, is at pains to disavow his sinful self before God; here, on the contrary, we have Rousseau, who plans to enter paradise precisely by virtue of having presented himself in all his dubious glory. The shift that occurs, as J.M. Cohen notes, is that “[b]y Rousseau's age men had begun to see themselves not as atoms in a society that stretched down from God to the world of nature but as unique individuals, important in their own right” (Introduction 7). We may note in passing that the social climate was perhaps not as accepting of Rousseau's secular instincts as his brave posture would imply – his persecution in later years was to some extent due to his insensitivity to religious convention – but it is certainly true that the ability to reveal the truth about himself, as he is, attains value as a moral currency in the confessional dynamics of his narrative. The fulcrum on which his confession turns is the belief that absolution depends on the degree of success with which he is able to access the immediate truth of his being.

As I mentioned earlier, Rousseau's insistence on the intrinsic value of subjective experience had a profound impact on his political thought, but in the *Confessions* the reader soon discovers that it has an unfortunate side-effect, namely the emergence of persecution mania. On numerous occasions he

states that it is not his intention to write an apology for his character, but merely to describe the events of his life, both good and bad, and that it is up to the reader to “assemble these elements and to determine the being that is made up of them” (Rousseau, *Les Confessions* 175). However, one finds with more and more frequency as the narrative proceeds that he believes himself to be misunderstood by almost everyone around him, and indeed the final part of the narrative resembles a paranoid or existential detective story, in which erstwhile friends with sinister motives set obscure plans in motion for the sole purpose of tormenting poor Rousseau.

As a consequence, and despite his protestations to the contrary, the suspicion arises that his professed sincerity has an ulterior motive, one that is directed more toward defending his reputation as an innocent victim among his peers than toward a philosophical or moral possibility of redemption. Rousseau’s sincerity has been discredited in various places (Leo Strauss, for example, argues in *L’intention de Rousseau* that it is best not take Rousseau at his word, and that one should rather look at his collective works in order to find a hidden intention there), which seems to signal that his insistence on sincerity as a function of confession might have implications that fall outside the economy of remorse and absolution that I have been describing here. We begin to suspect, in short, that Rousseau’s avowed belief in the singularity of subjective experience, for which sincerity is supposed to act as a guarantor, has more to do with elevating his narrative to a position of authority over his enemies, real or imagined, and less with the desire to atone for wrongdoing and thus gain moral absolution.

The suspicion concerning Rousseau’s strategic use of sincerity is amplified when we consider some of the particular crimes that he chooses to confess. The most heinous thing he ever did in his life, he tells us, was to steal a ribbon from a rich household where he was working as a valet and to blame the theft on Marion, a servant girl. The master of the house is called in; he fails to obtain a confession of guilt from the innocent girl, and in the ensuing doubt both of them are dismissed from

their duties. “This burden [of guilt] has lain without relief on my conscience until the present day, and I can affirm that the desire to relieve myself of it in some way has contributed much to the resolution I took to write my confessions,” he says (Rousseau, *Les Confessions* 86). He goes on to tell us that his refusal to withdraw his accusation was based not on the fear of punishment, but on the fear of disgrace, the fear of being called a liar, and furthermore that the remembrance of that deed has safeguarded him from committing similar deceptions in later life. What is startling about the passage, if we consider it carefully, is that Rousseau foregrounds an episode of patent insincerity (“du seul que j’aye jamais commis,” 87) in order to convince the reader of the sincerity of his character and of the subjective position from which he writes his narrative. Or, to put it differently, it seems relevant in a narrative that is preoccupied above all with the sincerity of its subject that the central confession is one in which that subject fails dismally at being sincere.

Rousseau intensifies the effect of his confession by framing it in two very specific ways, namely 1) by characterizing Marion as the very picture of innocence, and 2) by asserting that he has never told it to anyone before. Both of these framing devices contribute to the gravity of the confession, the first by enhancing the magnitude of the crime, and the second by creating a condition of privilege for the reader: you, dear reader, are the first person to gain access to these dark places in my heart. In order for the reader to enjoy this privilege, it is necessary to accept the sincerity of the narrative as more than a rhetorical device. It becomes apparent that the appeal to sincerity does not function as a detached addendum to the confession; it is built into the narrative structure of the passage itself.

The strategic use of sincerity does not mean that we must cry fraud and dismiss Rousseau as an unreliable witness to his own life, nor would that be a very useful conclusion to reach. The point is rather to notice the extent to which the notion of sincerity informs the text on a structural level, and conversely the extent to which the structure of the text participates in the creation of the sincere subject. That is to say, in Rousseau’s *Confessions*, we find that it is hard to separate the moral

economy of remorse and absolution from the narrative structure that gives it shape. If Augustine signals to us that literary confession is about the way in which the self transacts itself in relation to its own shames and desires, Rousseau's text makes it clear that it is not possible to disentangle those shames and desires from the process of representation in which they make themselves known. Rousseau's explicit project is to describe his own being from a position of privileged knowledge – the emotional knowledge of how he feels at any given moment in his life – but the reader soon discovers that the injunction of sincerity requires a strategic organization of material that belies the privileged capacity of the author. Sincerity, it seems, is not a secure channel of transmission through which Rousseau emits his subjective experience into the text; rather, we can understand the emergence of sincerity in the confessional text as a residue or consequence of the process of description. Rousseau is the author of his own sincerity; he creates it by describing it.

In another confessional text that comes to us from the Romantic period, namely Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, we find a rather more elusive engagement with the dynamics of subjective representation, one that moves closer to the recognition, in Coetzee's work, that the medium of self-expression (i.e. language) alters and perhaps even reconfigures the motives that prompt the writing in the first place. The point becomes clear if we consider the remarkable shift that takes place in De Quincey's own sense of what he is trying to achieve in writing his *Confessions*. In the opening pages of his narrative he is careful to distance himself from the crime of “self-indulgence” that he perceives in most English confessions (De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* 2), and from the “acts of gratuitous self-humiliation” that he finds in the “French” (1); he goes to some trouble to justify his own project on the basis of its usefulness and instructiveness for “the whole class of opium-eaters” (2). However, toward the end of his narrative (which in its tendency to digress begins to resemble the adventures of Tristram Shandy) he offers the following apology:

You will think, perhaps, that I am too confidential and communicative of my own private history. It may be so. But my way of writing is rather to think aloud, and follow my own humours, than much to consider who is listening to me; and, if I stop to consider what is proper to be said to this or that person, I shall soon come to doubt whether any part at all is proper. The fact is, I place myself at a distance of fifteen or twenty years ahead of this time, and suppose myself writing to those who will be interested about me hereafter; and wishing to have some record of a time, the entire history of which no one can know but myself, I do it as fully as I am able with the efforts I am now capable of making, because I know not whether I can ever find time to do it again. (De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* 62)

The passage indicates a divergence from the task that De Quincey had initially set himself, namely the edification of his fellow opium-eaters. It appears that he has come to realize through the course of his writing that his actual subject is himself, and his audience is no less than the future historians of his life. The English decorum of the opening passages has made way for an unabashed confession that he has abandoned considerations of propriety and focused instead on following his own “humours”, or on tracing the circuitous route of his thoughts wherever they might lead. It appears that De Quincey becomes infected with the delight of writing as soon as he puts his pen to paper, and in this sense it may be said that his belated confession at the end of the narrative is an acknowledgement that he has allowed himself to be written by the story. The subject of his *Confessions*, then, is the unthreading of intention by the narrative, the emergent realization that the subject of the story takes on a life of its own, and far from standing aloof, or preceding the narrative, the figure of the writer becomes instead a function of the writing. In this sense, De Quincey's *Confessions* forms a bridge between the conceit of immediate moral self-knowledge that is sustained so carefully in Rousseau, and the awareness, in Coetzee's literary project, that the subject of the confession is always already constituted by the material of the discourse itself.

One of De Quincey's digressions in particular provides us with an apposite example of the intrusion of the unexpected into the narrative, revealing the extent to which the material usurps the

constitution of the subject of the confession. In the midst of a protracted description of the happiest year in his life, De Quincey interrupts himself:

And, by the way, now that I speak of giving laudanum away, I remember, about this time, a little incident, which I mention, because, trifling as it was, the reader will soon meet it again in my dreams, which it influenced more fearfully than could be imagined. One day a Malay knocked at my door.” (De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* 55)

The ensuing scene is interesting for various reasons, and although it is quite long, I find it necessary to quote a large part of it here. De Quincey is fetched by a servant girl, who is convinced that “a sort of demon” (56) has arrived on the doorstep, and when he comes down the stairs, he finds the Malay and the servant girl arranged in a picturesque vignette in his kitchen:

And a more striking picture there could not be imagined, than the beautiful English face of the girl, and its exquisite fairness, together with her erect and independent attitude, contrasted with the sallow and bilious skin of the Malay, enamelled or veneered with mahogany, by marine air, his small, fierce, restless eyes, thin lips, slavish gestures and adorations. Half-hidden by the ferocious looking Malay, was a little child from a neighbouring cottage who had crept in after him, and was now in the act of reverting its head, and gazing upwards at the turban and the fiery eyes beneath it, whilst with one hand he caught at the dress of the young woman for protection. My knowledge of Oriental tongues is not remarkably extensive ... I addressed him in some lines from the Iliad; considering that, of such languages as I possessed, Greek, in point of longitude, came geographically nearest to an Oriental one. He worshipped me in a most devout manner, and replied in what I suppose was Malay. In this way I saved my reputation with my neighbours: for the Malay had no means of betraying the secret. (De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* 56)

De Quincey goes on to explain the voracious opium-devouring habits of his foreign guest; the remainder of the passage is fascinating and much could be made of it, but I limit myself to the

above. If we are able to ignore the racism that inheres in the caricatured description of the Malay, and we take De Quincey at his word that to the onlookers the unexpected guest had the appearance of a phantasm, then his own role in the proceedings takes on a special significance: he becomes a mediator between the familiar and the otherworldly, the one tasked with domesticating the irruption of the savage into the homely hearth. It is tempting to read the visitation of the Malay as a surfacing of the uncanny, in a cultural sense, but that is not quite the point I am trying to make here. What is relevant, rather, is the method of mediation, and the roles of the various participants in the scene, as described by De Quincey. Most revealing is the fact that the discourse in which the mediation occurs is one that is not mutually understood by the participants. De Quincey quotes the *Iliad*; the Malay responds; the onlookers, the servant girl and the child, imagine that their master has successfully contained the emergence of the unreal in their world – has tamed the tiger, so to speak. De Quincey's learning creates for him the persona of someone who is able to converse with the unfamiliar, the arcane. He inhabits this persona, which is sustained by the gaze of the witness, and proceeds to solidify it by appearing to fit the mould. The Malay has "no means of betraying his secret", and hence De Quincey's identity has been established through the medium of a discursive instant in which the actual content of the discourse has little, if anything, to do with the manifestation of that identity.

The deeper truth underlying the confession here is that the form of the discourse, by virtue of appearing to be authoritative, has supplanted the constitution of the subjective identity which it purports to sustain. There is a rupture between the self who speaks and the self that is created by the performance of the discourse. The servant girl and the child, for whose benefit the performance has been staged and who may be characterized as passive witnesses to the event, can carry on their lives in the secure knowledge that an able custodian patrols the perimeters of their world; De Quincey, as we know, is troubled by further visitations from the Malay in his dreams, and benefits from no such false sense of security. The ambivalence of the situation reveals the extent to which the discourse

usurps the creation of a sustainable subjective identity, while at the same time revealing that the motion of creation emerges from a self that experiences no such sense of coherence. When De Quincey admits that it is up to future historians to piece together the subject of his confession (namely himself), he is in a sense acknowledging that he has become aware that his own subjective presence in the text has more or less the same effect as the meaning of the Greek in his conversation with the Malay: it provides a space of mediation, a site to which the witness (or reader) may attach his or her understanding, but it does not reveal its true nature.

From these three pivotal figures in the tradition of confessional writing – Augustine, Rousseau, De Quincey – we are able to learn two things concerning the subjective dynamics of confessional writing: 1) the truth-value of a confession is linked to the constitution of the moral subject; and 2) the constitution of this subject is in important ways a retroactive function of the dynamics of the discourse. It is along these lines that Coetzee's autobiographical fiction enacts a reworking of the tradition of confessional writing. What it amounts to, I propose, is that he has built into his texts a formal resistance to the tendency of narrative discourse to posit an identifiable subject. This, in turn, has the rather paradoxical effect of redirecting the question of the truth of the self to that which resists articulation, or to that which escapes the defining properties of representational discourse. Consequently, we perceive in Coetzee's writing a kind of moral honesty, an honesty that derives from his keen awareness of the way in which the material of the discourse usurps the prerogative of self-definition, and on his strategic manipulation of narrative resources in order to expose, and thereby offer resistance to, the motions of that self-definition. Even as the traditional conditions for absolution (i.e. the seamless association between the confessional text and its author-subject) recede into the distance, we find that it is compensated for by an imaginative reconstruction of the ideal of absolution within a writing praxis that concedes the primary role of the text in the constitution of the moral subject. Coetzee's autobiographical fiction – especially if we perceive it in the light of his critical writing on confession and autobiography – can thus be read as a recasting of the conceptual

dynamics of confessional writing for our post-religious, post-sincere times. I elaborate on these thoughts in the next section by considering another significant moment from *Summertime*, and by presenting an account of Coetzee's treatment of the topic of confessional discourse in his inaugural lecture, "Truth in Autobiography".

4. "Quaquaquu"

The passage from *Summertime* I have in mind is one that resonates with the scene from *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* in which De Quincey and the Malay speak to each other in mutually incomprehensible tongues. Margot and John are settling down to face the night in a broken down Datsun in the Karoo, twenty kilometres outside the town of Merweville. "Are you sleepy yet?" she asks. "I'm not. I have a suggestion. To pass the time, why don't we tell each other stories."

"You tell a story," he says stiffly. "I don't know any stories."

"Tell me a story from America," she says. "You can make it up, it doesn't have to be true. Any story."

"Given the existence of a personal God," he says, "with a white beard quaquaquaquu outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia loves us deeply quaquaquaquu with some exceptions."

He stops. She has not the faintest idea what he is talking about.

"Quaquaquu," he says.

"I give up," she says. He is silent. "My turn," she says. "Here follows the story of the princess and the pea." (Coetzee, *Summertime* 112)

The figure of the female cousin features prominently in all three of Coetzee's autobiographical fictions (as Agnes, Ilse and Margot respectively), and in all three books their characters gesture toward a primordial, prelinguistic intimacy in which John is able to "unburden" himself without the benefit of a mediating agency (Coetzee, *Summertime* 97). Elsewhere in *Summertime*, he tells Margot, "[L]et me confess it – I was in love with you. And ever since that day, being in love with a

woman has meant being free to say everything on my heart” (97). There is a passage in *Boyhood* that might be read as an evocation of the same memory he is describing here, one in which the young John is conscious of “not having to pretend” with his cousin: “As he spoke he forgot what language he was speaking: thoughts simply turned to words within him, transparent words” (Coetzee, *Boyhood* 94). In the light of this relationship – a relationship that is founded on the memory of an almost prelapsarian intimacy – the story he chooses to tell her in their moment of awkward closeness becomes ripe with potential meaning.

The purpose of storytelling, for Margot, is to pass the time and to defuse the tension that has arisen from their earlier talk of politics. John’s idealism (to live in a world where racial segregation is not a reality, which compels him to do his own manual labour, which means he has performed his own truck repairs) has led to the breakdown, and now he is called upon to draw on his powers as a fabulist to ease their plight. He spouts a fragment of what sounds like unintelligible theology. A suitably informed reader can identify it as a reference to Lucky's rambling speech in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (Beckett 36-38), and may read into it any number of possible meanings: that John is making an ironic reference to their situation, in which they are merely passing time while they wait for someone to save them (“If we are lucky, someone will drive past,” he says, Coetzee, *Summertime* 110); that he is confessing to Margot that he spent his time in America doing nothing more exciting than reading Beckett; or simply that his head is so full of high modernist literary references that he has lost the ability to tell a straightforward story. To Margot, however it must seem like her cousin has degenerated into quacking like a duck (“quaquaqua”); as far as she is concerned, he might as well be speaking Greek. The scene is almost painful in its depiction of John's ineptitude in the face of their situation. What I would like to draw from it, however, is the discrepancy between John's intended meaning (which is entirely open to interpretation) and Margot's perception of it (she has “not the faintest idea what he is talking about,” 112). The discursive moment in which their conversation takes place signals here the absence of a mediating

voice that might enable mutual understanding; John becomes unintelligible at the moment of self-revelation. The discourse of self-revelation, it seems, is not sufficient to carry the full burden of his subjective experience.

The history of the relationship between Margot and John suggests that his “quacking” is a genuine attempt to unburden himself to her, or to speak without presenting himself in the guise of performative utterance. The time John spent in America is a source of suspicion among his family members (*Summertime* 89), and when his cousin presents him with an opportunity to fabulate his experience, or to sketch himself in a better light (“it doesn’t have to be true”, she says), he refuses the bait: myth-making, the passage would have us believe, is not part of his repertoire. By refusing to tell a proper story, John shows up the performance of narrative as inadequate to the gravity of the relationship that exists between him and his cousin. The moment in which he reveals his past by telling a story is precisely where one would expect the conventional process of subjective constitution to occur; instead, here, it signals a resistance to that very process. In the terms of confessional discourse, the implication is that the subject begins to emerge in a negative sense, as an absence rather than a presence, something that is perceived as an effect rather than a manifest component of the text.

These thoughts find an echo in Coetzee's inaugural lecture on autobiography from 1984, “Truth in Autobiography”. As I mentioned earlier, an important point of reference in that lecture is Rousseau's *Confessions*. Coetzee argues that Rousseau confesses strategically – that is to say, stops short of letting the cat out of the bag entirely – in order to preserve the interest, and indeed the progression, of his narrative. The point Coetzee makes is that discourse in general, and autobiographical discourse in particular, depends on the preservation of certain secrets, the revelation of which would spell the end of the discourse in question. What is notable about Coetzee's lecture is that there hovers about it a sense of the performative, a sense that the lecture itself is guarding a secret which

it will only be able to reveal at the cost of its own existence. The reader of the lecture has a mounting suspicion that it is performing something as much as telling something – a suspicion that piques the interest, to the extent that the reader wishes to discover the secret behind the performance. This becomes all the more relevant because the lecture is about autobiography, a genre that trades on the promise that here, finally, the secret behind the author's literary production will be revealed.

I would like to consider the conceptual implications of this tension between the performative aspect of Coetzee's lecture, and the resistance to disclosure it enacts, by drawing on an observation made by J.L. Austin concerning the performative use of language. Among the varieties of utterances, Austin explains in *How To Do Things With Words*, there are a certain number that do not act as simple descriptive statements. These utterances may rather be understood as actions, or “performatives”. They include locutions like “I promise”, “I bet”, “I swear” and so forth. However, as Austin explains, there are certain conditions under which the actions these statements are supposed to accomplish are compromised:

[A] performative utterance will, for example, be *in a peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy. This applies in a similar manner to any and every utterance – a sea-change in special circumstances. Language in such circumstances is in special ways – intelligibly – used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use – ways which fall under the doctrine of the *etiologies* of language. (Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* 22)

According to Austin's system, there are distinct modes of language, deriving from the context in which it is being used, and the mode of “normal” usage enjoys precedence over the mode of “performed” usage. A literary instance of a performative utterance (when Estragon curses Vladimir in *Waiting for Godot*, for example, Beckett 65) acquires whatever meaning it may have from our understanding of the conventional usage of that utterance. The conventional usage comes first; the

literary performance derives from it in some “etiolated”, or watered-down way. Austin is not concerned here with making a value judgement concerning the merits of literary language, but the hierarchy that he establishes between different forms of discourse, in which the normal becomes the source of the performance, and in which the meaning of the performance depends entirely (that is to say, “parasitically”) on the normal that hosts it, presents us with a useful vantage point from which to observe the way in which Coetzee upsets the separation, in his lecture on autobiography, between a pre-existing subject of confession, i.e. the self, and the confessional discourse that purports to articulate the being of that subject.

As is the case with John's unintelligible utterance to Margot in the cold Karoo night, we sense that there is something in Coetzee's lecture on autobiography that purposefully offers resistance to the enquiring gaze of the reader. “There are truths it may cost too much to tell, not because they lie too close to the autobiographer’s heart but because they lie too close to his art,” he says in the lecture (Coetzee, “Truth in Autobiography” 5). This is a curious statement, because it points us toward the idea that the sense of resistance is a formal aspect of the text, rather than a reference to some kind of secret truth of the autobiographical subject that underlies or precedes the production of the text. Coetzee puts forward the existence of hidden truths – “truths it may cost too much to tell” – but then collapses the relationship of anteriority that these truths are supposed to have with the verbal expressions that emerge from them. Instead, the relationship becomes one of simultaneity: the hidden source (“truth”) and the visible performance (“telling”) both occupy the same discursive field (the autobiographer's “art”). Coetzee's thought here aims to subvert the notion (as Austin would have it) that the literary dimension of the autobiographical text – its “performed” aspect – is subordinate to an underlying, normative source of meaning.

The implication is that Coetzee engages the tradition of confession in his writing while at the same time resisting the notion that confession depends for its efficacy on the revelation of profound truths

about the self who stands behind it. Ever since Rousseau postulated an immediate knowledge of the self as a vital condition for confession, there has been a latent awareness that the process of writing doubles back on the subject, formulates and posits the subject as much as describes it. Coetzee's writing brings this awareness out into the open, and attempts to answer it by writing a resistance to the usurpation of the self by the discourse into his texts. His autobiographical fiction is sincere about the fact that it is about himself – most obviously so in the fact that he shares a name with his protagonist, and has authored the same books – but it is also sincere about the fact that it does not wish to be understood as a secondary source for a deeper truth about its origin. That is to say, the subject of confession, for Coetzee, is a property of the discourse itself, in the sense that it actively resists becoming a supplement to a more authentic subject that precedes the narrative. The extent to which this negatively defined subject takes on a life of its own in Coetzee's writing, and the terms according to which it might be said to rekindle the ideal of absolution, can be examined by considering its genealogy in consecutive manifestations of Coetzee's autobiographical project. In the next, and final section of this chapter I will give an indication of the way in which this genealogy can be traced by focusing on an important difference between *Boyhood* and *Summertime*, namely the changing nature of the relationship between John and his father.

5. His Heart Begins to Throb

In *Summertime*, after John recounts the scratching of his father's records, he tells us that “[f]or that mean and petty deed of his he has for the past twenty years felt the bitterest remorse, remorse that has not receded with the passage of time but on the contrary grown keener” (Coetzee, *Summertime* 249). He also relates how he presents his father with a new Tebaldi record, and that what he wants above all is his father's forgiveness (250). In the absence of forgiveness – his father appears not to remember the incident – he starts listening to the Tebaldi record himself:

[A]s he listens the beginnings of some kind of transformation seem to take place inside him. As it must have been with his father in 1944, his heart too begins to throb in time with Mimi's. As the great rising arc of her voice must have called out his father's soul, so it now calls out his soul too, urging it to join hers in passionate, soaring flight.

What has been wrong with him all these years? (Coetzee, *Summertime* 250)

John never gets round to asking his father's forgiveness outright; nor does his father ever stop being an enigma to him. Instead, he discovers an imaginative form of identification with his father by opening himself to his father's music, and by letting it change him. Outright confession of his crime is not a possibility for John, and nor is it, it seems, for Coetzee. Rather, we find that the narrative itself, in its treatment of the characters, speaks back to earlier instances of Coetzee's writing, and attempts to atone for certain misdeeds of characterization. In the passage above, for example, we learn that his father has a soul which is capable of responding to the passionate call of Mimi Coetzee's song. This is a far cry from the father we meet in *Boyhood*, whom the teenage John refers to simply as "that man" (Coetzee, *Boyhood* 158): unemployed, foolish and useless, he lies in a darkened room in the middle of the day and stubs out cigarettes in a urine pot (159). To John, this father is a figure of disgust, and the text makes no effort to spare him. What the passage from *Summertime* thus appears to suggest is not so much the confession of a real-life sin committed against the father, but rather an expression of remorse for the aesthetic predisposition that has been able to depict the figure of the father in such cold-blooded terms. In the words of Derek Attridge, in *Boyhood* "we sense the unflinchingness more than the forgiveness" ("Confessing in the Third Person" 159). Now, in *Summertime* we discern the ghostly presence of shame in the text, and we notice the extent to which the possibility of absolution has been re-imagined as something that applies to the being of the narrative, rather than to a self that precedes, or surpasses the boundaries of that narrative.

Attridge writes about our perception of a "truth-directedness" ("Confessing in the Third Person"

160) in Coetzee's autobiographical fiction, and makes the point that the power of those books, or their “drive for truth”, can be felt “only if the author of the words we read is identified with the ‘he’ of the narrative” (161). He acknowledges that we will never be able to eradicate the doubt of this connection: it is a “doubt” that “haunts all autobiography... a genre that hovers permanently at the borders of the literary and the nonliterary” (161). While it is certainly true that the relationship between autobiography and historical truth is an ambivalent one, what I have been trying to articulate here is the idea that the impact of *Summertime* derives not so much from our understanding of John as a version of J.M. Coetzee – a watered-down, secondary version of the real thing (or an etiolation, in Austin's terms) – but rather from our understanding of him as a development of the writing practice that gave us the John of *Boyhood*. That is to say, Coetzee's engagement with the tradition of confessional writing does not necessarily allow him to confess better, in the sense that it does not necessarily bring us closer to the historical truth of his being. What it does instead is to keep alive the possibility of confession, and the attendant ideal of absolution, by re-situating it within a literary practice that is all too conscious of the ways in which the aesthetic material of a narrative text supplants and redefines the self that is motivated by the urge to confess in the first place.

The relationship between aesthetics and the confessional impulse that I am describing here is a complex one. To speak about a “relationship” between them implies that they can be thought of separately, as discrete properties of the text, elements that may be cordoned off from each other, so to speak, and studied in isolation, with whatever instruments of investigation the critic has at his or her disposal. Whereas the thrust of my argument is that this is precisely what is not possible in Coetzee's writing: that his autobiographical fiction involves a kind of palpable *feeling through* of the confessional impulse – with all the shadings of remorse and regret and yearning after absolution that it entails – in a literary paradigm that is inescapably aesthetic in its bearing (aesthetic in the sense that its material is the associative realm of figurative language, in which thoughts and feelings

come into existence for a fleeting moment, then pass away, without a telos). The peculiar way in which the aesthetic paradigm of Coetzee's writing acquires a confessional dimension becomes easier to understand if we look closely at a pivotal moment in *Youth*, namely the passage in which John discovers, in the British Museum, the memoirs of early travellers to Southern Africa, and a profound shift occurs in his ideas about his own artistic vocation.

John is gripped in particular by William Burchell's account of his expedition to the interior of the country in the early nineteenth century (*Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa*, first published in two volumes in 1822 and 1824). Upon reading these journals, with their descriptions of “reconnaissances by ox-wagon into the desert of the Great Karoo, where a traveller could trek for days on end without clapping eyes on a living soul,” he is surprised to discover that he feels a “tug at the heartstrings”: “it is his country, the country of his heart, that he is reading about” (Coetzee, *Youth* 137). South Africa, and specifically his own South African background, has up to this point been a source of great shame for John. His high-minded artistic ideals at the beginning of the novel – his belief that poetry should be “hard and clear like a flame” (21), his unquestioning acceptance of the stern aesthetic judgements of Eliot and Pound (25) – are based in no small part on his desire to distance himself from what he considers to be the defects of his South African upbringing (“an undistinguished, rural family, bad schooling, the Afrikaans language,” 62). When his mother persists in writing him letters, he wonders how he can make her accept that “the process of turning himself into a different person that began when he was fifteen will be carried through remorselessly until all memory of the family and the country he left behind is extinguished” (98). Notably, his first prose writing experiment betrays how strongly his literary sensibility – and his sense of his own artistic vocation – has been influenced by this desire to “cut all bonds with the past,” (98), in that he is troubled to see that the story he has written is still set in South Africa: “[h]e would prefer to leave his South African self behind as he has left South Africa itself behind” (62). John's idealistic aesthetic self-fashioning – his belief in the purifying powers of art – appears to be premised on the

view that art is a means by which to escape the realities of his historical situation – a situation which is, for him, emblematic of a kind of existential guilt (South Africa is “like an albatross around his neck,” 101).

John's discovery of Burchell announces a change in his literary sensibility that is important in two respects. The first involves the possibility of engaging with his South African past in a way that moves him, or that matters to him personally. The “ugly new South Africa” (Coetzee, *Youth* 137), with its sordid apartheid politics and its brutal acts of violence (100), is still anathema to him, but at the very moment when his heart begins to quicken with a memory of love for the place he left behind, the sheer dead weight of his shame recedes (like the albatross dropping from the mariner's neck in Coleridge's poem)⁴² and he is able to reformulate his literary ambitions from a fresh perspective. The second change has to do with John's overwhelmed response to the fact that the events portrayed in Burchell's travelogue “really happened” (“Real oxen hauled him and his cases of botanical specimens from stopping-place to stopping-place in the Great Karoo; real stars glimmered above his head, and his men's, while they slept,” 137), and the desire that it awakens in him to “write a book that is as convincing as Burchell's” (138). In the convergence of these two new defining elements in his aesthetic sensibility (to write about something that involves him personally, and to imbue his work with a sense of reality, or an “aura of truth,” 138), John dreams up a new task:

⁴² In Coleridge's “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”, it is at the very moment when the cursed seaman recalls love in his heart for God's creation that the dead albatross, the emblem of his guilt, drops from around his neck:

O happy living things! no tongue
 Their beauty might declare:
 A spring of love gushes from my heart,
 And I blessed them unaware!

...

The self same moment I could pray;
 And from my neck so free
 The Albatross fell off, and sank
 Like lead into the sea.

(Coleridge, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” lines 282-285, 288-291)

The challenge he faces is a purely literary one: to write a book whose horizon of knowledge will be that of Burchell's time, the 1820s, yet whose response to the world around it will be alive in a way that Burchell, despite his energy and intelligence and curiosity and sang-froid, could not be because he was an Englishman in a foreign country, his mind half-occupied with Pembrokeshire and the sisters he had left behind. (Coetzee, *Youth* 138)

In conventionally autobiographical terms, the passage describes the emergence of the idea that would culminate, some ten years later, in “The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee.”⁴³ If we take a step back, however, and we consider the way in which the passage brings this moment of conception to life, we notice that it echoes its own content: that Coetzee has taken up, in *Youth*, the “purely literary” challenge of writing a book whose “horizon of knowledge” is that of his own younger self, a book that is textured with the historical material that describes the reality in which that self has his existence, and that acquires an “aura of truth” to the extent that Coetzee imagines himself responding to the world in the way that his protagonist would have responded. The passage that announces John's willingness to explore his own heritage – and consequently the roots of his own shame – in a literary project (and it is not for nothing that Coetzee's first novel, *Dusklands* traces the contorted dimensions of the colonial mentality) is in itself an aesthetic manifestation of the way in which Coetzee's work constitutes a *feeling through* of the transactions between the self and its own historical sense of guilt. John is not absolved from his shame, but the aesthetic dimension in which he has his being does not blanch before expressing, in the fullest sense possible, the contours of that shame.

In recent years, Coetzee has become more and more preoccupied with the ways in which the activity of writing creates a separate frame of existence for the writing self. It is a concern that

⁴³ That John would go on to write *Dusklands* becomes retrospectively evident from the Julia-interview in *Summertime*: “One morning... John appeared at the front door. 'I won't stay,' he said, 'but I thought you might like this.' He was holding out a book. On the cover: *Dusklands*, by J M Coetzee” (Coetzee, *Summertime* 55).

appears to coincide with a growing awareness of mortality, of the inescapability of death. In a review of Philip Roth's *Nemesis* that appeared in 2010, for example, Coetzee constructs a reading that sees the plague condition described in that novel – the polio that swept through Roth's Newark in 1944 – as “simply a heightened state of the condition of being mortal” (Coetzee, “On the Moral Brink” 2). He goes on to reflect on the peculiarity of Roth's narratorial devices, and marks especially the occurrence in his recent fiction of narrators who speak from “beyond the grave”, or who deliver meditations on their “post-mortem existence” (6). He ends his review by describing a scene that exemplifies the kind of writing that emerges now that the intensity of the “old” Roth – the Roth of *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain*, who was still animated by the fires of creative passion – has “died down” (9). In the scene, the protagonist of *Everyman* strikes up a conversation with a gravedigger (his own gravedigger) and receives a salutary lesson in the craft of making a grave. In Coetzee's concluding remark, it is hard not hear echoes of his own growing awareness of mortality, and of how it affects the being of writing: “This modest but beautifully composed little ten-page episode does indeed provide a good education, and not just for older persons: how to dig a grave, how to write, how to face death, all in one” (10).

If Coetzee's review of *Nemesis* reveals a preoccupation with the mortality of the writer, there is another, more recent review that speaks directly to his professional interest in the ways in which the being of the writer takes on a life of its own in writing. This rather peculiar review (“The Quest for the Girl from Bendigo Street”) appeared in 2012, and concerns the fiction of Gerald Murnane, an Australian writer who developed, in the course of six books published between 1974 and 1990, a metaphysics of writing that culminates in the writer taking up residence in the world of his fiction. For Murnane, Coetzee writes, “[a]n important stage in the life of writing is attained ... when the writing self moves from merely observing and reporting on inner images to living an image life among image persons in the other world” (“The Quest for the Girl from Bendigo Street” 6). Coetzee is as scrupulous and dispassionate as ever in his description of Murnane's complex idealism (“There

are readers who will dismiss Murnane's dual-world system as idle theory-spinning," he warns, 6), and he repeats certain staple ideas that will be familiar to most with an interest in Coetzee scholarship,⁴⁴ but it is nevertheless telling that he is drawn to the ways in which Murnane's excursions into the "other world" of writing might be understood as an imaginative "act of atonement" (7). About *Inland*, a book in which Murnane tries to make amends for an unnamed original sin by bringing himself and a girl he loved in his childhood back to life in the image-world of his fiction ("Orpheus-like," 8), Coetzee has the following to say:

The transgression for which *Inland* is supposed to atone is not visible in the story of the youthful pair, but seems part of the constitution of Murnane himself, or the Murnane self who figures as the writer of the book. *Inland* tries to give substance to this obscure originary sin by situating it in an overt work of fiction, and thus – in Murnane's metaphysical system – making it real. (Coetzee, "The Quest for the Girl from Bendigo Street" 7)

Taken in conjunction, these two reviews suggest a growing interest on Coetzee's part in how a writer might begin to settle his accounts, so to speak, without betraying a lifelong investment in the discourse of fiction. This is not to say that an awareness of mortality is a new departure for Coetzee – on the contrary, *Age of Iron* might be read as a sustained and incisive meditation on the meaning of approaching death, and *The Master of Petersburg* is concerned especially with how a writer might come to terms with the reality of death without denying its shattering force. What we notice, rather, is a careful and sustained attention to how the image of the self – an image that is inseparable from the being it acquires in writing – begins to account for its past in a gesture that resembles the moves of atonement we discern in the tradition of confessional writing. It is along these lines that we can begin to make sense of Coetzee's symbolic killing off of the author John Coetzee in

⁴⁴ "For readers who, despite Murnane's best efforts, cannot tell the difference between image-persons and figments of the human imagination, it may be best to treat Murnane's theorizing – which extends into the very texture of his fiction – as no more than an elaborate way of warning us not to identify the storytelling *I* with the man Gerald Murnane, and therefore not to read his books as autobiographical records, accountable to the same standards of truth as history is. The *I* who tells the story will be no less a constructed figure than the actors in it" (Coetzee, "The Quest for the Girl from Bendigo Street" 4).

Summertime, and of his consequent revision of the narrative treatment given to the figure of the father in *Boyhood*; and it is also in this sense, I think, that we can understand the incorporation of the confessional heritage in his autobiographical fiction.

CHAPTER TWO: THE KAROO FARM

1. The Sacral Space of the Farm

In the previous chapter my aim was to give a sense of the way in which Coetzee re-inscribes the tradition of confessional writing in a body of work that foregrounds the aesthetic constitution of the subject. An important point of departure in that chapter was the notion, already implicit in the *Confessions* of St Augustine but focalized more clearly in the Romantic turn personified by Rousseau, that the ideal of redemption depends on a belief that the confessional text gives access to an authentic self, one that already exists before the confessional procedure is set in motion. Coetzee's writing, by contrast, operates in the knowledge that the being of the confessional subject is indelibly bound up with the narrative that describes it, to the extent that the idea of a "real", or authentic self features only in a negative sense, as a kind of desire of that subject to transcend the mediated (and hence compromised) nature of its reality. Toward the end of the chapter I also suggested, by referring to an important moment in *Youth* (namely John's discovery of Burchell's travel journals in the British Museum), that the aesthetic paradigm of Coetzee's fiction derives a great deal of its impetus by drawing on the sense of association his protagonist feels with the land that lies closest to his heart, namely the Coetzee family farm in the Karoo ("the country of his heart," Coetzee, *Youth* 137). In this chapter, my aim is to explore the complex engagement with the site of the farm in Coetzee's writing more thoroughly, with a particular focus on the role that it plays in the formation of the subject in his autobiographical fiction. The farm becomes, in my reading, a cultural source for Coetzee's recasting of the Romantic ideal of redemption in a textual paradigm that denies access to a prior, more authentic version of the self (and hence the site that provides a symbolic point of origin for the peculiar sense of dissonance that pervades his literary explorations of selfhood).

My argument stems from the observation that the Romantic pursuit of redemption can be understood as an attempt, on the part of the poet, to regain a sense of subjective unity. This unity is often depicted as belonging to a past in which the self enjoyed an uninterrupted communion with nature, and through nature with a pantheistic life force. The conceptual structure that underlies the Romantic appropriation of nature, and the ways in which that appropriation enables the creation of a unified sense of self, is an important point of departure for my readings of Coetzee in this chapter, and to this end I trace, in the next section, its expression in the work of Wordsworth in particular. However, to begin with, I would like to situate my argument by making a few general remarks concerning the significance of the natural environment to the Romantic sensibility. Raymond Williams makes the observation, in *The Country and the City*, that the Romantic emphasis on the natural environment forms part of a longstanding pastoral tradition that had defined itself over the course of successive generations by invoking an idealized notion of the past: a mutable and ever-receding “Golden Age” that works as a corrective, in literary form, for feelings of disillusionment with the socioeconomic distortions of the present. For the Romantics, writing in a time in which agrarian reform was becoming increasingly mechanized (Williams, *The Country and the City* 127) and the spirit of community increasingly “dispossessed” (131), nature became a source in which organic human truths that were being threatened by the atomization of society could be rediscovered. An important shift during that time, says Williams, was the internalization of the creative principle embodied by nature, so that “a new emphasis is placed on the act of poetry itself, the act of creation” (132). Consequently, in the Romantic image of “the man driven back from the cold world and in his own natural perception and language seeking to find and recreate man,” it becomes harder to distinguish the boundaries between the poet-as-creator and the subject of his poetry (132). Romantic poetry thus becomes an articulation of the poet's desire to reconnect with an underlying life force by recalling, in the imagery and structure of his poem, the pure connection that once existed between the self and nature, and poetic language becomes the medium through which

the poet recreates the possibility of a unified consciousness from within a state of contemplation – a state that is marked by an awareness of the subject as an entity who enters the world through the medium of language.

If we are to understand Coetzee's recasting of this dynamic in a literary form that takes the culturally demarcated space of the farm as its point of origin (rather than nature in a broader, more encompassing sense), it is important to have a clear notion of what the Romantic gesture of subjective identification entails. The novelist Orhan Pamuk provides a useful perspective when he writes, in his Charles Eliot Norton Lectures (collected under the title *The Naive and the Sentimental Novelist*), about the distinction between two different kinds of writer, namely the “sentimental” and the “naive” (*The Naive and the Sentimental Novelist* 14). It is a distinction, Pamuk tells us, that was first made by the German Romantic Friedrich Schiller, and it describes the difference between those writers who write in the unquestioning confidence that their work is a direct representation of reality (“naive”), and those who have become conscious of the constructed nature of their representations, or of the literary artifice that shapes the version of reality they present in their work (“sentimental”, or reflective). Naive writers, says Pamuk, are “at one with nature”:

For them – in contrast to contemporary writers – poetry is like an impression that nature makes upon them quite organically and that never leaves them. Poetry comes spontaneously to naive poets from the natural universe they are part of. The belief that a poem is not something thought out and deliberately crafted by the poet, composed in a certain meter and shaped via constant revision and self-criticism, but rather something that should be written unreflectively and that may even be dictated by nature or God or some other power – this Romantic notion was advocated by Coleridge, a devoted follower of the German Romantics, and was clearly expressed in the 1816 preface to his poem “Kubla Khan”. (Pamuk, *The Naive and the Sentimental Novelist* 14)

What is especially notable about Pamuk's observation here is his description of the esteem in which

the Romantics held an “organic” mode of being, or their admiration for a kind of existence that lays claim to a spontaneous communion with “nature or God or some other power”. In the preface to “Kubla Khan” that Pamuk mentions, for example, we find Coleridge's rather awed recollection of the way in which the lines of the poem descended upon him while he was in an unconscious, or at best a half-conscious state:

The Author continued for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses, during which time he has the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines; if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images of rose up before him as *things*, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort. (Coleridge, *Coleridge's Poems* 163)

The principle underlying the image of the “naive” poet is that he or she exists in a state of seamless connection with some kind of primal life source – that the lines of poetry rise up before his or her inner eye spontaneously, as “things”, without any effort of the conscious will – and that this connection carries over, by extension, to the literature produced by that poet: the work itself becomes imbued, via the agency of the naive poet-self, with an essential and deep-seated truth concerning the nature of reality. The Romantic conceit of subjective identification revolves around the idea that by recapturing the spirit of an earlier, naive self in a poem, that poem would become expressive of a similar truth. The reflective poet, of which Schiller is the self-avowed personification (Pamuk, *The Naive and the Sentimental Novelist* 17), is constantly trying to recreate this sense of communion with the essential nature of things through the medium of his poetry.

It is this principle of creative identification that is put under interrogative pressure in Coetzee's autobiographical fiction, and especially so when we consider the farm as the setting in which the younger self experiences those moments of cosmic affiliation that are so suggestive of the Romantic rapport with the natural environment. “The farm, rather than nature, however regionally defined, is

conceived as the sacral place where the soul can expand in freedom,” writes Coetzee in his appraisal of landscape in South African writing (*White Writing* 180), and it is in returning to the farm that the South African poet experiences “the same intimation of a return to the true self and primitive moral sources that Wordsworth feels in returning to the dales and fells” (180). For Coetzee, as we shall see, the problem with the farm is that the connection which the younger self experiences with the natural environment there is from the outset compromised by a sense of contingency, or a sense of not properly belonging. Coetzee's writing about the farm draws substantially on the Romantic yearning for an ideal version of the self in a natural setting, but the past in which the Romantics locate that self is, for him, already marked by feelings of fraudulence: the desire for “naivety” cannot justify itself by harking back to a memory of pastoral innocence.

2. Wollstonecraft, Wordsworth and the Natural Subject of the Romantics

The figure who best represents the prominent role of nature in the Romantic project of literary self-expression, at least as far as its influence on Coetzee is concerned, is William Wordsworth. Tracing the exact measure of this influence is not an easy task. “There are works of literature whose influence is strong but indirect because it is mediated through the whole of culture rather than immediately through imitation,” writes Coetzee in response to a question from David Attwell concerning his literary forebears; and Wordsworth is the writer he singles out as a prime example of this influence-through-cultural-diffusion: “I see no marks of Wordsworth's style of writing or style of thinking in my own work, yet Wordsworth is a constant presence when I write about human beings and their relations to the natural world” (“An exclusive interview with JM Coetzee”). Despite the intangible form of this influence, we take note that the element in Wordsworth that features most strongly in Coetzee's literary sensibility – the area where it is a “constant presence” – is in his writing about “human beings and their relations to the natural world.” In a different interview, Coetzee tells us that teaching Wordsworth, and *The Prelude* in particular, has had a

significant impact on his understanding of autobiography, on what it means to write autobiography (the other writer that receives special mention is Roland Barthes) (Coetzee and Attwell, “All autobiography is *autre*-biography” 214). From these two telling references we can infer that the point at which Wordsworth's influence is most keenly felt by Coetzee is at the juncture between writing about nature and writing about the self. Or, to put it differently, Coetzee's indebtedness to Wordsworth is most clearly evident at the point in his writing where the aesthetics of representing the natural environment overlaps with the more overtly existential question of what it means to write about the self. What I would like to do in this section, then, is to explore the subjective dynamics of natural representation in the work of Wordsworth, in order to understand better its consequences for Coetzee's writing about the farm in his autobiographical fiction.

For Wordsworth, as for the Romantics more generally, the idea of nature is not a simple matter, and to attempt to define it in any narrow sense would be ill-advised. As a concept it feeds into and sustains a complex network of associated literary themes and concerns. One strand of this network that is especially relevant to my reading of Coetzee – an aspect of it that I touched on briefly in the previous section – is the tradition of pastoralism in English letters. The development of this tradition, with its many twists and turns and its subtle localized variations, is articulated with a great deal of perspicuity by Raymond Williams, who traces its literary origins to ancient bucolic poetry, to Virgil and Theocritus, and before them as far back as Hesiod's *Work and Days*, composed in the ninth century before Christ (Williams, *The Country and the City* 14). An element that provides a measure of continuity to the otherwise multifaceted pastoral tradition is its “note of idealisation” – the sense, as Williams explains, that the natural abundance of the bucolic setting has always been contrasted, as in Hesiod, with “the iron time of modern men, in which labour is necessary and is admired” (17). When we read a Romantic poet like Wordsworth, and we are confronted with the striking self-assurance of his investment in the natural environment, it is important not to lose sight of this note of idealisation that has accompanied the pastoral tradition since its beginnings, and of

the sense of entitlement that it suggests: the belief that the absence of the bounties of nature from general life is due, at least in part, to some error or malignancy on the part of the socio-historical dispensation, and that it is the rightful task of the poet to rediscover, and indeed to embody, the spirit of natural communion that is being threatened by said deprivation.

I mention this historicized view of pastoralism, and its influence on the Romantics, because it provides us with a perspective from which Wordsworth's investment in the natural environment acquires something of an ethical character, in the sense that the poet's search for redemption among the natural scenes of his youth becomes at the same time a search for some kind of communal ideal that falls perennially by the wayside of social realities. In Coetzee's writing about the farm, as we shall see in the next section, the implied moral sanction behind this Romantic gesture of continuity between the self and the natural environment is quite severely compromised, and it becomes necessary to reconsider the terms on which the self might claim any sort of privileged experience of nature. The question of nature thus forms part of a larger complex of meaning in which the creative act of self-expression, on the one hand, and the ethical carriage of the relationship between the individual and his or her social milieu, on the other, are both strongly involved.

It would be disingenuous to suggest, however, that the Romantic preference for natural scenery drew its impetus exclusively from the tradition of pastoralism. On a more immediate level, the origins of this preference might be traced to any number of literary sources. Madame De Staël locates it in Germany, where the harsh climate compels the independent figure of the poet to seek personal transcendence⁴⁵; Goethe's young Werther finds in the natural landscape an ideal companion for his violently fluctuating emotions⁴⁶; and the widely influential writings of Rousseau, as we have seen, is full of imagery involving the ideal existence of primitive man in his natural

⁴⁵ Brix, "L'image du Nord chez Mme De Staël et la fondation du romantisme français", 187, 2002.

⁴⁶ Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, 1774.

environment⁴⁷ (see chapter one, section 1 – “Coetzee, Rousseau and the Problem of the Self”). The source I would like to single out for special consideration here is Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Short Residence in Sweden* – not least because it speaks to the emergence of the taste, in Romantic literature, for scenes that evoke an experience of the sublime, and thus provides us with a key to understanding the importance of this concept for a Romantic, and especially a Wordsworthian, approach to nature.

Richard Holmes has pointed out the fascination that Wollstonecraft's Scandinavian correspondence held for the younger generation of English writers at the time, a list that includes Coleridge, Southey, Hazlitt and Wordsworth (Introduction 36). “*A Short Residence*,” writes Holmes, “may be said to have entered into the literary mythology of Romanticism within a single generation”:

Its combination of progressive social views – Wollstonecraft's “favourite subject of contemplation, the future improvement of the world” – with melancholy self-revelation and heart-searching, came to have an almost symbolic force within that extraordinary circle of poets, travellers, philosophers and autobiographers. (Holmes, Introduction 41)

Wollstonecraft's account of her journey contains many scenes that are reminiscent of images which would later become familiar in Wordsworth's poetry. Notable among these are her descriptions of a cataract outside Frederikstad in Norway – a “sublime object” that raises in her “tumultuous emotions” and turns her mind to thoughts of eternity (Wollstonecraft, *A Short Residence* 153) – and another one outside Trollhättan that likewise elicits intimations of a “solitary sublimity” (160).⁴⁸ One moment that resonates quite strongly with the image of nature as it would appear later in Wordsworth's poetry takes place while Wollstonecraft is staying in the coastal town of Tønsberg. She has been detained there for some time (98), and makes use of the opportunity to avail herself of

⁴⁷ Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi des hommes*, 1755.

⁴⁸ Richard Holmes adds these vivid descriptions of waterfalls to the long list of possible sources for the sacred river in Coleridge's *Xanadu* (“Kubla Khan”): “[I]t is hard not to believe that the great echo-chamber of Coleridge's mind did not half-hear those Scandinavian waters amidst so many others” (Holmes, Introduction 40).

the “beauty of the season” (99) and of the pleasing natural scenery that surrounds her there.

Reclining by the seashore, she is lulled into a state of reverie: “Every thing seemed to harmonize into tranquillity,” she writes:

[E]ven the mournful call of the bittern was in cadence with the tinkling bells on the necks of the cows, that, pacing slowly one after the other, along an inviting path in the vale below, were repairing to the cottages to be milked. With what ineffable pleasure have I not gazed – and gazed again, losing my breath through my eyes – my very soul diffused itself in the scene – and, seeming to become all senses, glided in the scarcely-agitated waves, melted in the freshening breeze, or, taking its flight with fairy wing, to the misty mountains which bounded the prospect, fancy tript over new lawns, more beautiful even than the lovely slopes on the winding shore before me. – I pause, again breathless, to trace, with renewed delight, sentiments which entranced me, when, turning my humid eyes from the expanse below to the vault above, my sight pierced by the fleecy clouds that softened the azure brightness; and, imperceptibly recalling the reveries of childhood, I bowed before the awful throne of my Creator, whilst I rested on its footstool. (Wollstonecraft, *A Short Residence* 110)

What is striking about this rather “empurpled” passage (Holmes, Introduction 38) is the balance that it achieves between the calm homeliness of the pastoral imagery – “the tinkling bells on the necks of the cows ... repairing to the cottages to be milked”, the “inviting path in the vale below”, the “scarcely-agitated waves” – and those aspects which obtrude upon the scene more sharply and imbue it with a sense of the sublime: the “mournful call of the bittern”, the “misty mountains which bounded the prospect”, the “sight pierced” by the clouds in the “vault above”. About the sublime features of this passage, and about the way in which it foreshadows Wordsworth's treatment of the natural environment, we might remark on a number of things. Firstly, we notice that the arrival of the sublime, in the schematics of the scene, occurs along a vertical axis. Wollstonecraft turns her eyes from the “expanse below to the vault above”, and it is in this upwards movement that her prone observations are “pierced” by impressions that culminate in a reverential gesture before the

“awful throne of [her] Creator”. The thrilled sensation (“I pause, again breathless, to trace, with renewed delight”) that is thus induced by a move from a horizontal to a vertical plane underscores the Burkean origins of the notion of the sublime at work in Wollstonecraft's writing: the perception of visual grandeur, which might, under less picturesque circumstances, impress upon the human instinct for self-preservation and elicit a terrified response, produces here instead an overwhelming and altogether exquisite sense of astonishment and awe.⁴⁹ Without going too deeply into the visual schematics of the sublime, and at the risk of running ahead of myself, it is worth mentioning that Coetzee has written about this peculiarly European configuration of the sublime, with its emphasis on verticality, or on the vertiginous aspect of landscape, and about how this topographical preference precluded the sublime from gaining a foothold in a South African literary aesthetic, where it is the vast, flat expanses of the interior, and of the Karoo especially, that makes the strongest claim on those feelings which would speak to the profound and the eternal in human experience – “feelings such as fear and ecstasy, and values such as transcendence and unattainability” (Coetzee, *White Writing* 54).

The second facet of Wollstonecraft's passage that draws our attention relates to the balance that it achieves between these two contrasting aspects of the natural environment, i.e. the pastoral and the sublime. Into her description of the scene, Wollstonecraft slips the observation that it called to mind similar dream-like moments from her youth: “and, *imperceptibly recalling the reveries of childhood*, I bowed before the awful throne of my Creator” (*A Short Residence* 110, my emphasis). It is this gesture of childhood reminiscence, I think, that situates the passage squarely in a Romantic idiom, and it does so by creating a condition (a condition in the form of a precedent) in which the homely and the unearthly (or the pastoral and the sublime) may occupy the same subjective moment without threatening the integrity of the experience. Wollstonecraft is able to find pleasure and fulfilment in this latticework of contrasting natural impressions, in other words, because there is a

⁴⁹ My thoughts concerning the sublime here derive from Edmund Burke's *On the Sublime and Beautiful*. See especially Section VII, “Of the Sublime.”

thread that runs from the moment of writing (“I pause, again breathless, to trace, with renewed delight”), through the actual experience (“sentiments which entranced me”) and all the way back to a subjective origin that precedes the eventualities of the moment (“the reveries of childhood”).

The word on which the functioning of this conceptual unity depends, in this case, is “imperceptibly”. If one looks at it again – “*imperceptibly* recalling the reveries of childhood” – it becomes more and more evident that “imperceptibly” is doing some rather complicated work in that sentence. It has the implication that the process of recollection is a gradual one – that the memories of childhood settle into place seamlessly, without causing a disturbance – but even more significantly, it distinguishes Wollstonecraft's process of recollection from the sensory reality of the moment: the perceived and the *im*-perceived. What the word thus appears to signal is the process by which the sensual input from the natural environment, in all its bewildering diversity, converges in a subjective framework that is able to hold it all together, or that enables Wollstonecraft's sense that “every thing seemed to harmonize into tranquility” (*A Short Residence* 110). The passage thus creates a deliberate form of association between Wollstonecraft's sense of self and those impressions which derive from the natural environment – an association that is integral rather than fortuitous, and on which the cohesion of her experience of the natural world depends.

In a passage that follows closely on the one mentioned above, Wollstonecraft describes a moment that reinforces this spirit of accord between the self and the natural environment – a spirit that would soon also become characteristic of Wordsworth's poetry. The passage occurs while Wollstonecraft is out rowing on a boat in the bay at Tønsberg, accompanied by a pregnant companion:

[M]y train of thinking kept time, as it were, with the oars, or I suffered the boat to be carried along by the current, indulging a pleasing forgetfulness, or fallacious hopes. – How fallacious! yet, without hope, what is to sustain life, but the fear of annihilation –

the only thing of which I have ever felt a dread – I cannot bear to think of being no more – of losing myself – though existence is often but a painful consciousness of misery; nay, it appears to me impossible that I should cease to exist, or that this active, restless spirit, equally alive to joy and sorrow, should only be organized dust – ready to fly abroad the moment the spring snaps, or the spark goes out, which kept it together. Surely something resides in this heart that is not perishable – and life is more than a dream. (Wollstonecraft, *A Short Residence* 112)

Coetzee has pointed out how, in Romantic schemes of representation, “[b]odies of still water lend themselves to metaphors of thinking” (*White Writing* 46), and indeed it seems as if Wollstonecraft's reflection on her own mortality here sustains the contemplative posture that is associated with calm surface water (especially so when we consider that she has just described the bay at Tønsberg, on which she is currently rowing, as “scarcely-agitated”, *A Short Residence* 110). The rhythms of her thought reflect the movement of the boat on the water: ordered and in “train” with the regular dippings of the oar, or free-flowing and speculative when the boat is set loose on the current. The untethered sensation of drifting freely on the water induces in her a feeling of dread when it calls up the thought that she will one day be “cease to exist” – that she will “lose” herself – but then she finds reassurance in the belief that there is something in her that is “not perishable,” or that connects her to a force that is larger than her own self. The tranquil waters of the bay thus become a kind of scenic correlative for a moment of cognition that begins with a hyper-awareness of the self, and an attendant premonition of the loss of that self, before moving on to an affirmation of the connection that exists between the self and a more pervasive, more diffuse reality: a sense of the eternal. Even in its more unsettling moments (thoughts of annihilation, thoughts of human life as nothing more than “organized dust”), Wollstonecraft's description suggests an organic connection between the realm of nature and the individual self, or between the subject of contemplation and the subject who contemplates. Coetzee reveals his concern in these matters when he points to “the near absence of surface water on the South African plateau” as one of the features that compromise an integral relationship between the self and the natural environment in South African writing (*White Writing*,

46). The absence of this naturally reflective medium, he writes, creates a “lacuna in the repertoire of the artist” – the artist who has been weaned on European models of representation – and disables the possibility of carrying on a meaningful dialogue with the land (46).

Now, if we move on to Wordsworth, we discover that there is a passage in *The Prelude* in which many of these conceptual strands that emerge from Wollstonecraft's descriptions of nature are woven together, and in which the relationship between the self and nature, as it is made manifest in Romantic writing, begins to assume a more tangible force. The passage I have in mind is the boat scene from Book I of *The Prelude*. The young boy Wordsworth, while on holiday in the village of Patterdale, goes rambling along the shore of the lake one evening and comes across “A Skiff that to a Willow tree was tied/Within a rocky Cave” (Wordsworth, *The Prelude* lines 374-375). Without giving it a moment's thought, and being led only by “Nature” (line 372), he unloosens the skiff from the tree and rows out onto the lake. It was, he says, “an act of stealth/And troubled pleasure” (line 361), and indeed one would be able to read the passage quite productively as an instance of confessional writing, but I would like to focus here instead on the peculiar shaping influence which the natural surroundings have on the psyche of the young poet. At first the scene that surrounds him is placid and calmly beautiful, albeit tinged with a sense of the ethereal:

The moon was up, the Lake was shining clear
 Among the hoary mountains; from the Shore
 I push'd, and struck the oars and struck again
 In cadence, and my little Boat mov'd on
 Even like a Man who walks with stately step
 Though bent on speed. It was an act of stealth
 And troubled pleasure; not without the voice
 Of mountain-echoes did my Boat move on,
 Leaving behind her still on either side
 Small circles glittering idly in the moon,
 Until they melted all into one track

Of sparkling light. ...

(Wordsworth, *The Prelude* lines 383-394)

Again, as in Wollstonecraft, we notice the emphasis that is placed on the rhythmic motion of the oars, striking and striking again, “in cadence,” carrying the solitary figure of the boy safely away from the shore and deeper onto the still waters of the lake. The artistry of the passage is such, however, that we are able to discern the early signs of a quickening in these measured depictions of the movement of the little boat, or a foreshadowing of the visitation that is about to befall young Wordsworth. The image around which these foreshadowings accumulate is the image of the mountain. In line with the Romantic visual scheme mentioned earlier, in which vertical surfaces are associated with sublime impressions, the presence of the mountain in the passage figures as a force of disturbance in the otherwise tranquil scene. In the second quoted line, for example (line 384), the “hoary mountains” are juxtaposed quite distinctly with the clearly-shining lake. This effect is intensified by the shift in tone that accompanies the first part of the line – the audible lowering of “Among”, and its prolonged assonance with “hoary” and “mountain” – before the semicolon abruptly closes off the image. The mountain also brings about the understated shift in mood that occurs through the repetition, in lines 386 and 390, of the phrase that describes the “boat moving on”. In the first instance, the “little Boat mov'd on” in “cadence” (line 386), and the image is associated with the sure purpose of a man “who walks with stately step” (387). Wordsworth's rowing, in this instance, happens in accordance with a set purpose, a kind of secure carrying out of his desire to sample the mildly transgressive pleasure of going out on the lake in a purloined skiff. This configuration of his activity occurs against the backdrop of the silent, accommodating lake, and is in fact goaded on by the natural environment, with the moonlight “glittering idly” (line 392) on the surface water and leaving a track behind him, as if to point the way. In the second occurrence of the phrase, however, the presence of the mountain is superimposed over his activity and becomes a kind of portentous reminder that all is not what it seems: “not without the voice/Of mountain-echoes did my Boat move on” (lines 389-390). The visual schematics of the passage, in other

words, is organized in such a way that a subtle link is established between these two contrasting aspects of the natural environment. The inviting, familiar scene of the moonlit lake provides a passage for the young poet's encounter with nature in its wilder, more disturbing form.

The passage culminates in a sudden intrusion of the sublime on the scene, in the form of a cliff (a “huge” cliff) that rears its head between the rower and his unspoilt view of the stars (Wordsworth, *The Prelude* lines 405-412). The effect of this confrontation with the sublime on the boy is rather drastic. He rows back to the shore with “trembling hands” (line 412) and for some days afterwards he feels himself at a loss to form any coherent thoughts. Instead, Wordsworth tells us, his brain “Work'd with a dim and undetermined sense/Of unknown modes of being” (lines 419-420), and:

[H]uge and mighty Forms that do not live
Like living men mov'd slowly through my mind
By day and were the trouble of my dreams.

(Wordsworth, *The Prelude* lines 425-427)

The upshot of the episode, we are made to understand, is that it gave the young boy a sense of the eternal, or put him in touch with a transcendent force that supersedes the “vulgar” world of man (Wordsworth, *The Prelude* line 435) and “giv'st to forms and images a breath/And everlasting motion” (lines 430-431). Primed by the promptings of nature, then, the young Wordsworth has been led to a climactic moment in which his soul became infused with a knowledge of the deep-seated harmony of things. The peculiarly Romantic way in which the passage configures this harmony is as a sense of correspondence between the aesthetically pleasing forms of nature – the accommodating surface of the lake, in which the boy finds a reflection of his own desires – and the sublime energies that supply these forms with an enduring, or transcendent value – the looming cliff that rises like a sentinel from the subtly pervasive mountain-echoes encircling the scene. Consequently, the boy's mind is shaped into a receptive instrument for the “dark/Invisible

workmanship that reconciles/Discordant elements, and makes them move/In one society” (lines 352-355). What we have here, in other words, is a description of the moment in which the young poet receives the ability that will allow him, in later experience, to harmonize the “perceived” and the “im-perceived”. The point is to notice the extent to which Wordsworth's poetic intelligence, semantically as well as syntactically, corroborates the overarching theme of *The Prelude*, in which nature (or “Nature”) is figured as both the origin and the medium for the poet's ability to synthesize the diversity of his experience into a subjectively coherent whole. The passage thus becomes an evocation of – and indeed a key moment in – the Romantic tendency to connect the literary expression of the self to an originative moment in a childhood experience of nature. “Fair seed-time had my soul,” writes Wordsworth elsewhere in the book, “and I grew up/Foster'd alike by beauty and by fear” (lines 305-306).

The strong sense of harmony between the self and nature that informs *The Prelude*, and the conceptual moves which link that harmony to the creative formation of the youthful mind through the agency of the natural environment, finds a memorable expression in another of Wordsworth's poems, namely “Tintern Abbey”. In that poem, there are two Wordsworths: Wordsworth the poet, reminiscing from the present of the poetic discourse, and Wordsworth the young boy, bounding through the landscape with “glad animal movements” (Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey” line 75), a feral creature who enjoys direct, unmediated correspondence with his natural environment. The boy becomes, in Wordsworth's depiction of him, an unreflective node of perception who feeds off the “colours” and “forms” (line 80) of nature. His passage through the landscape carries a sense of immediacy and urgency: the “sounding cataract/[haunts] him like a passion” (line 77). The “sounding cataract” – which is, as we have seen, a familiar image in the Romantic archive – returns as a point of reference in Coetzee's *Boyhood*, but for now it is enough to emphasize that Wordsworth uses the figure of his younger self in nature to provide a subjective point of departure for the possibility of unified consciousness that the poem wishes to actualize from within the

present reflective moment. He acknowledges that he “cannot paint/What then [he] was” (“The Prelude” line 76), which leads us to understand that the young boy is embodied in the poem not as an external figure, a metaphor for something else, but rather as a point of origin for the grand project of subjective unification that underscores the redemptive features of Romantic poetry. Wordsworth’s own presence in the poem is a continuity of the young boy’s experience of nature: just as he cannot “paint” (line 76) his younger self, he does not have access to an objective point of reference outside the poem from which to articulate his own subjective being in language. The boy’s communion with the force of nature is thus not merely an emblem or metaphor for the possibility of redemption – it is rather a subjective position from which the descriptive language of the poem emerges, organically.

3. “Tree-names but no trees yet”

It is typical of Coetzee’s writing to find traces of the Romantic heritage scattered about, clues or half-clues which may lead somewhere, or nowhere, or which may be assembled and reconstructed in our reading of him to reveal aspects of his work which would otherwise remain submerged.

Disgrace is perhaps the one book where the traces of Romanticism coalesce most readily to point us toward a post-pastoral reading, a reading in which the dystopian aspects of the narrative engage most clearly with what Rita Barnard calls “the passing of a rural way of life” (“J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* and the South African Pastoral” 203). In her reading Barnard argues that the novel performs a sociolinguistic interrogation of the pastoral mode (a mode that has its roots, in South Africa, in the tradition of colonialism),⁵⁰ and remarks on the abject failure of Lurie’s attempts to

⁵⁰ One of the striking examples that Barnard analyses is the conversation between Lurie and Petrus which takes place after Lucy’s rape – a conversation in which the old patterns of question-answer, and its rootedness in a master-slave relationship that underscores the pastoral in a South African context (or a *baas* and *klaas* relationship, to call up the derogatory Afrikaans colloquialism describing the relationship between farmer and farm worker) is subverted by the semantic indeterminacy of Petrus’s locutions:

He strolls over, exchanges greetings. “You must have heard, we had a big robbery on Wednesday while you were away.”

“transfer the Romantic sublime to an African landscape” in his Mont Blanc-lecture (Barnard, “*Disgrace* and the South African Pastoral” 216; Coetzee, *Disgrace* 22).⁵¹ Barnard makes the striking observation that the ending of the novel suggests a mode of being that utterly transcends the tired and morally bankrupt conventions of South African pastoralism, embedded as it is in notions of “kinship, labor, ownership or debts” (“*Disgrace* and the South African Pastoral” 222), thus suggesting that the Romantic ideal of a transcendent reality (or, more precisely, of a self that is aligned to the transcendent through the agency of the sublime) finds an unexpected purchase in the novel.

I will return to these thoughts in the concluding section of this chapter, but my focus here turns rather to Coetzee's autobiographical fiction, and to the many suggestive indications that are to be found in it of Coetzee's preoccupation with the literary afterlife of Romanticism. The first lines of *Boyhood* present us with an example:

They live on a housing estate outside the town of Worcester, between the railway and the National Road. The streets of the estate have tree-names but no trees yet. Their address is No. 12 Poplar Avenue. All the houses on the estate are new and identical. They are set in large pots of red clay earth where nothing grows, separated by wire fences. (Coetzee, *Boyhood* 1)

The book begins by delineating the topographical features of the environment in which the protagonist will have some of his early formative experiences. The description contains a few

“Yes,” says Petrus, “I heard. It is very bad, a very bad thing. But you are all right now.”

Is he all right? Is Lucy all right? Is Petrus asking a question? It does not sound like a question, but he cannot take it otherwise, not decently. The question is, what is the answer? (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 114)

⁵¹ There is a great deal to be said about the Romantic resonances in *Disgrace*. In my Masters thesis, “Embedded Subjectivity in the Work of J.M. Coetzee” (Stellenbosch University, 2007), I devoted a chapter to it, and in particular to tracing the way in which Coetzee, in *Disgrace*, inscribes subjective experience in an aesthetic structure that derives its co-ordinates from a Romantic tension between the ideal and the real – a tension that figures predominantly in Lurie's lecture on Wordsworth's *The Prelude*. In this thesis, however, my aim is to explore these questions more explicitly in the light of the question of selfhood that emerge from Coetzee's autobiographical fictions.

interesting peculiarities. Of these, perhaps the most striking, at least for the purpose of my argument, is the observation that the streets of the estate “have tree-names but no trees yet.” In addition to surface waters and mountain peaks, Coetzee suggests in *White Writing*, trees are a feature of the environment that provide a “locus of meanings as well as an element of construction” in traditional Romantic representations of the landscape (*White Writing* 46). Trees, in Coetzee's view, are one of those focal points in the natural world that enable the artist to carry on a dialogue with the land, or that aid in the creation of a sustained sense of communion between the self and his or her environment. Thus, while the enumeration of the protagonist's physical address (“No. 12 Poplar Avenue”) serves the general narrative purpose of creating for the reader a clearly identifiable sense of place (“In poetry the action can take place everywhere and nowhere ... Prose, on the other hand, seems naggingly to demand a specific setting,” opines John in *Youth*, 62), we can also read into its specific form here (“the streets have tree-names but no trees”, Coetzee, *Boyhood* 1) a kind of veiled allusion to the post-Romantic ambit of Coetzee's autobiographical project. That is to say, while the reference to trees calls on the Romantic, and explicitly Wordsworthian tradition of setting the scene via recourse to the natural markers of the landscape – a convention that enables an immediate sense of communion between the poet-self and his natural environment⁵² – the way in which these signifiers are stripped of their potency in the opening lines of *Boyhood* is at the same time an indication of the foreignness of that tradition in the literary milieu where it has taken up abode. In short, it is as if Coetzee signposts the Romantic tradition of locating the self in nature, but then proceeds to neuter that tradition by voiding it of substance and by explicitly decontextualizing it. What if, instead of describing the streets that have “tree-names but no trees yet,” he had begun his book by writing about the mountain ranges that encircle the town of Worcester? Or what if he had moved the initial formative descriptions of early childhood to Cape Town, a habitat to which

⁵² Compare, for example, the opening lines of *The Prelude*, in which Wordsworth hails “the gentle breeze/That blows from the green fields and from the clouds” (lines 1-2), naming it as a “Messenger” and a “Friend” that welcomes him back into the fold of nature from which he has too long been absent (lines 5-9).

the young protagonist believes himself – in no uncertain terms – to be better suited?⁵³ These are of course purely rhetorical questions, but they bear out the point that Coetzee's autobiographical venture appears from the start to be situating itself self-consciously in a literary mode that draws on the ideals of Romanticism, with its promise of a unified sense of self that is achieved through communion with the natural environment, but is at the same time quite resolute in its refusal to grant those ideals any tangible purchase in his imaginative exploration of childhood in small-town South Africa.

Another, less oblique reference to Romanticism occurs later in the book. John's father has given him a collection of Wordsworth's poems to read and quotes from "Tintern Abbey": "The sounding cataract haunted me like a passion," he says (Coetzee, *Boyhood* 105). John is not impressed by his father's enthusiasm for nature poetry. He finds it hard to imagine his father as having a passion for anything at all: when he thinks of him as a boy, all he can imagine him doing is "joking and laughing and smoking cigarettes behind the bushes" (105). Yet it is through this uninspiring figure of his father that John has access to the place he loves more than any other place on earth:

Voëlfontein, the Coetzee family farm, near Merweville in the Karoo. At a first glance, one might infer from the Romantic trace in this exchange that John associates Romantic nature poetry with the vulgar image of his father, and consequently as an insufficient carrier for what he believes to be his own unique passion for the farm and its dramatic, sprawling landscape. On the other hand, we have seen that there is in Coetzee's critical writing about the representation of the farm in South African literature a recognition that it draws into itself "many of the energies of European Romanticism, many of the feelings of cosmic identification and engulfment originally attributed to the relation not of farmer to farm but of man to the wilderness, to forest and moor and mountain" (Coetzee, *White Writing* 90), and furthermore that these energies feed into the notion of the farm novel as a site for

⁵³ "There are ants in Worcester, flies, plagues of fleas. Worcester is only ninety miles from Cape Town, yet everything is worse here. He has a ring of fleabites above his socks, and scabs where he has scratched. Some nights he cannot sleep for the itching. He does not see why they ever had to leave Cape Town." (Coetzee, *Boyhood* 2)

working out “the problematics of consciousness” (91). If we bear in mind this critical awareness of the farm novel's indebtedness to the Romantic tradition, then we might consider the Romantic trace in the passage quoted above – the offhanded reference to the “sounding cataract” (Coetzee, *Boyhood* 105) – as a signal that what is at stake for Coetzee in writing about the farm is still “the problematics of consciousness”, but that these problematics are being worked out in a structure of representation that draws on the idea of the text as a system of layered meanings and assembled traces rather than as the projection of a unified, linear consciousness.

The first mention of the farm in Coetzee's autobiographical fiction occurs early on in *Boyhood*, when we learn that John loves listening to the stories that come from it:

He is never happier than when listening to these stories, to the teasing and laughter that go with them. His friends do not come from families with stories like these. That is what sets him apart: the two farms behind him, his mother's farm, his father's farm, and the stories of those farms. Through the farms he is rooted in the past; through the farms he has substance. (Coetzee, *Boyhood* 22)

Here, the farm supplies a sense of historical depth to the narrative that John constructs around his understanding of himself.⁵⁴ It provides a point of origin for the imaginative activity – the telling of

⁵⁴ In “The Dertigers and the *plaasroman*: two brief perspectives on Afrikaans literature,” Gerrit Olivier makes the point that the tradition of farm writing in South Africa has, since its early beginnings, expressed an ambiguity in the relationship between the farm dweller and the land. The fear of dispossession, originating in memories of the Anglo-Boer War, meant that even in its early evocations as a celebratory symbol of occupation and stewardship, the farm was “a place of triumph as well as vulnerability, a place of happiness as well as anxiety” (Olivier, “The Dertigers and the *plaasroman*” 317). By creating for John a sense of rootedness in “stories” about the farm, and by situating that very rootedness in a structure of meaning that compromises its expression, or that introduces a note of dissonance in the promise of spiritual fulfilment that it contains, Coetzee positions his writing about the farm as a subtle continuation or elaboration of the tradition of the *plaasroman*. Olivier also notes the contribution that Coetzee has made, in *White Writing*, to our understanding of the genre, namely that it “represents a creative and symbolic appropriation; that it is, therefore, never simply a descriptive genre” (Olivier, “The Dertigers and the *plaasroman*” 316). The specific form of Coetzee's contribution derives from his analysis of the farm novels of C.M. Van den Heever, whose creative challenge, as Olivier paraphrases it, was to find a way “to generate an ideological justification for ownership of the farm” (315) – a challenge that culminates in the farmer-protagonist “reaching a state of awareness in which Romantic notions of nature are combined with the experience of a symbiotic relationship between nature and agricultural endeavour” (316). It is thus no accident that Coetzee's evocations of the farm – a space, as Olivier notes, that has retained “its potential to be a site of symbolic contestation” in South African literature (317) – continues to draw on Romantic notions of the relationship between the self and nature,

stories – through which John elects to articulate his emotional affinities. Similarly to the river Derwent that winds its way through Wordsworth's memories of infancy and feeds his early creative promptings⁵⁵, we have in this passage a suggestion that the farm is the early beginnings of John's narrative conditioning. There is, however, a paradox that inheres in his relation to the farm. That which gives him “substance” is simultaneously that which “sets him apart” from his peers: the farm becomes a figure for the aesthetic predisposition that gives life to his interiority while at the same time compromising the expression of that inner being. The figure of the farm, even while it serves as a symbolic point of origin for the subjective being that finds expression in the narrative, already sets in motion a discrepancy between the experience of subjectivity and the articulation of that experience.

The early suggestion of dissonance in John's relation to the farm finds a fuller expression when he visits Voëlfontein for the Christmas holidays (Coetzee, *Boyhood* 79), and the reader discovers that the farm comprises various layers of meaning. There is the natural landscape, the rocks and the animals and the dusty plains, but overlaying that landscape is a socio-political dispensation of family members and farm workers, sheep shearers and girl cousins, a network of relationships that spans over the palimpsest of nature and troubles the unsullied communion with the Karoo landscape that the young John wishes to claim for himself. He is derisive of the “tame patter of genteel conversation” (78) which he must endure in order to go to the farm, but endure it he must, “because there is no place on earth he loves more or can imagine loving more” (79). Notably, it is the natural aspect of the farm that becomes the object of his love:

[H]e loves every stone of it, every bush, every blade of grass, loves the birds that give it its name, birds that as dusk falls gather in their thousands in the trees around the fountain, calling to each other, murmuring, ruffling their feathers,

even while Coetzee's writing strongly resists the ideology of ownership that the Romantic gesture of assimilation with the land has traditionally fed into, in the genre of the *plaasroman*.

⁵⁵ See Wordsworth, *The Prelude* lines 271-304.

settling for the night. It is not conceivable that another person loves the farm as he does. (Coetzee, *Boyhood* 80)

John's secret love of the farm is disturbed, however, when it is compared to the experience of the farmworkers, people like Outa Jaap who "[knows] more about it, about sheep, veld, weather, than the newcomer ever will" (Coetzee, *Boyhood* 84), and Freek, who cycles all the way to town and back and who seems to belong there "more securely than the Coetzees do – if not to Voëlfontein, then to the Karoo" (87). Similarly, when a band of sheep shearers descends on the farm, John reflects on the mystery of their origin, asking himself if there is "a country deeper even than the country of Voëlfontein, a heartland even more secluded from the world" (93). The presence of these socially ostracized and politically excluded farm workers, who seem tied to the land in a way that surpasses John's wildest ambitions, raises the notion that the farm itself is a structural imposition on the Karoo landscape, and that there is a submerged layer of meaning which will remain forever closed off to the reflective subject who wishes to establish unity with nature through the mediated space of the farm. What emerges from these passages is that the figure of the farm occupies a rift between John's desire to unite with the landscape and the realization that his desire emerges from a space that does not quite conform to the quasi-mythical status he imagines for it. Whereas Wordsworth reads the possibility of personal redemption into a past where the subject is so close to nature as to become one with it, the text of *Boyhood* gives us instead a subject whose desire to articulate himself as a child of nature is from the outset the product of a contested, mediated space. The farm situates itself in the wake of a pastoral tradition that reaches back to Romanticism, but it also stands in the text as a figure for the process of displaced consciousness.

4. A Detour in the Country of Baboons

The space of the Karoo farm is revisited time and again in Coetzee's writing. In his early novel, *In the Heart of the Country* (1976), the farm becomes the setting, or we might even say the theatre, for

the protagonist's intense and hallucinatory attempt to establish some form of personal identity against the impervious backdrop of nature. The farm landscape in that book is unforgiving at best, yet it is precisely its bareness, its naked insistence, that compels Magda to conceive of herself as "a poetess of interiority" (Coetzee, *In the Heart of the Country* 35). The farm thus overturns the facile identification with nature inherited from the Romantic tradition, but even while it does so, it compels the subject to work out a form of inner redemption for herself in the face of the collapse of the unified sense of self accompanying that tradition. Magda's struggle, in this sense, becomes an articulation of Coetzee's reconfiguration of the tenets of Romanticism in a poststructuralist milieu, taking the Karoo farm as its cohesive aesthetic manifestation.

The emphasis on the space of the farm in Coetzee's early fiction deepens our understanding of the influential role it plays in the development of the young writer's literary sensibility. In *Summertime*, when John returns to Voëlfontein, we learn that what the farm evokes in him most strongly is a sense of melancholy. One evening he goes for a walk through the veld with his cousin, Margot, and while they are reminiscing about their childhood on the farm he compares his feeling to the melancholy of a baboon at sunset, as recorded by Eugène Marais:

'...I understand what the old male baboon was thinking as he watched the sun go down, the troop leader, the one Marais was closest to. *Never again*, he was thinking: *Just one life and then never again. Never, never, never.* That is what the Karoo does to me too. It fills me with melancholy. It spoils me for life.'

She still does not see what baboons have to do with the Karoo or their childhood years, but she is not going to let on.

'This place wrenches my heart,' he says. 'It wrenched my heart when I was a child, and I have never been right since.' (Coetzee, *Summertime* 97)

Margot's puzzlement about the baboons is understandable; it is indeed a peculiar allusion to make at that moment in their conversation. The preceding passages suggest that John is unburdening himself

to her – that is to say, he is trying to speak his heart, or referring to a time when such communication was still possible for him⁵⁶ – he is unburdening the impossibility of unburdening – and it is not immediately obvious why he would choose to associate his own melancholy with that of a baboon. Readers who are familiar with Coetzee’s attitude toward animals will perhaps not be surprised at John’s identification with the mute baboon, and it is worth noting that a few pages earlier, around the dinner table, there has been talk of his budding vegetarianism and the concomitant outsidership that this implies in the hearty Karoo tradition of mutton eating (Coetzee, *Summertime* 93)⁵⁷, but we may also infer another meaning from the association of the protagonist’s melancholy with the baboon’s emergent sense of mortality. It is a meaning that derives from my reading of the farm and its landscape as a reconfiguration of the Romantic conception of nature, and it will become clear if we consider the figure of the baboon as a recurrent topos in South African letters.⁵⁸

In order to explain the significance of John's reference, it is necessary here to refer at some length to a series of representations of baboons in South African literature. The point, as we shall see, is that John is situating himself according to a localized version of those conceptual moves in the Romantic tradition that would create a sense of association between the self and the sublime aspects of the natural environment. To begin with, I would like to consider two anthologized poems about baboons, poems that are revealing for the conceptual shift in their treatment of the subject. The first

⁵⁶ I have already discussed this moment in a different context, in the chapter on confession. See chapter one, section 4 – “Quaquaqu.”

⁵⁷ In “Converging Convictions: Coetzee and his Characters on Animals”, Karen Dawn and Peter Singer argue quite convincingly that the attitude of Coetzee’s characters toward animals (autobiographical and otherwise) reveals a belief in vegetarianism and the ethical treatment of non-human beings that is shared by the author himself.

⁵⁸ I am especially indebted to Mike Marais for pointing to the conceptual significance of the figure of the baboon in an article on Justin Cartwright’s *White Lightning*. In the article, entitled “‘We know bugger-all about baboons’: Nature and exile in Justin Cartwright’s *White Lightning*”, Marais demonstrates how the exchanges between the protagonist and his pet baboon, Piet, illuminate the underlying conceptual problematics of subjective identification. Marais pays considerable attention to the apparent inscrutability of the baboon, and argues that the consequent failure of subjective self-knowledge (a ‘sublime’ experience, “‘We know bugger-all about baboons’” 83) occasioned by this inscrutability is at the same time the condition of possibility for subjective redemption, in the form of an experience of that which exceeds the subject. Cartwright's novel, I might add, presents an account of the problems of identifying with the South African milieu that resonates quite strongly, in its spirit of disillusionment, with Coetzee's melancholy sense of alienation on the farm.

poem, “Bongwi”, by Kingsley Fairbridge (1885–1924), situates the baboon as the denizen of a landscape that draws substantially from a Romantic notion of nature as a sublime space:

Upon the summit of the height,
 Where only wind-swept lichens grow,
 Bongwi, lit by the dawning-light,
 Watches the plain below.

Fierce eyes, low brow, protruding mouth,
 Short hands that twitch and twitch again,
 The hairy gargoyle of the South –
 A man without a brain;
 Upon the highest krantz he waits
 Dim-lit by golden streak of dawn,
 Guarding the interests of his mates
 Who wreck the fields of corn.

(Fairbridge, “Bongwi” lines 5-16)

The landscape in the poem is threatening, and indeed almost gothic in its portentousness – we are reminded of the boy in “Tintern Abbey”, who experiences nature “more like a man/flying from something that he dreads, than one/who [seeks] the thing he loves” (Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey” lines 71-73) – and the baboon emerges like an avatar from its sublime reaches to wreak havoc on the domesticated space of the farm on the “plain below”. Fairbridge’s poem speaks to the tenuous status of the farm in the wilderness, where the neatly apportioned “mealie-gardens” (“Bongwi” line 17) are under constant threat from an irruption of something savage that emerges from the “open veld” (28), or from nature itself. As such, it betrays an awareness that proprietorship and tilling of the land does not in and of itself secure for the inhabitants of the farm (who are notably absent from the poem) a harmonious, or even a stable relationship with their natural environment.

The last few lines of the poem go a step further in removing from the (absent) farmer his claim of

natural authority over the land. The troop of baboons have “gorg’d” themselves on mealies (“Bongwi” line 27), and they flee in the approaching dawn:

And Bongwi sees. But turns his view –
 Brown-eyed – towards the breaking morn,
 And gazes through the soundless blue,
 The golden distance of the dawn.

(Fairbridge, “Bongwi” lines 29-32)

Disconcertingly, we now discover that the baboon has become the node of perception to which the landscape speaks. Nor is it a wild or savage eye to which the view belongs – it is “Brown-eyed”, familiar, and its gaze is calm. “The hairy gargoyle” (Fairbridge, “Bongwi” line 11), which has been transplanted from the image vault of the Romantic gothic onto a “krantz” (line 13) in (presumably) Fairbridge’s Rhodesia, has all of a sudden asserted itself as an unwitting proprietor of the landscape by virtue of its gaze. Thus the baboon, who enters the scene as a conventional manifestation of the Romantic sublime, interrupting the labour of domestication taking place on the farm below, finds itself transformed all of a sudden into the subjective centre of the poem. It is a transformation that occurs, prosaically, at sunrise.

In the second poem, “The Theology of Bongwi, the Baboon”, by Roy Campbell (1901–1957), we find the baboon trying to come to terms with its newfound agency. Campbell, it must be said, does not appear to have taken too seriously the failure of the South African fauna and flora to accommodate conventional models of Romantic pastoralism. His poem is a satirical representation of primate theology, and it is more concerned with poking fun at the tendency of man to conceive God in his own image than with working out the subjective agency of baboons. Nevertheless, it is quite revealing that it is precisely the baboon that gives body to a scathing (and comical) indictment of the cosmic view that situates man in a privileged relationship with God and thus claims for the

human subject the position of unified being at the centre of meaning. What is revealing about the poem is that it offers no apology or framing device for its straightforward, iambic characterization of the mischievous baboon deity, other than asserting that what we are being presented with is, simply, “the wisdom of the Ape” (Campbell, “The Theology of Bongwi” lines 1-2):

‘Tis God who made me in his shape
 He is a Great Baboon.
 ‘Tis He who tilts the moon askew
 And fans the forest trees,
 The heavens which are broad and blue
 Provide him his trapeze;
 ...
 And when I die, His loving care
 Will raise me from the sod
 To learn the perfect Mischief there,
 The Nimbleness of God.

(Campbell, “The Theology of Bongwi” lines 3-8; 12-16)

Whatever Campbell’s intentions may have been, it is telling that, however rudimentary and lacking in gravitas, the next move in the baboon’s fledgling consciousness, after taking the first step in the direction of subjective agency in Fairbridge’s poem, is to try to work out a cosmic identity for itself. The knowledge of mortality that is evident in the last lines (“And when I die...”) is an important component of cosmic awareness and goes a long way toward explaining the baboon’s desire to posit “God”, as origin and destination of being, in a primate mould.

The mode of consciousness that Campbell projects onto the baboon in his poem is cocksure and naive, which has an interesting double effect. It reveals, on the one hand, the inadequacy of (Western) man’s theological belief system, at least in Campbell’s conception of it, and perhaps specifically the Reformist notion of a personal God, but it also suggests, if I am allowed to invert

the metaphor for a moment, that the baboon is a suitable subject for a commentary on activities that occupy, in Campbell's satirical view, the spectrum of human spiritual preoccupations. The point is that the baboon begins to accrue a certain textured meaning by virtue of its persistence as a metaphor for human affairs. The type of meaning that it accrues is akin to the dawning of realization in Fairbridge's poem, where the baboon as a metaphor for the Romantic sublime begins to approach an awareness of itself as a site of subjectivity, in the same sense that Wordsworth's young boy in "Tintern Abbey" is a site of subjectivity: he is not conscious yet, but he becomes the point of origin for the poetical consciousness that comes after, a mythical site that draws to itself the disparate flux of perceptions and gives them cohesion. The baboon thus becomes at once a figure for the failure of traditional modes of natural (and cosmic) description and the site of possibility for an alternate subjective awareness and consequent codification of the natural world (and of the position of the subject in that world).

Which brings us to Eugène Marais's baboon and the emergence of melancholy, which is the next step in the evolution of the literary baboon and the aspect of its nature that John invokes in his conversation with Margot. Baboons, in Marais, are painfully aware, in their rudimentary fashion, that death circumscribes their existence, that it signals a threshold on the other side of which is something that baboon consciousness cannot comprehend. In the final chapter of Marais' *Burgers van die berge* (which translates, appropriately, as 'citizens of the mountains') we find a moving description of the baboon's confrontation with mortality. The leaders of the troop (Marais calls them the 'council of leaders', *Burgers van die Berge* 156) gather around his hut one night, ominously silent, as if to communicate the occurrence of some "great tragedy" (158). In the morning Marais learns that a number of baboon infants had died during the night, and when he carries away the bodies for examination, one of the mothers trail him. What she wanted, says Marais,

“...was exactly the same thing that the seven leaders wanted who came calling so

unexpectedly in the night. The leaders wanted our help in staving off the imminent death of their little ones – *the imminent death of which in all probability they had been well aware the previous day*. And the mother wanted us to heal her child. *The immense and implacable condition which she had come to know in her environment as death, she wanted changed*. Somewhere in her mind the belief had taken root that these miracle workers with which she had become acquainted might have it in their power to restore life to her child.” (Marais, *Burgers van die berge* 159, my translation, my emphasis)

Marais’ anthropomorphic diction and talent for characterization contribute substantially to the reader’s identification with the baboons, but whether or not we take him at his word regarding their intimations of mortality, it is clear that we have come a long way, in the literary depiction of baboons, from Fairbridge’s “hairy gargoyle” (“Bongwi” line 11) to these respectable citizens of nature. The baboon in Marais has graduated from being a mischievous monkey with a caricatured cosmic awareness (Campbell) to a sentient, solemn creature who despairs at the finitude of life, and even more than that, a creature who experiences these emotions as a natural consequence of its existence in the Southern African landscape, which is its proper “environment”.

When John refers to the melancholy of baboons to describe the effect of the farm landscape on his psyche, therefore, he invokes an alternative evolution of the problematics of consciousness in Southern African literature, one that runs parallel to Romantic notions concerning the role of nature in the formulation of subjective being. What is striking about the figure of the baboon, as I have tried to show here, is the extent to which it continues to function as a metaphor for changing attitudes regarding the role of nature while at the same time resisting inscription into the ideologies which inform those attitudes. Or, to put it differently, the baboon continues to resist the programmatic tendencies of literary appropriation, even while it seems to provide an amenable, home-grown metaphor for those programmes. Or, to put it differently yet, the figure of the baboon is an active metaphor that contributes to and alters the meaning of those literary constructions in

which it finds itself playing a part: the baboon does not remain inert.

The same holds for John's baboon, who emerges from the pages of Eugène Marais,⁵⁹ stares melancholically into the sunset, and receives a refined literary sensibility when its mournful thoughts are voiced in words that remind one of Rilke: "*Never again, he was thinking: Just one life and then never again. Never, never, never*" (Coetzee, *Summertime* 97). These thoughts, projected onto the baboon by John, echo a passage from the ninth of Rilke's *Duino Elegies*:

...Once
for everything, only once. Once and no more. And we, too,
only once. Never again. But to have been,
this once, if only this once:
to have been *of the earth* can never be taken back.

(Rilke, "The Ninth Elegy" lines 13-17)

The baboon's melancholy thus surpasses the primitivistic and rudimentary intuition of death in Eugène Marais' depiction and refines itself into a poetic speculation on the singularity of existence. But it does more than that: it infuses the words of Rilke with its own particularity; it speaks back to the late German Romanticism of Rilke's verse with the plangency and immediacy of its own experience "*of the earth*". The baboon makes an unselfconscious claim for its own environment, the arid landscape of the Karoo farm; it arrives at the problem of the singularity of subjective existence

⁵⁹ The shadow of Eugène Marais that presides over John's affiliation with the baboon reveals an intertextual depth that sustains the strategy of belonging I have been describing here. Dirk Klopper has noted that Marais consciously positioned himself, in the role of Afrikaner, as someone with a native knowledge of the land and a privileged insight into the behaviour of the animals who inhabit that land. He suggests that this constitutes a deliberate inversion of the imperialist trope of the 'wild Boer' and that it implies a realignment of the rational categories of identification which the imperial subject imposes, by way of the Enlightenment, on the colony (Klopper, "Boer, Bushman and Baboon" 15). Elsewhere, in a review of the film *The Guest*, Coetzee writes about Marais's difficulties in negotiating a position for himself in the Afrikaner fold, burdened as he was (according to the popular imagination) by the blight of higher consciousness (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 116-7). Both of these observations revolve around the idea of Marais as someone who stands in a troubled relation to conventional structures of understanding, and suggest that John's purported identification with the baboon (and, by association, with Marais) signals a desire to go beyond the established forms of association that govern life on the farm. Furthermore, we might speculate that John's feelings of melancholy acquire a nuance of meaning that derives from Eugène Marais's failure to find a role for himself in the economy of the relation between the Afrikaner and his land.

along its own trajectory; it insists on the validity of the problematics of its own consciousness. The baboon is insensible to its status as a creature of a lower order in a hierarchy of meaning that posits the human self as the node of subjective authority.

5. The Earth Speaks Its Silence

Jean-François Lyotard points to the emergence of the sublime in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as the condition under which aesthetics asserted its critical rights over the arts in Europe and thus as the condition under which Romanticism came to prevail (“Le sublime et l'avant-garde” 104). He goes on to trace the continued relevance of the sublime for the avant-garde, which breaks, he says, from “the eloquence of Romantic art, but does not reject its fundamental task”, which is “to bear witness to the inexpressible” (104, my translation). The sublime, for Lyotard, is very much a matter of the “here and now”, that is to say, of that which resists reduction to a formal structure of comprehension but insists instead on its own arrival, its own immanence, its own irrefutability (103, 105). Alain Badiou describes a politics of resistance for Lyotard, in broadly Marxist terms, based on this refusal of homogeneity,⁶⁰ but my interest here lies rather in establishing the relevance of this poststructuralist understanding of the sublime for Coetzee’s engagement with the problematics of consciousness in the Karoo landscape.

We have seen, in the presence of the baboon as a kind of literary correlative for the feelings of melancholy which the farm has evoked in John since childhood (“This place wrenches my heart,” he says. ‘It wrenched my heart when I was a child, and I have never been right since,’ Coetzee, *Summertime* 97), that there is indeed an attempt in Coetzee's writing to establish some form of connection between the profundity of his experience and the natural landscape of the farm. We have

⁶⁰ “In ontological terms, the incommensurability of genres of events, the heterogeneousness of what happens, cannot but persist, cannot but insist. The intractable remains intractable, silent under the rule that orders its reduction [i.e. Kapital]” (Badiou, *Pocket Pantheon* 97).

also seen, however, that John is innately aware of the tenuous status of his claims for sublimity when they are set against the realities of daily life on the farm, where his strategies of identification are frequently at odds with the accepted patterns of social behaviour among his family, and where the disenfranchised community of farm workers have a far stronger claim than he has to natural kinship with the land. There is a passage in *Boyhood* that evokes the contradictory experience of self brought about by his predicament, and that suggests the continued influence of the sublime within a structure of meaning that refuses the harmonious sense of being which has been inherited from the Romantic tradition. The passage occurs after a description of a graveyard that lies half a mile from the farmhouse, a graveyard in which the presence of the family patriarch, John's grandfather, still looms large in the form of a marble headstone. There is also, Coetzee tells us, another graveyard on the farm:

On the other side of the road is a second graveyard, without a fence, where some of the grave-mounds are so weathered that they have been reabsorbed into the earth. Here lie the servants and hirelings of the farm, stretching back to Outa Jaap and far beyond. What few gravestones still stand are without names or dates. Yet here he feels more awe than among the generations of Botes clustering around his grandfather. It has nothing to do with spirits. No one in the Karoo believes in spirits. Whatever dies here dies firmly and finally: its flesh is picked off by the ants, its bones are bleached by the sun, and that is that. Yet among these graves he treads nervously. From the earth comes a deep silence, so deep that it could almost be a hum. (Coetzee, *Boyhood* 97)

In line with a tradition that is at least as old as Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm*, Coetzee makes no attempt here to soften or ameliorate the severity of the Karoo environment.⁶¹ Nature does not

⁶¹ Schreiner's novel rejects outright the colonial stereotypes surrounding the kind of story that is appropriate to a Southern African setting ("Such works are best written in Piccadilly or the Strand: there the gifts of the creative imagination, untrammelled by contact with any fact, may spread their wings," she writes in the preface to the novel, xiv), but what I have in mind here concerns especially her treatment of the natural surroundings in which her story is set, namely the Karoo farm. Here, for example, is Schreiner's description of a particularly severe drought:

Man and beast turned their eyes to the pitiless sky, that like the roof of some brazen oven arched overhead. On the farm, day after day, month after month, the water in the dams fell lower and lower; the sheep died in the fields; the cattle, scarcely able to crawl, tottered as they moved from spot to spot in

accept human life warmly into her bosom: she goes to work swiftly and efficiently to strip away the remains of her children. The ants pick clean the bones and the sun bleaches what is left, reducing human existence to an almost mineral form. The flat grave-mounds, which have been “reabsorbed into the earth”, disassociate the scene at once from the patriarchal tradition that is represented by the phallic tombstone presiding over the Coetzee family from the graveyard across the road, as well as from the Romantic visual scheme that would associate sublime feelings with vertical natural features. And yet, the passage resonates with the same kind of primordial energy that we associate with Romantic evocations of the sublime. Like Wordsworth's description of the impact of the cliffs during his boat escapade in the *The Prelude*, we have a sense here that we are in the presence of “huge and mighty Forms that do not live/Like living men” (Wordsworth, *The Prelude* lines 425-426), a sense of “blank desertion” (line 422) in the face of some immeasurable and wholly alien grandeur that pulses from the centre of the earth. This Romantic quality of the scene is made manifest most clearly in the feelings of “awe” that it elicits from the young John. The last sentence of the quoted paragraph, however, gives the experience a sense that leans more towards Lyotard's poststructuralist characterization of the sublime as an experience of absence, or as a lacuna that does its work by bearing testimony to that which falls outside the normative tendencies of representational structures of meaning: “From the earth comes a deep silence, so deep that it could almost be a hum.” If we consider John's experience of the farm as a kind of originary moment for the sense of being that finds expression in Coetzee's autobiographical fiction, then, we see that that sense of being locates itself from the outset in a kind of schism or fold between that which is deeply – indeed, almost transcendentally – felt, and the equally powerful sense that the material and social realities in which those feelings have their being denies the legitimacy of their expression. Consequently, the young John navigates his way “nervously” between the servants' graves, filled with a sense of awe that does not, or that cannot belong to him.

search of food. Week after week, month after month, the sun looked down from the cloudless sky, till the karoo-bushes were leafless sticks, broken into the earth, and the earth itself was naked and bare; and only the milk-bushes, like old hags, pointed their shrivelled fingers heavenwards, praying for the rain that never came. (Schreiner, *Story of an African Farm* 13)

The uneasy, fractured sense of being that comes to the fore in the dissonance between the transcendent and the material in John's experience of the farm is prolonged, as we have seen, in *Summertime*. In that book, John distances himself from familial conventions pertaining to the texture of life on the farm. He refuses to partake of the meat; he speaks a strained and awkward Afrikaans; he recoils from the codes of conduct which the other members of the family assume as a natural state of affairs. Margot's puzzled and sometimes irritated response to her cousin is an indication of the extent to which he has managed to estrange himself from the established order. Instead, as we have seen, he aligns himself with baboons, and when Margot asks him if he remembers pulling the legs off a locust when they were children, he responds by saying that he prays for forgiveness to *Kaggen*, the mantis god, every day (Coetzee, *Summertime* 96). These are strategies which would surprise even Outa Jaap (see *Boyhood*) in the scope of their ambition to belong properly to the farm. John shuns the level of engagement enacted by the nominal inhabitants of the farm and attempts to situate himself according to a semiotic structure that incorporates traces of a prehistory of natural life in the Karoo. What unsettles Margot is the foreignness of these traces to the existing layer of codified exchange on the farm, but if they were *merely* foreign, or no more than foreign – if John had spoken about the melancholy of polar bears, for example – they would have very little impact on the collective discourse happening in and around the space of the farm. It is of course only John, with his specialized knowledge of literature and linguistic structures, who is aware of the claim of these traces to a rightful place in a semiotic structure of representation for the Karoo, and hence of their ability to unsettle a conventional codification of the relationship between the self and the landscape of the farm.

What occurs, then, is that the natural model inherited from Romanticism finds itself subjected to a surprisingly Romantic insurgence of the sublime, embodied in this instance by the gods of the San, and more explicitly by the figure of the baboon. The arrival of the baboon as a material trace in the

text upsets the notion of a complacent identification with nature by insisting on the possibility of a counterclaim. And because the trace remains opaque – because it does not fit readily into any of the existing schemes of social interaction on the farm, because it has a history of opaque engagement with conventional literary models – it signals the tenuous status of a subjectivity that wishes to claim for itself a linear, privileged relationship with the landscape that informs its being. We find here that John’s method of self-expression begins to overlap with the mode of representation at work in the book, in the sense that the structure of *Summertime* insists on the opacity of its protagonist by describing him through a series of counterclaims. John’s subjective being arrives as the confluence of the multiple traces of him that comprise the various interviews in the book. That being said, the interviews are of course all the work of a single authorial intelligence, which implies that the notion of the self as a refracted multiplicity of traces might be understood as a form of wishful thinking, or if not as wishful thinking, then at least as a self-conscious attempt to reconfigure the Romantic notion of the authorial subject as a unified, harmonious entity.

Pieter Vermeulen has argued that Coetzee’s autobiographical project is a “distinctive reconfiguration of the Wordsworthian model” as it derives from *The Prelude*, and furthermore that this “reconfiguration is presented as a distinctively South African one” (“Wordsworth and the Recollection of South Africa” 56). One of the more cogent aspects of this reconfiguration, says Vermeulen, is Coetzee’s insistence on a topographical inclusion of the “real” in his texts (Vermeulen calls it “[t]he onslaught of the real,” 55):

It is South Africa’s nagging need for a storied web of description, for a connection to particulars that are not spirited away into harmonious universals, that obligates what I want to call Coetzee’s prosaics of enumeration – an account of particulars which need no longer be harmonized into a meaningful poetic whole ... It is only through prosaic enumeration, and not through the imposition of the Wordsworthian sublime, that the particulars of South Africa are allowed to remain and to go on insisting and are not given up to poetical harmonization. (Vermeulen,

“Wordsworth and the Recollection of South Africa” 57)

I would go one step further, and argue that the “prosaic enumeration” of “particulars”, or the occurrence in the text of material traces which threaten to disrupt the harmony of the social codes that order the life on the farm – and in particular those traces which originate in the natural landscape – are a manifestation, in a poststructuralist milieu, of the energies of the sublime, specifically in Lyotard’s sense of the sublime as that which “bear[s] witness to the inexpressible” (Lyotard, “Le sublime et l'avant garde” 104). The disharmonious effect of these traces reflects back on the self as a figure of structural cohesion. That is to say, the fiction of the self, which is presented in Coetzee’s autobiographical project as a confluence of insistent traces, is the principle according to which the particularities of existence maintain their right to be present. We can thus understand Coetzee’s appraisal of the farm and its landscape as a self-conscious aesthetic reconfiguration of the Romantic attempt to redeem the self by claiming for the subject a privileged position in nature: a source, in other words, for the discord between the idea of a transcendent self and the ever-present insistence of historical and discursive pressures that throbs at the centre of Coetzee's creative output.

There is a passage in *Youth* that sheds light on Coetzee’s treatment of the farm in *Boyhood* and *Summertime*. It occurs while the protagonist is in London, eager to attract those types of metropolitan experience that he imagines will transfigure him into an artist:

Tired out, one Sunday afternoon, he folds his jacket into a pillow, stretches out on the greensward, and sinks into a sleep or half-sleep in which consciousness does not vanish but continues to hover. It is a state he has not known before: in his very blood he seems to feel the steady wheeling of the earth. The faraway cries of children, the birdsong, the whirr of insects gather force and come together in a paean of joy. His heart swells. *At last!* he thinks. At last it has come, the moment of ecstatic unity with the All! Fearful that the moment will slip away, he tries to

put a halt to the clatter of thought, tries simply to be a conduit for the great universal force that has no name. (Coetzee, *Youth* 117)

At a glance, the passage appears to describe exactly the type of Wordsworthian unity with a pantheistic life force that informs the literary intelligence of a poem like “Tintern Abbey”. The choice of diction (“greensward”, “in his very blood”, “paeon of joy”, “ecstatic unity with the All”, “great universal force”, etc.) situates the passage in a semantic field that reaches back (via D.H. Lawrence, perhaps) to Romanticism. The passage thus appears to represent a straightforward attempt to respond to the tradition of English Romanticism on its own terms, i.e. by employing a lexical range and a cosmic terminology that is familiar to it. However, it is an affect that does not bear the scrutiny of a second glance. If the question of sincerity were not so pertinent to the autobiographical fictions as a whole, it would be tempting to label this particular passage as a moment of patent insincerity. It is preceded by the protagonist’s speculation about his fate, which is to remain forever the descendant of his gloomy South African forebears, “sweating in their dark clothes in the heat and dust of the Karoo” (*Youth* 116), and it is framed by his wish to belong, instead, to the metropole. If we cannot call it an insincere moment, we may perhaps call it a suspiciously opportune one, coming as it does in the midst of these thoughts about the failure of his environment to live up to his desires. The moment passes without a fuss and does not resurface in the narrative. In the subsequent pages John frets about ways to save money (118). For all intents and purposes, he has not yet been transformed, or at least not as transformed as he would like to be. It appears that he will have to return to the Karoo farm and its arid landscape in order to work out his own configuration of the energies that come to us, in strange and unexpected ways, from Romanticism.

CHAPTER THREE: POLITICS, VOICE AND THE SELF

1. The Soiled Condition

In the previous chapter I focused on the role of the farm in Coetzee's autobiographical fiction, and argued that his representation of it involves a strategic reconfiguration of the Romantic dynamics concerning the relationship between the self and nature. In Romantic writing, and in the poetry of Wordsworth in particular, the psyche of the child-self is shaped by the guiding hand of nature, and the mature poet, who is an extension of that younger self, is able to imbue his work with the same sense of transcendent harmony that informs the originaive childhood moment. The redemptive feature of these Romantic moves – the way in which the identification between the poet and his or her childhood self is situated within a transcendent natural order, and the subsequent conceit that the process of creative self-exploration is tantamount to a discovery of authentic, perennial truths about the nature of being – is compromised in Coetzee's work by an awareness that the yearning for kinship with the land is at odds with the social realities that govern life on the farm. My aim in this chapter is to explore this politicized sense of reality in Coetzee's work more extensively, and to determine the ways in which it conditions the formation of the subject in his autobiographical fiction. The point, as we shall see, is that the self becomes a site, in Coetzee's writing, where the incommensurability of these opposing forces – the desire for an autonomous, transcendent sense of being and the insistence of socio-political realities that are inimical to the expression of such desires – finds a form of expression.

The first notebook entry in *Summertime* plunges us directly into the deprivations of the political milieu to which the young writer returns after his time in America, and provides a useful point of departure for my discussion. John reads the Sunday papers and discovers that there has been a

politically motivated murder of South African citizens in Botswana. This murder, we are told, is one in a long chain of political crimes, reported “week after week” by the press (Coetzee, *Summertime* 4), along with denials by the apartheid government that it has anything to do with them. The effect of these reports on the protagonist is to send him into helpless “fits of rage and despair” (5): they constitute a “moral dilemma” from which he can envision no escape (5). His articulation of the dilemma in his notebook presents us with an opportunity to examine more closely what it means for him to be subjected to the political situation in South Africa in the 1970s:

He reads the reports and feels soiled. So this is what he has come back to! Yet where in the world can one hide where one will not feel soiled? Would he feel any cleaner in the snows of Sweden, reading at a distance about his people and their latest pranks?
(Coetzee, *Summertime* 4)

The use of the word “soiled” evokes a specific inflection of meaning for the process of political involvement that is being described here. In a literal sense, it means simply that John has been made (or feels himself to have been made) dirty. It carries along with it connotations of the crudest kind, connotations that gather around images of incontinence and defecation. These connotations impart a sense of shame to the figurative meaning of the word, which denotes a state of devaluation: the self has somehow been tarnished, or compromised by an exposure to the political. The image of the self is thus set up in opposition to the political. In particular, the political is characterized as that which has the capacity to devalue the experience of self – a self which would otherwise exist, presumably, in some mythically pure state. The devaluation of the self by the political is an altogether shameful experience.

However, if we take into account the wider context of the passage, namely John’s homecoming after several years abroad, then it becomes hard to ignore the further connotative meanings that attach to the word “soil” in its nominative sense, by which I mean the images of nativity and rootedness that

it evokes. This layer of allusive meaning suggests that the shameful invasion of the self by the political is in fact the proper environment for that self: John's native soil is the condition of being "soiled". The axis on which these paradoxical meanings turn is the notion that John's sense of self comes into being at the moment of recognition that it is undergoing a shameful penetration by that which it perceives as the corrupt domain of the political, and furthermore that it is an expression of this impure state which offers the closest approximation to the reality of that self. John flickers into life at the precise moment of his devaluation, which is being staged here as an interpenetration between an elusive, pure sense of self and the base materials of political rhetoric. All these meanings, in this particular context, are figured in the use of the word "soiled". It would be possible to extrapolate related sequences of meaning from other aspects of the passage cited above, but for the purpose of my argument I would like instead to consider the ramifications of the way in which the self finds itself embroiled here in political realities.

In its notion of the political as a constitutive aspect of what it means to be a self, the first passage of *Summertime* recalls the opening of Coetzee's previous book, *Diary of a Bad Year*. The first section of that book comprises an essay on the origins of the state,⁶² ostensibly written by the protagonist, JC, who shares with the protagonist of *Summertime* an open-ended autobiographical relation to his author. The essay describes, in a tone of unmitigated frustration, the primacy of the state in the constitution of what it means, in terms of identity, to be human. "The state is always there before we are" writes JC (Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* 3): "From the moment of our birth we are subject" (4). In his conclusion, he bemoans the futility of trying to find a position outside politics from which to talk about politics (9), suggesting that it is not possible for the self to consider itself in relation to the state without participating in the very discourse, namely political discourse, from which it seeks to redeem itself.

⁶² I have already mentioned this passage from *Diary of Bad Year* briefly in the first chapter, with a particular emphasis on its relation to Coetzee's writing about Jean-Jacques Rousseau (see section 1 – "Coetzee, Rousseau and the Problem of the Self").

Nevertheless, he presents us with an example of what it might mean to pursue a state of being that is not from the outset subjected to the impersonal machinations of power that characterize, in his description, the politics of statehood. He points to the retreat of German forces from France at the end of the Second World War and asks whether this might not have been an opportunity for the French people, who were for a few golden (and perhaps hypothetical) moments “ruled by no one” (Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* 7), to “roll back the state” (7) and to envision for themselves an alternative way of being in the world. Quite bitterly he concedes that the “poet” (7) who might have spoken such thoughts would have been silenced at once by the agents of power who filled the space left by the Germans.

The hypothetical scenario that JC sketches for the French people demonstrates a curious blend of utopianism and fatalism. He concedes the possibility of an alternative arrangement for society but posits the impossibility of such a society ever seeing the light of day. It exists only as a flicker of hope, a word that is spoken and then erased. In *Summertime* we discover similar sentiments being spoken on John’s behalf by a French interlocutor, Mme Sophie Denoël, a former colleague and lover of the protagonist. In the course of much prodding and prompting by her interviewer, Mr Vincent, she reveals that John dreamed utopian dreams without investing any hope in their political fruition (Coetzee, *Summertime* 229), or indeed without bothering to consider their application to his immediate political environment, namely the struggle for liberation in apartheid South Africa (230). When she is pressed to describe the particular form of his utopianism, she presents us with a vignette of society that is so utterly radical that one does not wonder at her dismissive tone: “The disbanding of the armed forces. The abolition of the automobile. Universal vegetarianism. Poetry in the streets. That sort of thing” (230).

These radical utopian ideas – ideas which are associated, for Coetzee's autobiographical

protagonists, with a kind of visionary poetic capability – take us back to Martin's description of John, in one of the previous interviews in *Summertime*, as someone who had a secret affinity for “the more vatic poets” (Coetzee, *Summertime* 213).⁶³ The vatic poet whose spirit appears to preside over the Romantic idyll of a free society that Sophie describes for John, in this case, is William Blake. The type of societal afflictions that John would get rid of in his anti-political fantasy (armed forces, automobiles, meat-eating), and perhaps more centrally the image of the poet as someone who takes to the streets to proclaim his creative visions (“Poetry in the streets. That sort of thing,” *Summertime* 230), echoes the sensibility that is expressed in a poem like Blake's “London”, where the poet wanders “thro' each charter'd street” (“London” line 1), identifying the “mind-forg'd manacles” (line 8) that bound the human spirit, and that derive, in the conceit of the poem, from the regulatory controls imposed on the populace by the unholy trinity of dogmatic religion, state-sanctioned warfare and monarchical rule:

[T]he Chimney-sweepers cry
 Every blackning Church appalls,
 And the hapless Soldier's sigh,
 Runs in blood down Palace walls

(Blake, “London” lines 9-12).

Blake's singular and untrammelled rejection of “chartr'd” existence figures as an extreme example of the species of utopian dream that John remains attached to, in his fatalistic way (Coetzee, *Summertime* 230).⁶⁴

The sheer conviction of Blake's poetic protest against the social and political orthodoxies of his day

⁶³ I discussed this passage from the Martin-interview in my introduction (see section 4 – “Conflicting Sources of the Self”).

⁶⁴ James Fenton writes about the singular force of Blake's radical dissent when he remarks about one of the other poems in the “Songs of Experience”-cycle (“The Chimney Sweeper”): “No one had ever written anything remotely like this before. No one had thought to attack the Church and the monarchy and parenthood in a single short poem” (Fenton, Introduction xxiii).

is grounded in his belief in the transcendent roots of imaginative inspiration. It is a belief that finds an especially powerful expression in one of the “memorable fancies” that are collected in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Blake writes that he was sharing a meal with the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel, and made use of the opportunity to ask them “how they dared so roundly to assert that God spake to them” (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 40 – I have retained Blake's original spelling in my citation):

Isaiah answer'd. I saw no God nor heard any, in a finite organical perception; but my senses discover'd the infinite in every thing, and as I was then perswaded, & remain confirm'd; that the voice of honest indignation is the voice of God, I cared not for consequences but wrote.

Then I asked: does a firm perswasion that a thing is so, make it so?

He replied. All poets believe that it does, & in ages of imagination this firm perswasion removed mountains; but many are not capable of a firm perswasion of any thing. (Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 40)

Ezekiel then elaborates on the nature of this “voice of God” that is discernible as “the infinite in every thing,”⁶⁵ and that is the source of the prophets' conviction of their own opinions (their “perswasion”):

Then Ezekiel said. The philosophy of the east taught the first principles of human perception some nations held one principle for the origin & some another, we of Israel taught that the Poetic Genius (as you now call it) was the first principle and all the others merely derivative, which was the cause of our despising the Priests & Philosophers of other countries, and prophesying that all Gods would at last be proved

⁶⁵ A more well-known expression of the prophets' conception of infinity can be found in the opening lines of Blake's “Auguries of Innocence”:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour

(Blake, “Auguries of Innocence” lines 1-4)

to originate in ours & to be the tributaries of the Poetic Genius, it was this that our great poet King David desired so fervently & invokes so pathetically... (Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 40)

“Poetic Genius,” according to Blake's prophets, is the original transcendent force, and all opinion that springs from it should be expressed fully, without reservation or fear of prosecution. By establishing for his protagonist a secretive (secretive in the sense of being rarely expressed)⁶⁶ rapport with Blake's imaginative mode of social critique, Coetzee involves the Romantic belief in the transcendent reality of poetic inspiration in his view on politics in a very peculiar way. Instead of challenging the status quo forthrightly, as Blake does, John prefers to remain silent, to internalize his views, to work them out via oblique references to potential vatic sources of creative inspiration. In the figure of John, Coetzee thus appears to be staging a contest between an alluded-to ideal of poetic truth as the essence of his autobiographical subject, and the ever-present sense that the actual realm of the self is, in fact, the “soiled” world of politics.

John's radical utopian ideas are not to be thought of as a political position, says Sophie, but rather as a variety of philosophical idealism that is, at its very core, “anti-political” (Coetzee, *Summertime* 228). Concurrently with this idealism, she says, ran his belief that humans “will never abandon politics” because it affords us an opportunity to play out our “baser emotions” and thus expresses itself as “a symptom of our fallen state” (229). On the face of it, then, we have in John someone whose fantasies of a prelapsarian state of grace are foreclosed by the very conditions under which they come to exist, namely the fraught and political condition of being human. His version of utopianism thus has the surprising effect of consolidating the species of fatalism that sanctions his sense of being in the world. Or, to put it differently, his visions of utopia appear to function in a negative sense, as a hypothetical position that serves to affirm the “fallen state” as the proper locus of reality.

⁶⁶ “[John] was very scrupulous about not preaching. His political beliefs you discovered only when you got to know him better,” Sophie tells Mr Vincent (Coetzee, *Summertime* 228).

At this point we might recall that John experiences the “soiled” nature of his being – his ontological complicity in the political – as a “moral dilemma” (Coetzee, *Summertime* 5). What this implies is that for John, the utopian vision of an ideal, “anti-political” (228) existence is aligned with an ideal of moral purity. For the subject to escape a condition of moral compromise, it would be necessary to live in a world that is free of politics. However, as I have mentioned above, John's utopian ideal has the contradictory effect of reinforcing the ubiquity of the fallen state. In similar fashion, then, we might say that the desire for moral purity points us to the notion that the self is in fact always already morally compromised. That is to say, the subject finds itself always in the midst of moral turmoil – it is never outside the dilemma. The notion of moral purity thus acts retrogressively in *Summertime*, by providing a negative space, or an absence, against which the contours of the blemished moral being of the subject, John, takes shape.

John's compromised moral being becomes all the more pertinent if we bear in mind that *Summertime* is a work of autobiographical fiction. The question of the moral being of the subject (and, more precisely, of its moral redemption) is closely tied, as we saw in the first chapter, to the writing of an autobiographical text, insofar as it figured in the history of confessional writing.⁶⁷ In Coetzee's work, the question is given an added layer of complexity by the persistent ambiguity that surrounds the nature of the relationship between the writer and his subject, “John”. The depiction of moral depravity, which is conventionally justified as one of the necessary steps in a road that leads finally to redemption, or at least to absolution, acquires a shadowy moral status all its own when it becomes impossible to determine the subjective locus of the moral being that reveals itself in this way. In short, if we are to understand the depiction of moral depravity in *Summertime* as something more than sensationalism, it becomes necessary to establish a connection between “John” and his author, or at least to understand the significance of the relationship between them.

⁶⁷ See especially section 2 – “A Brief History of Confession”.

If the professed aim of the writer of an autobiography is to depict the truth about him- or herself, then we can identify in Coetzee's autobiographical fiction an embodiment of the idea that this aim must be prolonged – or indefinitely suspended – for as long as the writing continues. While the notion of identification between the writer and his subject serves to drive Coetzee's autobiographical fiction (or to give it a sense of “truth-directedness”, to return to Attridge's term, “Confessing in the Third Person”, 160), it is at the same time a notion that operates in a negative sense, as something that exerts its influence on the narrative through its absence rather than its fulfilment. The reader is compelled and drawn forward by the question of the historical veracity of the narrative, but then finds him- or herself immersed instead in the imaginative descriptions that occupy the evasions of that very question. It is as if the writer incorporates the problem of veracity in his text and then proceeds to skirt it, or as if the problem that is there, haunting the text, serves mainly to set in relief the proper substance of the narrative, which is the imaginative description of things as they might have been. That this could be so is an unsettling thought, because what it implies is that the writer deliberately refrains from imparting a sense of moral closure to his narrative, which has a marked consequence for the ethical measure of his work. It brings to the fore the problem of accountability: what does one do with the ethical questions raised by Coetzee's work if the work itself strives to unsettle the existential determinacy of the subjective position in which those questions originate and cohere? Or, to put it differently, how do we account (do we account at all?) for the privilege that is accorded to imaginative activity – the privilege of the imagination – in works that are inflected to a very high degree by a consciousness of the individual's historical and socio-political responsibility?

2. Echoes of Negative Capability

A recent example of the kind of criticism that embarks on an ethical consideration of Coetzee's

work is the collection *J.M. Coetzee and Ethics: Philosophical Perspectives on Literature* (edited by Anton Leist and Peter Singer). While the collection does contain some insightful discussion on what Gillian Dooley calls the “author/character nexus” (Review, 1) in Coetzee's writing (see, for example, Karen Dawn and Peter Singer's argument, in “Converging Convictions”, that Elizabeth Costello's views on vegetarianism and on the treatment of animals are shared by her author; or Jonathan Lear’s “Ethical Thought and the Problem of Communication,” which traces the displacement of opinion through the tripartite structure of *Diary of a Bad Year*), these essays from the camp of philosophy are concerned more with the ethics of Coetzee's representation of animal being, and less with the question of accountability raised by his autobiographical practice. Another example – one that is more closely aligned to the purposes of my argument here – is David Attwell's essay “The Life and Times of Elizabeth Costello,” from a collection edited by Jane Poyner (*J.M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual*). In his essay, Attwell traces the strategic ways in which Coetzee has resisted the demands of public engagement. Instead of taking a stand on important public issues under his own name, Attwell says, Coetzee prefers to “absorb the public domain into the codes of fiction,” thereby attempting to “give to fictionality an authority to challenge the demand for public accountability” (“The Life and Times of Elizabeth Costello” 34). The ethical importance of doing so is located in the possibility of creating a position (or a “nonposition”) from whence it is possible to engage with socio-political issues without “falling into the dominant rivalries” (34) that tend to characterize such issues. Attwell draws on Coetzee's own articulation of this problem in his essay on Desiderius Erasmus, “Erasmus: Madness and Rivalry” (collected in *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship*) – the problem of speaking from a position which is *not* a position, or of engaging with the structures of power without succumbing to the ideologies of power – and suggests that the figure of Elizabeth Costello presents him with a solution (Attwell, “The Life and Times of Elizabeth Costello” 36).

The relationship between Costello and Coetzee is a complex one. Attwell explains it as follows:

One may see her as a compromise and a surrogate: a compromise because through her Coetzee goes some way toward meeting the demands placed on him to step into the public limelight, and a surrogate because she does, to some degree, speak for him – when called on to speak publicly, Coetzee ushers her into [the public sphere] instead, enabling him to stand back and observe the ironies and the play of positions.

(Attwell, “The Life and Times of Elizabeth Costello” 33)

That the surrogacy is a genuine one is confirmed by their shared general beliefs, at least insofar as one may deduce these beliefs from the concerns which inform Coetzee's previous work (Attwell, “The Life and Times of Elizabeth Costello” 36) – concerns like the nature of animal being, the problem of representing evil, the conflict between desire and responsibility, the work of the sympathetic imagination and indeed the embattled position of the writer-as-public-intellectual, to name a few. The point is that Costello has a similarly autobiographically-inflected connection with her author as, for example, John in *Summertime* or JC in *Diary of a Bad Year*, albeit in a less pronounced (and more obviously distinguishable) way. And in *Costello*, Coetzee comes closest to confronting the ethical questions raised by precisely such an investment in the imaginative displacement of his moral being via the subject of his narrative.

The passage that embodies this confrontation best, to my mind, occurs in the final, allegorical chapter of *Elizabeth Costello* (“At the Gate”). In that chapter the eponymous writer-protagonist has to defend her beliefs before a panel of judges. Although it is never spelt out, the suggestion is that the reason for Costello's presence there is that she must convince the judges that her lifelong commitment to fiction writing is sufficient justification to grant her passage to the hereafter. The confrontation that is staged is thus one in which a writer has to defend her investment in the life of the imagination before a sort of tribunal of the soul – a tribunal that does not accept (indeed, has not the slightest interest in) the idea that the work of imagining oneself into the being of others is in itself an ethically justifiable end. What the judges demand is an expression of the beliefs that define

her moral being *beyond* her activity as a writer. They are singularly unimpressed by her pleas that it is precisely the duty of a writer to suspend his or her moral being in the interest of his or her work. In one of their interviews, or hearings, Costello explains her lack of clearly defined beliefs as a moral obligation to keep “opinions and prejudices at bay” (Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 200). One of the judges wonders indifferently, but also with a whiff of recognition, whether she is referring to the idea of “negative capability” (200).

It is not for nothing, I think, that Coetzee incorporates the Keatsian notion of negative capability here. It is a reference that echoes the way Costello is described in the opening pages of the book, when her son John finds her look of “blank receptiveness” (Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 4) reminiscent of Keats. What the literary-minded judge alerts us to is the fact that Costello's insistence on the privilege of the imagination can be read as an idea with its own intellectual history and ideological background, an idea that reaches back, in this case, to the early nineteenth century and Romanticism. Keats's notion of “negative capability” is one of the abiding formulations of the spirit of uninhibited creative absorption that we associate with that period in literary history. The term comes from a letter that Keats wrote to his brothers, Tom and George, on the 21st of December, 1817:

I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke, on various subjects; several things dovetailed in my mind, & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean Negative Capability, that is *when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason* – Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge. This pursued through Volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration. (Keats, “Letter to George and Thomas Keats” 41, my emphasis)

What Keats is expressing here is the right claimed by literature to free itself from the demand that it be conceptually and epistemologically accountable, which is precisely what the judges are

demanding of Costello (and, we might add, what the hypothetical public demands of Coetzee).

Keats's claim is quite large. He is not only arguing for the primacy of aesthetic considerations (“the sense of Beauty”) in the writer's sensibility, but also, and perhaps more powerfully, that the very *being* of the writer is invested in the uncertainty and ambiguity that characterizes the aesthetic play of the imagination (“when a man is capable of *being* in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts”, my emphasis). The idea of “negative capability” thus seems to be a historical marker for Costello's declared inability to separate her moral being from the fictional play of her work.

Keats's influence on Costello resurfaces a few pages later, when a line from one of his poems enters her mind, seemingly unprompted. The line concerns a girl “[k]eeping steady her laden head across a brook” (Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 222), and its origin is Keats's *To Autumn* (1819), one of the last poems he wrote during his productive years (1817-1819), shortly before his death (Gittings, Introduction 11). The poem is resonant with Costello's situation for various reasons, not least of which is its insistence on describing the autumnal moment, so to speak, from within the stylistic paradigm that characterizes the author's opus. When Keats reaches the end of his productive period (Sheats, “Keats and the Ode” 97) he channels the winding down of his creative energies into an ode that bespeaks the mellifluous abundance of that very moment, to the extent that he dismisses any nostalgia for the antecedent “songs of Spring” (Keats, “To Autumn” line 23) and celebrates instead the music that is particular to his subject, namely the in-between time of autumn (Sheats, “Keats and the Ode” 98). Similarly, in *Elizabeth Costello*, when Coetzee confronts the idea of a writer who is passing from the stage of productive activity to what lies beyond, he approaches it with his sensitivity to the affective properties of language intact. *To Autumn* thus seems to be an appropriate model for Costello when she insists that even here, at the end of the line, metaphorically speaking, she does not have access to a position that lies outside an aesthetic sense of being, with all the inherent contradictions that such being entails.

Costello's appropriation of Keats reveals the extent to which the project of self-writing, for Coetzee, has been influenced by a Romantic emphasis on the primacy of subjective experience, or on the freedom of the individual to give voice to his or her experience in an aesthetic form. The way in which this influence manifests most clearly, I think, is in Coetzee's refusal to account for the self in instrumental terms. That is to say, it is possible to trace the incorporation of autobiographical elements in his fiction – or, conversely, the essentially fictional nature of his autobiography – to a Romantic notion of self-expression as the freedom to represent, in irreducible terms, the ambiguities that characterize the activity of the subjective imagination. The absence of closure in Coetzee's fictional autobiography – his resistance to the idea of achieving a sense of identification with the moral being of his subject – thus has the paradoxical effect of positing the invisible presence of exactly that which eludes the text, namely the reality of a personal, or subjective experience. Despite the various ways in which Coetzee displaces the subjective locus of her being, we have a sense, when we listen to Elizabeth Costello, of a clearly defined voice, and it is precisely this voice (to use Attwell's terms) that “*lingers* as a mark of ethical accountability” (Attwell, “The Life and Times of Elizabeth Costello” 36). That which must be held to account, in other words, is the consistency and full-blooded realization of the *voice* in which the various ambiguities, mysteries and uncertainties surrounding the nature of the subject in writing is articulated.

These ambiguities are certainly sustained in Coetzee's work, and especially so in those books which incorporate a sense of the autobiographical. In *Summertime*, for example, the method of representation, which describes the protagonist through a series of interviews and notebook entries, is already indicative of the liminal modality of the subject. Beyond the formal properties of the work, however, we find that the language itself embodies the paradox of subjective being, as I have tried to demonstrate at the beginning of this chapter by describing the use of the word “soiled” in its particular context: an expression of the corruption of the self that is at the same time an expression of the yearning to transcend that corruption. From the structure of the text to the minutiae of the

language, Coetzee's writing evokes a strong awareness of the contesting semantic fields from which a literary utterance derives its meaning – semantic fields, in my reading, which often stand in a deeply uncomfortable, even agonistic relationship toward each other.

The layered, simultaneous presence of disparate fields of meaning in Coetzee's autobiographical fiction calls to mind, in certain respects, the theory of the novel put forward by Mikhail Bakhtin.⁶⁸ Thus, in “Discourse in the Novel,” Bakhtin describes language as a heteroglot system (*raznorecie*: “heteroglossia”) of overlapping fields of discourse (“social dialects, characteristic group behaviour, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and passing fashions, *languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day, even of the hour,*” “Discourse in the Novel” 674, my emphasis), and argues that “this internal stratification present in every language ... is the indispensable prerequisite for the novel as a genre” (674). The novelist (and for Bakhtin the novelist *par excellence* is Dostoevsky) incorporates the multiple, intersecting points of view that are expressed in the variety of speech genres into his work “for orchestrating his themes” and “for the refracted (indirect) expression of his intentions and values” (676).⁶⁹ For Bakhtin, the confluence of contradicting socio-ideological language systems (676) that are drawn into the fabric of the novel does not nullify the possibility of authorial intent; on the contrary, “[t]he prose writer makes use of words that are already populated with the social intentions of others and compels them to serve his own new intentions, to serve a second master” (678). In these technical aspects, it is hard not to see the links between Bakhtin's thought and Coetzee's novelistic craft. When Michael Holquist says about Bakhtin's theory of the utterance that it describes a “give-and-take between the local need of a particular speaker to communicate a specific meaning, and the global requirements of language as a

⁶⁸ Carrol Clarkson has written perceptively about Bakhtin in relation to Coetzee, paying attention especially to the ways in which Coetzee's writing sustains, at the level of the utterance, a sense of dialogic responsiveness to the potential of the other (see *Countervoices*, chapter 2 - “You”).

⁶⁹ “These distinctive links and interrelationships between utterances and languages, this movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia, its dialogization – this is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel” (Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel” 674).

generalizing system” (*Bakhtin and his World* 60), we can discern a tension that is analogous to the way in which the subject in Coetzee's autobiographical fiction defines itself in the conflict between the desire for pure, autonomous being and the recognition that being is in fact contingent on the social environment from which it takes its coordinates. It is in the constant expression of this dialogic exchange, at the level of structure as well as the level of language, that the self has its most marked reality in Coetzee's writing, and that we hear in his work the presence of a voice that will not go away, even as it is beset by the doubt of its own moral legitimacy.

But the dialogic resonance that is discernible in Coetzee's writing has to be qualified (as Clarkson points out in the introduction to *Countervoices*, 9) by the reservations he has expressed in a few select places concerning the universal applicability of Bakhtin's theory. In his review essay of Joseph Frank's biography of Dostoevsky, collected in *Stranger Shores* (“Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years*”), Coetzee maintains that the entry of Bakhtin's thought into mainstream academic criticism has entailed a certain “vulgarization”: that “‘dialogical’ has become a term of approval, ‘monological’ a term of censure,” presented as alternatives “between which a writer is free to choose” (“Joseph Frank” 145). Against this mechanistic appropriation of Bakhtin's thought, Coetzee argues that we need to recognize the singularity of the dialogic method that arises in Dostoevsky's work: 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,” and that “to the degree that Dostoevskian dialogism grows out of Dostoevsky's own moral character, out of his ideals, and out of his *being as a writer*, it is only distantly imitable” (145, my emphasis). These thoughts echo the sentiments expressed by JC in *Diary of a Bad Year* concerning Dostoevsky (about which I have written in section 3 of my introduction – “A Close Reading of Authority”), and are similarly expressive of Coetzee's continued preoccupation with the ways in which authorial being plays itself out in writing. Coetzee's thoughts on Bakhtin acquire a slightly different slant, however, when we consider his comments in an interview with Joanna Scott,

published in *Salmagundi* in 1997. Asked about the “manipulation of single voices” in his own work, and his “interest in Bakhtin's concept of 'dialogism'” (Coetzee and Scott, “An Interview” 89), Coetzee responds by drawing attention to the cultural situatedness of Bakhtin's theory:

Dialogism? More and more I suspect I don't understand the concept. The more I read Bakhtin, the less I'm sure what dialogism is. Not, I think, because Bakhtin doesn't know what he means, but because there's something he's assuming in the way of shared cultural knowledge, specifically of Russian literature and maybe of Russian philosophy, that I don't have and very likely most of the people who take over the term dialogism from him don't have either. (Coetzee and Scott, “An Interview” 89)

So, over and against the idea that Dostoevsky's dialogism grows out of his own “being as a writer” (Coetzee, “Joseph Frank” 145), we have here an assertion that the theory itself, and consequently the practice that it describes, cannot be understood separately from the specific cultural milieu in which it resides. The upshot of these reflections on Bakhtin is that even while we discern in Coetzee's work a dialogic refraction of authorial voice in the conflict that arises between contesting appeals for the determination of the subject in his writing, the particular way in which this voice speaks, through Coetzee's protagonists, calls for a nuanced understanding of both Coetzee's personal investment in the persistence of the individual, irreducible being of the self, and of the specific socio-cultural contexts that give shape to his writing. The work in which the tension between these disparate fields is most clearly manifest – i.e. the expression of a highly individual sense of self against the equally forceful insistence of the culturally specific (and politically antagonistic) milieu from which the writing emerges – is *Age of Iron*.

3. *Age of Iron* and the Question of Voice

The question of voice is crucial to my understanding of the sustained dualism in Coetzee's writing between the rights of individual expression, on the one hand, and the dictates of a politicized reality

in which those rights have only the most tenuous standing, on the other. *Age of Iron* is arguably his novel in which this conflict is most strongly felt. Even though it is not usually considered in the company of those of Coetzee's books that have a more direct autobiographical resonance, I would like to examine it at some length in this section, because it is a novel that explicitly dramatizes the problematic I have set myself in this chapter. Specifically, I aim to explore the various perspectives which the novel grants on the idea of a personal voice – or on what is at stake in the act of self-expression – in order to gain some sense of the ways in which Coetzee refocuses the relationship between the individual imagination and the world of socio-political affairs in which that imagination has its being.⁷⁰

In *Age of Iron*, the political tremors that we discern in *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime* are thrust onto the centre stage, so to speak. The insistence of political realities is made manifest very explicitly in the historical framework in which the protagonist, Elizabeth Curren, finds herself embroiled. In postcolonial terms, the characteristics of such a society, seething with unrest and on the brink of revolutionary outburst, is perhaps best expressed by Frantz Fanon. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon describes the atmosphere that prevails when an oppressed people is on the point of erupting into revolution. One characteristic of this atmosphere is that it does not leave the “blissful existence” of the oppressor “intact” (Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* 56). Instead, the oppressor – or the “settler”, in Fanon's terms – becomes aware “that something is afoot”: “‘Good’ natives become scarce, silence falls when the oppressor approaches; sometimes looks are black, and attitudes and remarks openly aggressive” (56). Police and military presence is increased; “the smell of gunpowder” is in the air (56). “The atmosphere becomes dramatic,” says Fanon, “and everyone wishes to show that he is ready for anything” (56).

⁷⁰ I should say that it is not quite my intention to argue for or against the ethical merits of Coetzee's writing. My aim in this chapter is rather to show that his work becomes more affective – in a sense more personal, more strongly felt – by giving voice to the social aspects of the reality in which his protagonists suffer from their idealistic dreams.

In this “embryonic” stage of the revolution, any show of violence serves only to bolster the aggression of the oppressed (Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* 56), because it confirms to the native what he has known all along in his bones, namely that violence is the only mode of expression that has any real currency in the social dispensation of the colony. Those values which have been inculcated for generations in the schoolrooms of the colony, namely the values of universal dignity and respect for the individual, for individualism, are called out and dismissed as purely Western constructs, an ideology in the service of Western domination (36). “All the Mediterranean values – the triumph of the human individual, of clarity and beauty –”, writes Fanon, “become lifeless, colourless knick-knacks. ... Those values which seemed to uplift the soul are revealed as worthless, simply because they have nothing to do with the concrete conflict in which the people is engaged” (36).

The figure of the colonized intellectual serves to demonstrate the shift in values that occurs during the pre-revolutionary period. This figure has had “hammered” into his mind “the idea of a society of individuals where each person shuts himself up in his own subjectivity, and whose only wealth is individual thought” (Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* 36). If and when he has the opportunity to return to his people, however, the colonized intellectual soon repudiates the sophistry of the West and reinserts himself into the fold of brothers and sisters who are united, as one, in their struggle for liberation. The movement that occurs is thus one from a tradition of individual subjectivity – “[i]ndividualism is the first to disappear”, says Fanon (36) – to an awareness of the common goal of liberation as the only relevant concern. Furthermore, the force which binds this new, collective identity to reality is its canalization and expression of violence (45). Fanon thus makes the point that the movement from individualism to collectivism is accompanied, in the racially oppressed state, by a transition from “lethargy” and “petrification” (73) to a condition of robust violence. The mark of the native's decision to leave behind the abstract principles of the Western cultural tradition and to “embody history in his own person” (31) is his entry into violence.

Although it is perhaps not entirely accurate to designate the Cape Town of the late 1980s as a pre-revolutionary site in a strict Fanonian sense – most jarring in the analogy would be perhaps the absence of a motherland – there are nevertheless some striking affinities between the two, most notably the fact that the struggle between oppressor and oppressed played itself out along lines of racial differentiation. In *Age of Iron*, which is set in a bleak and wintry Cape Town during the “state of emergency” period in South African history, the resonance with Fanon's description is amplified, and we find ourselves in a world that is characterized quite strongly by an emphasis on violence, by a growing disillusionment with the precepts of individualism that emerge from the tradition of Western culture, and by a collective purpose that presents itself to the protagonist as a stony silence, an impenetrable mask, a resolve that cannot be breached (a “hardened rhetoric of absolutes,” as David Attwell puts it in *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* 120).

Age of Iron was first published in 1990. It is, in the words of Mike Marais, a “stark, yet full, depiction of the indigence and distortion of life under apartheid” (*Secretary of the Invisible* 103). The novel presents itself to us in the form of a letter, addressed by the protagonist, Elizabeth Curren, a former classics professor, to her unnamed daughter, who has turned her back on the petrification of life in apartheid South Africa and made a new life for herself in America. In the letter, Elizabeth describes the events which befall her during the last days of her life, from the moment when she is diagnosed with terminal cancer, to what may or may not be read as the moment of her death. It is a period in her life that coincides with the arrival of a stranger, a vagrant who goes by the name of Vercueil and who takes up intermittent residence in her home. Apart from her relationship with Vercueil, the narrative also portrays her growing involvement in the life of Florence, her domestic worker, and of Florence's family. It is an involvement that draws her from her secluded life in the suburbs of Cape Town into a confrontation with the naked realities of the struggle against apartheid, and consequently into an involvement that occasions a dramatic shift in

her perception of what it means to be alive in her particular time and place, which we might perhaps describe as the wrong end of history. In short, Elizabeth is drawn from her sheltered life spent in the company of the classics and brought face-to-face with the demand for accountability that is made by the political situation in the country.

The novel resonates quite strongly, as I have mentioned, with Fanon's description of the transformational period that precedes the outbreak of a revolution. This is most evident in the realistic depictions of civil unrest and confrontation between the security forces and the budding revolutionaries, who are typified in this instance by Florence's son Bheki and his ambiguously named friend, "John" (Coetzee, *Age of Iron* 147). It is also evident, if less overtly so, in the confrontation which is staged for us in Elizabeth's sustained belief in the importance of speaking in her own voice – a belief that derives from her immersion in classical literature and expresses itself as a concern for the passing of her individual soul – and the realization that this tradition has not furnished her with a sufficient response to the pressing realities of the social reality that defines her life – a reality that is equally firm in its wholesale rejection of individualism. That is to say, the shift of values and behaviour which characterizes the larger socio-political period of transition in which the story takes place is intertwined in very complex ways with her private musings concerning her passage towards death.

I will refer to one of the key passages in the book to demonstrate my point. The passage occurs as one of the various soliloquies that Elizabeth delivers to Vercueil concerning the meaning of her death. This particular speech is spoken while they are lying together on a piece of cardboard, in a "wooded space" under the stars (Coetzee, *Age of Iron* 161). Vercueil has carried her away from an overpass in Buitenkant Street, where she had been lying comatose on the pavement, in the depths of ignominy after she had fled from the police who had raided her house and assassinated the young revolutionary who had been hiding there. She begins by saying that, in the face of the shame that

attends her life by virtue of having lived as a person privileged by the oppressive regime, the most she has hoped for is an honourable death, “*honesta mors*” (164), a notion that derives directly from her classical education.⁷¹ Then she goes on:

What I did not know, *what I did not know* – listen to me now! – was that the price was even higher. I had miscalculated. Where did the mistake come in? It has something to do with honor, with the notion I clung to through thick and thin, from my education, from my reading, that in his soul the honorable man can suffer no harm. I strove always for honor, for a private honor, using shame as my guide. As long as I was ashamed I knew that I had not wandered into dishonor. That was the use of shame: as a touchstone, something that would always be there, something you could come back to like a blind person, to touch, to tell you where you were. (Coetzee, *Age of Iron* 165)

Elizabeth is aware here that there is something wrong with the “notion” of honour that she has clung to like a “blind person”, despite the evidence of her senses – that is to say, despite the challenges which the realities of circumstance may have levelled at it. Her notion of honour has sprung untempered from her immersion in the classics and taken up residence as a universal value in her moral being. Her description of the value of honor – of the value of the value, so to speak – reads like a truism: “in his soul the honorable man can suffer no harm”. In its generalization of gender (“the honorable *man* can suffer no harm”), the truism reveals a marked lack of particularity in Elizabeth's notion of honour; or, to put it differently, it shows us to what extent the *idea* of “a private honor” has taken root in her being without in fact being aware that it is *her* being in which it has taken root.

This is rather perplexing, because along with its emphasis on the individual soul (“*in his soul* the honorable man can suffer no harm”), it suggests that the idea of honour, taken by Elizabeth *as is* from her classical education, does not concern itself much with the situation of the *particular* soul

⁷¹ The reference is most likely from Book 33 of Tacitus's “*Agricola*”: *honesta mors turpi vita potior* (“A death of honour is better than a life shame”) (Tacitus, *Agricola and Germania*, 22).

in which it resides. As a vehicle for honour, it seems, one individual soul is as good as another. What counts is not the actual, de facto private honour of a particular soul, but rather the *idea* of private honour, disembodied, interchangeable from being to being. What Elizabeth seems to signal here is an awareness of her embeddedness in an irredeemably Western system of cultural transmission. When Fanon tells us that the rebellious native turns his back on the preaching of individualism, we may understand it as his perception that what is being taught is not any concern for this or that particular soul, but rather an attempt to transmit and further entrench those self-serving Western values of which the oppressor is the inheritor and master. Elizabeth's musing on the meaning of her own life and death thus becomes interlaced with the larger rejection of cultural values that characterizes the historical moment of resistance in which her life takes shape.

There is a certain phrase in the novel – or a trope, if you will – that seems to encapsulate the transmission of the value of individualism that characterizes the oppressive society to which Elizabeth, by definition, belongs. At the beginning of the narrative, when Elizabeth discovers the terminal nature of her illness, her doctor tells her: “We will do everything we can ... we will tackle this together” (Coetzee, *Age of Iron* 4). However, she is not convinced. Here are her thoughts on the matter: “[A]lready, behind the comradely front, I could see he was withdrawing. *Sauve qui peut*. His allegiance to the living, not the dying” (4). Her concern in this particular instance has to do, of course, with the private matter of her death, rather than with the cultural transmission of the philosophy of individualism which I have been describing. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the motto she selects for the tribal allegiance in which she and the doctor have their common being is precisely one that emphasizes the well-being of the individual above all else: “*sauve qui peut*”, save yourself. This phrase, with its allusion to a state of savage disorder, and its echoes of indebtedness to French letters, has a rich and manifold significance for various aspects of the novel. I would like to focus specifically on its encapsulation and transmission of the idea that each person is responsible, in the final analysis, when things have fallen apart, for the well-being of his or her own

individual soul.

Let us consider first the extent to which this value of self-preservation (and its twin, self-reliance) functions as a description of the larger society to which Elizabeth belongs. We have already noted that it exists as a sort of unspoken code between her and the doctor, an acknowledgement that that which underlies their performance of camaraderie is the recognition that there exists no true obligation to care for the other. It is an attitude that resurfaces when Elizabeth visits the injured young friend of Bheki in the hospital – the same friend who is later killed by the police – and has a vision of white people as “a herd of sheep ... milling around on a dusty plain”, uttering “the same bleating call in a thousand different inflections: ‘I!’ ‘I!’ ‘I!’” (Coetzee, *Age of Iron* 80). Elsewhere, in a passage of considerable satirical bite, Elizabeth rails against the flight of the rich and the powerful from the “worm-riddled ship” of the apartheid state, which is “clearly sinking” (128) – a description in which it is hard not to hear the resonant cry of *sauve qui peut!* as a vindication of the rights of self-preservation. Suffice to say that the value which privileges individualism and responsibility to the self is an integral aspect of Elizabeth's criticism of the culture from which she has emerged, and from which she tries so hard to distance herself. It is this political sense of individualism that riles the spirit of the revolutionaries, and which Elizabeth herself finds so despicable in the cultural belief system of the apartheid overlords.⁷²

Yet in the aforementioned speech that she makes to Vercueil while they are sharing their cardboard bed under the starry sky, a speech in which she is trying her best to come to terms with the meaning of her position as a voiceless old woman on the point of dying, we find that the one thing she wishes to communicate to those who will not hear her, the one value that captures the message she wishes to transmit before she goes, is precisely this value of *sauve qui peut*. Specifically, when she

⁷² The culture of individualism has long roots in the history of Western political thought. In Hobbes's *Leviathan*, for example, we discover that Hobbes's belief in the necessity for some form of civil contract is underpinned by a remarkably solipsistic account of the nature of knowledge and perception (see especially the first two chapters), and, more specifically, that the voluntary election of a higher power is justified primarily by his belief that the fear of death is the only thing that would be able to temper man's rampant lust for self-advancement (see chapter 10).

thinks of Florence's daughters imbibing the lesson of “*Freedom or death!*” (Coetzee, *Age of Iron* 163) – the battle cry of the young revolutionaries – she wants nothing more than to cry out to them: “*No! ... Save yourselves!*” (163). That which forms the basis of her criticism against the petrifying regime of apartheid and that which has stripped her of her voice from the opening pages of the book, namely the value which justifies the promotion of self-interest above any other concern, is the same value she wishes to transmit with her dying breath, so to speak.

What we have here is the confounding ambiguity of a criticism that is at the same time an assertion of that which it wishes to criticize. It is an ambiguity, I would suggest, that emerges from the complex intertwining of the two distinct spheres of transition that inform the structure of the narrative, namely 1) the socio-historical collapse of the political regime (that which I have described, following Fanon, as the pre-revolutionary state); and 2) Elizabeth's passage from the land of the living to the land of the dead, a transitional stage that draws extensively on various classical and mythico-religious topoi for its imagery. The referential ambiguity of the notion of *sauve qui peut*, the fact that it serves at once to criticize the oppressive mentality of individualism and to assert the rights of the living soul, results from this double-situatedness of the subject who speaks it, Elizabeth.

Critics have drawn attention to Coetzee's subtle negotiation of the complications that surround the positioning of the subject in writing, and its implications for what might broadly be described as an ethics of community. Patrick Hayes, for example, is especially preoccupied, in his book *J.M. Coetzee and the Novel*, with what he sees as the capacity of Coetzee's writing to transform our understanding of what political community entails. Hayes argues that Coetzee's prose style – a style that he describes as “jocoserious” (*J.M. Coetzee and the Novel* 4), pointing to Coetzee's borrowing of the term from Joyce in his essay on Erasmus's *In Praise of Folly*, and that he traces in particular to Coetzee's assimilation of the “comic energies of Beckett” (11) – constitutes an approach that is

“most truly amenable to an anti-foundational imagining of moral community” (71), one that “tries to hold open, and bring about dialogue between divergent ideas of what makes for a good community” (130). Hayes describes the position of the self in relation to the other that is brought about by Coetzee's writing as a position in which fixed identities are resisted in favour of an indefinitely sustained and “potentially transformative alertness to ... the difference the other might bring” (30) – a situation, in turn, that invites a re-imagining of how people relate to each other in political communities. If we follow Hayes's thought here, we can read the ambiguity of Elizabeth's position in the novel as an attempt to hold open the notion of individual subjective being while at the same time allowing that being to be infused with or altered by the culturally specific and materially distinct aspects of her particular socio-historical environment.

Carrol Clarkson provides another perspective on the ambiguous positioning of the subject in Coetzee's writing when she asks us, in a chapter in her book *Countervoices* that is dedicated to the topic of voice, to consider the “importance” that is accorded in Coetzee's work to “the speaker's construction of the place from which he or she speaks” (*Countervoices* 78). Clarkson arrives at the conclusion, via a consideration of Coetzee's engagement with Bakhtin and Erasmus, that “even when all rhetorical and narrative strategies are purposely deployed to disturb the attributing of positions and dispositions to speakers and listeners, to writers and readers, *still* the writing seems to effect the realization of an authorial voice” (97). While the focus of Clarkson's argument concerns specifically “the positions and dispositions of the writer and reader” (78), I believe it is also possible to draw on her thought here to elaborate on the peculiar ambiguity of Elizabeth's role in the two distinct domains that give shape to her life. That is to say, by virtue of the paradox that inheres in Elizabeth's speech concerning the value of individualism, we are able to see her as someone who occupies a sort of fold between the cultural and artistic heritage of the West, on the one hand, and the contingencies of her historical reality, on the other, and furthermore that this position enables her to resist the potentially oppressive tendencies of both those domains (or enables her to *still* have

a voice). What it comes down to, I suggest, is that Elizabeth's voice in the novel is precisely one in which the conflict between individual expression and collective, revolutionary purpose is given scope to articulate itself.

To explain what I mean, I turn once more to the speech that Elizabeth makes to Vercueil under the starry sky. Directly after she has expressed her wish to tell Florence's daughters that they must not heed the call to revolution, she bemoans the fact that she has no voice in which to speak, no voice that entitles her to an audience:

“Whose is the true voice of wisdom, Mr. Vercueil? Mine, I believe. Yet who am I, *who am I* to have a voice at all? How can I honorably urge them to turn their back on that call? What am I entitled to do but sit in a corner with my mouth shut? I have no voice; I lost it long ago; perhaps I have never had one. I have no voice, and that is that. The rest should be silence. But with this – whatever it is – this voice that is no voice, I go on. On and on”

Was Vercueil smiling? His face was hidden. In a toothless whisper sticky with sibilants I went on. (Coetzee, *Age of Iron* 164)

To my mind, this passage gives distinct expression to the notion of a voice that persists despite its constitutional impossibility, or despite the rhetorical emphasis on the fact that there exists no legitimate position for it from which to speak. But what kind of voice is this that continues to speak despite the fact that it has no place? It is certainly an evocatively described voice: “a toothless whisper sticky with sibilants”. I would recommend to the reader to read the speech out loud, to him- or herself, in a “toothless whisper sticky with sibilants”, in order to experience the measure of pathos that attaches to Elizabeth's words if we hear it in that voice. It is an uncanny and mesmerizing voice, one that is haunting as much as it is comic. In a very material sense, then, a very vivid sense, this voice that has the properties and dimensions of a real voice finds its way to us from a position that is all but untenable in the politically fraught environment from which it speaks.

However, that is not all there is to it. The qualifiers that attach to this particular voice, namely “toothless”, “whisper”, “sticky” and “sibilants”, all resonate in very particular and meaningful ways with the textual plane from which it speaks. I would like to consider each of them in turn, to appreciate in full the measure of this voice that speaks where no voice is possible. First, we have “toothless”, which evokes for us the graphic image of Elizabeth as an aged and destitute person, one who has just had a stick poked into her mouth by street children in search of golden dentures (Coetzee, *Age of Iron* 159, 161). It also suggests, to speak metaphorically for a moment, the lack of bite in her words, reflecting the non-authoritarian position from which she speaks – a position which Coetzee considers in some depth in his essay on Erasmus's *In Praise of Folly*.

The next qualifier is “whisper”, which has the curious effect of combining Elizabeth's lack of authority with the force of penetration. That is to say, despite the desiccation of her voice – despite its having been stripped of the full-bodied resonance of the vocal chords – it is still a voice of some potency. It is, if you will, a voice that gains its expressive quality precisely from its threadbare existence. As such, it is a voice that reflects Coetzee's notion of the voice of the writer in apartheid South Africa, namely that it suffers from a “stuntedness and deformity” (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, 98) as an inevitable result of its psychic association with the “unnatural structures of power that define the South African state” (97).

The “stickiness” of the voice seems to recall – gratuitously, perhaps, but also to remind us of the material reality of her situation – the aforementioned stick that has been pushed into her mouth. More than that, however, it appears to insist on the peculiar staying power, or persistence, of her voice. A “sticky” voice is a voice that inserts itself into the cracks between the official avenues of discourse and binds together the disparate elements that may have fallen by the wayside of that discourse. It is thus a voice that provides a space for the subject that finds itself in the no man's land

between the oppressive rhetoric of politics and the neutered classical heritage which is its inheritance.

The fourth qualifier, namely the “sibilance” of the toothless whisper, takes us back, I would suggest, to that classical heritage, by way of a detour through modernism. In the passage quoted above, Elizabeth tells us a few things about her position. She avers that hers is the “true voice of wisdom”; and furthermore, that with her voice of wisdom, a “voice that is not a voice”, she goes on: “On and on” (Coetzee, *Age of Iron*, 164). A disembodied voice that despite itself cannot refrain from preaching its wisdom and belongs to an old woman who is somewhere between life and death, beyond the pale; a voice that speaks in “sibilants”: to my mind, this voice recalls quite distinctly the Sibyl of Cumae, who furnishes the epigraph to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Coetzee's indebtedness to Eliot is evident from the way in which Eliot frequently resurfaces in his writing (I have in mind here especially the pivotal role that Eliot plays in *Youth*, and Coetzee's essay on the classic in *Stranger Shores*, “What is a Classic? A Lecture”), and it is not my purpose here to draw an extensive comparison between Elizabeth Curren and the unhappily immortal seer of Cumae. What I would like to draw attention to, rather, is the implication that the notion of the classic is refracted in *Age of Iron* through the collapse of structural integrity that is characteristic of Eliot's emblematic poem. In his guide to the poem, C.J.D. Harvey puts it thus:

The metaphorical 'Waste Land' in which the entire poem is enacted is waste, both physically and spiritually, because its inhabitants do not want to live and yet they will not die and 'let go' of their individual identities, the only things they can attach value to, either. (Harvey, *A Complete Guide to T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land"* 7)

Elizabeth's ambiguous attachment to the idea of “individual” identity, which has been challenged quite severely, as we have seen, by the discourse of the pre-revolutionary state, as well as by her own personal disgust at the self-serving ideology of the oppressive classes, now acquires another

dimension through its association with the modernist questioning of those values which have been inherited from the cultural tradition of Western thought. What she appears to be resisting is the censure against individual voice that is implicit in both the practice of high modernism and the political realities of the environment in which she has her being. It is indeed not an enviable position from which to speak the meaning of one's own death.

In Clarkson's aforementioned study of Coetzee, she emphasizes the persistence of a singular authorial voice despite the contingency of that voice on the cultural and historical milieu that gives it shape (*Countervoices* 105). She makes the point that it is precisely the fact of the voice's responsiveness to the various layers of discourse which make up its habitat that allows us to identify that voice as a position from which it is possible to speak (105). A different way of saying this, is that the singularity of a voice is constituted precisely in the inflection that it gives to the multiple demands that is made on it by its environment. In the case of Elizabeth, then, we might say that her resistance does not take the form of asserting her individualism despite the stone-faced collectivism of the revolutionaries, or despite the perversion of Western culture that is the ideology of the apartheid state, or despite the structural collapse of subjective autonomy that is implicit in the artistic productions of high modernism. Rather, we might say that her resistance, or even her defiance, lies in her willingness to include these historical and cultural realities in her discourse, to articulate that which is foreign to her sympathies in her own voice.

In his treatise on the art of poetry, Aristotle places considerable emphasis on the distinction between the modes of diction that are appropriate to the rhetorician and historian, and those that are appropriate to the poet. The difference between poetic truth and historical truth, he writes, is that "it is not the poet's function to describe what has actually happened, but the kinds of thing that might happen, that is, that could happen because they are, in the circumstances, either probable or necessary" (Aristotle, "On the Art of Poetry" 43). I would like suggest that Elizabeth's resistance

entails the safeguarding, or reinvigoration, of precisely such a position, namely one in which it is possible to engage in an imaginative exploration of the multiple possibilities that are contained in the realities of circumstance. It is a resistance, as we have seen, that involves a fraught and often violent intrusion of social realities into the scope of that which is spoken about, and which becomes more potent precisely because it makes space for those intrusions.

There is a passage near the centre of the book that dramatizes the dynamic tension between these distinct modes of expression (i.e. the creative and the rhetorically persuasive). It is a passage that represents for us the tenacity with which Elizabeth occupies her fold between the twin demands of historical accountability and imaginative expression. She is standing in the rain, surrounded by a “ring of spectators” (Coetzee, *Age of Iron* 98), and is pressed by Mr. Thabane to account for the injustice of what they have just witnessed, namely the destruction of countless homes in Site C, near Gugulethu. Elizabeth fails quite miserably as an orator:

“These are terrible sights,” I repeated, faltering. “They are to be condemned. But I cannot denounce them in other people's words. I must find my own words, from myself. Otherwise it is not the truth. That is all I can say now.”

“This woman talks shit,” said a man in the crowd. (Coetzee, *Age of Iron* 98)

The passage is reminiscent of a classical oration, i.e. one in which the speaker's task is to impress the audience with his rhetorical skill. Mr. Thabane has issued his challenge; it is up to Elizabeth to rise to the occasion by harnessing or responding to the restless, revolutionary energy around her. The moment is one of political decision: she must either take up the position of spokesperson for the apartheid government, or she must renounce all ties to that government and side with the cause of the people. What is expected, in other words, is for her to account for herself in the eyes of the revolutionaries.

It is quite evident that she fails to meet their expectations. The anonymous man in the crowd does not simply agree or disagree with her position; what he gives voice to instead is the notion that what she has said (“shit”) falls beyond the scope of intelligible meaning in the context in which it has been spoken. Elizabeth's response, it seems, is entirely the *wrong order* of response. She has been called upon to make a speech; what she has done instead is give voice to her own personal discomfort with the rhetorical practice of speech-making (“it is not the truth”). Thus we see that the notion of artistic truth that is presented in *Age of Iron* has a particularly complicated relationship to the historical actuality of its setting. Even while it takes account of that actuality – as is evinced by Coetzee's staging of this passage in the very thick of the struggle, so to speak – it does not relinquish that which is vital to its position, namely the privilege of being able to speak in one's own voice.

What I have tried to demonstrate in this reading of *Age of Iron* is that we might conceive of Elizabeth's position in the novel as the embodiment of a sort of poetics of resistance. It is a position that we can define as the struggle to define her own voice despite her awareness, in the face of approaching death, of the contingency of her being on the oppressive dictates of the society that surrounds her. The signature that signs off the novel tells us that the author began writing it in 1986. It so happens that this date provides us with a historical contingency that feeds well into my argument. I refer to two articles that Coetzee published in *The New York Review of Books* in 1985 and 1986 respectively. The first article, “Satyagraha in Durban”, is a straightforward literary review of a novel by Sheila Fugard, namely *A Revolutionary Woman*. It is a scathing review, and in it Coetzee criticizes the novel for its “failure of craft” (“Satyagraha in Durban” 3) and its apparent lack of historical awareness. The second article, “Waiting for Mandela”, is, among other things, a review of a work of non-fiction by Richard John Neuhaus, namely *Dispensations: The Future of South Africa as South Africans See It*. In that article, Coetzee himself evinces a strong working knowledge of and insight into the political complexities of the workings of the ANC and the

apartheid state. Taken together, these two pieces seem to point to the level of historical engagement that Coetzee envisions as the proper responsibility of the novelist. They also indicate, if we consider what *Age of Iron* excludes, namely a political response to the political problems of the nation, that he does not quite conceive of creative expression as an efficacious tool in the service of political justice. As the novel progresses, we begin to see that a personal voice, in its literary form, is not simply a matter of finding a place from which to speak that is unaffected by, or protected from the discomfiting realities of the social milieu in which one lives and breathes – it is not, in a manner of speaking, a case of shutting oneself off from the world and composing sonnets to the birds. On the contrary, the voice becomes more poignant, more powerful and affecting, if we conceive it as a literary imprint that carries the fine traces of its author's personal inclinations and desires, but that weaves its patterns from the socio-historical realities in which those desires come to life.

4. The Sympathetic Imagination

What happens, then, is that the Romantic emphasis on the freedom of individual expression – or, as Keats would have it, the belief that the being of the writer is wholly invested in the ambiguous play of the aesthetic imagination – is tempered in Coetzee's work by an acute sense of the socio-historical context in which that aesthetic play occurs. It would be disingenuous to suggest that this dimension of historical awareness is completely absent from Keats's sensibility;⁷³ the point is rather to note that in Coetzee's work it comes to the fore explicitly as a powerful antagonistic force against which the rights of the aesthetic imagination finds itself in a constantly beleaguered state. A common response from Coetzee critics, as I have pointed out in my introduction,⁷⁴ has been to argue that the continued insistence of an aesthetic sensibility in his work (i.e. his refusal to offer up his voice indiscriminately to a politics of revolution, or his insistence on continuing to speak from

⁷³ See, for example, Nicholas Roe's *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent*, and Greg Kucich's observation, in *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, that Keats's "To Autumn" might be read as an instance of what he calls a "political sense of negative capability," 194).

⁷⁴ See section 1 – "The Return of the Author".

what Keats might call “the Penetralium of mystery,” “Letter to George and Thomas Keats” 41) can best be justified as a literary manifestation of an “ethics of otherness”. A part of my aim in this chapter has been to suggest, however, that the moves of self-effacement involved in such an ethics of identification are compromised when we perceive the historical, or socio-political situatedness of the subject as a constitutive aspect of the voice that speaks from the pages of Coetzee's writing.

Mike Marais, who is an advocate of such an ethical reading of Coetzee, has registered the problems raised by the strong sense of cultural location in his writing. For Marais, the “sympathetic imagination” is the literary correlative that enables an ethics of identification with the other. In *Secretary of the Invisible*, however, he mentions the extent to which the possibility of sympathetic identification suffers from the fact that the imagination is “located in the self,” and that the “desires and antipathies” of that self are “situated by the self's location in a particular cultural and historical context” (Marais, *Secretary of the Invisible* 177). The point is demonstrated in *Disgrace*, says Marais, by Lurie's failure of sympathy when he strikes Pollux, one of the perpetrators of the rape on his daughter, Lucy (*Secretary of the Invisible* 176). Marais thus draws our attention to the idea that the ethical imperative of self-abnegation is compromised by the dialogic nature of the subject. That is to say, if the subject were to give itself over entirely to an imaginative act of sympathetic identification, it would be necessary for that subject to assume a kind of “non-position” (178), one which is divested of all relational sense. In short, we may say that purely ethical being – a being that is able to account for itself fully in terms of the demand made on it by the other – would require a purely autonomous subject, one that was entirely in possession of itself, with no investment at all in the “natural and cultural configurations we lump together as 'the world'” (Holquist, *Bakhtin and his World* 30). Only such an isolated subject would be able to take full responsibility for the transcendence of self that is required by a pure ethics of identification with the other. The act of deterritorialization by which the imagination seeks to invest the self in the other now appears to disable that very investment, because it dispossesses the subject of its autonomy and posits that

subject instead as a site of flux, a site that coheres as a meeting point for the various aesthetic configurations that make up the work of the imagination.

I would like to explore this notion more fully by returning to *Elizabeth Costello*, and in particular to the chapter entitled “The Poets and the Animals”, which deals extensively with the sympathetic imagination and its ethical implications. In that chapter, Elizabeth gives a reading of two poems by Ted Hughes, namely “The Jaguar” and “Second Glance at a Jaguar”, in which she argues firstly that the poems allow us to feel, when we “recollect it afterwards in tranquillity” (Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 98), what it feels like to be a jaguar, and secondly that this form of identification “falls within an entirely human economy in which the animal has no share” (96). Elizabeth makes the point that even while there is something ethically attractive about the primitive poetics of identification with animal being that Hughes espouses, “[i]ts ramifications into politics are not to be trusted” (97). It is not to be trusted because in the final analysis, the world view that underlies it, namely an ecological world view, concerns itself less with the individual beings that make up the world, and more with the idea of a larger ecological harmony, a harmony in which the “actual role players” (98) function as mere temporary instalments of the life of the species (99). What Elizabeth seems to be suggesting is that a poetics of embodiment, of which Hughes's poems are an example, is not in and of itself enough to guarantee an ethical engagement with the world and its inhabitants. It is not enough to merely imagine oneself into the body of the other; there is another dimension that is required.

This other dimension of which the sympathetic imagination needs to avail itself is described by Elizabeth through a reference to *Gulliver's Travels*, and in particular to his stay among the ultra-civilized, horse-like Houyhnhnms. A member of the audience has asked her whether it is fair to expect human beings to forego their natural inclination to eat meat in order to take up residence in an abstract realm of rational vegetarianism, such as represented by the utopian race of the

Houyhnhnms. After a prolonged contextualization of her understanding of Swift, Elizabeth comes to the following conclusion:

So – excuse the confusion of this response – yes, we are not horses, we do not have their clear, rational, naked beauty; on the contrary, we are subequine primates, otherwise known as man. You say there is nothing to do but embrace that status, that nature. Very well, let us do so. But let us also push Swift's fable to its limits and recognize that, in history, embracing the status of man has entailed slaughtering and enslaving a race of divine or else divinely created beings and bringing down on ourselves a curse thereby. (Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 103)

The meaning of Elizabeth's response here is, as she concedes, not at all clear. She has, on the one hand, removed Swift's fable from its satirical origins and read it instead as an insufficient representation of the history of colonialism and the violence that is attendant on that history. Furthermore, she has insisted that in order to embrace what it means to be human requires not only that we pay attention to our cultural history, but also that we acknowledge the violence that is part of that history, that we take that violence upon ourselves and assume responsibility for it. Her thought here seems to be going in the opposite direction to the shamanistic effacement of the self that she encounters in the poetry of Ted Hughes. Instead, we might say that for Elizabeth the work of the imagination, or a part of its work, consists precisely in delineating more carefully the contours of what it means to be a self, and specifically in tracing those contours along the lines of history. The ethical imperative of the sympathetic imagination in Coetzee's work would then be not to negate the self in an attempt to embody the being of the other, but rather to grasp in its fullness the implication of the “curse” we have brought down upon ourselves, namely that we are always complicit, ontologically, by virtue of the way that subjective being is constructed – that is to say, historically and politically – in the savage ways of the world. Elizabeth's plaintive call for the ethical treatment of animals has thus once again situated the self in a liminal space that is characterized by a desire for moral being, on the one hand, and the fatalistic realization that the

self's complicity in history disables the very ideal to which it gives birth.

CONCLUSION: CONFLICTED RELATIONS

1. A Thread of Conflict

In my introduction, I stated that the central observation informing my thesis is the idea that Coetzee's oeuvre might best be understood as the literary expression of a perpetual state of conflict. I took the notion of authority as my starting point, asking what it might mean to speak of the persistence of authority in the wake of a poststructuralist denunciation of the author. The terms of the conflict in that discussion arose from the Romantic ideal of the author as a figure whose communion with transcendent, ahistorical truths occurs in a kind of synthesis with the larger movements of what Hazlitt describes as "the Spirit of the Age" (*The Spirit of the Age* 252). The point was to suggest that the lingering presence of the figure of the author in Coetzee's work can be read as a strategic departure from the Romantic model, in the sense that it comes to life precisely in the staging of a contest between an anachronistic belief in transcendent values and the socio-historical and literary contexts that give shape to his writing.

Over the course of the ensuing chapters I expanded on this initial observation by investigating the ramifications of the conflicted sense of self that emerges in Coetzee's writing through a related set of thematic co-ordinates. The first chapter considered the problem of self-expression as it is brought to light through the theme of confession. I argued that the conflict between the desire to tell the truth about oneself, and the realization that the "self" that speaks in writing is already a product of the confessional narrative itself, is central to our understanding of Coetzee's autobiographical project. In the second chapter I focused the terrain of the conflict more narrowly by tracing the particular significance of the site of the Karoo farm in Coetzee's explorations of subjectivity. The lingering influence of a Romantic conceit of identification between the self and nature, I argued,

plays an important role in Coetzee's representations of the farm, but it is an influence that is refracted through his historical awareness of the farm as a site in which these transcendent moves can have no real purchase. The third chapter picked up on the sense of socio-historical dislocation that pervades Coetzee's protagonists' experience of the Karoo farm, and approached the notion of conflict more explicitly from the point of view of politicized reality in Coetzee's work. An important line of thought in that chapter revolved around the idea of voice, and the realization that voice itself, even while it expresses a resistance to the idea of politics, or dreams of a place beyond politics from which to speak, is strongly inflected by the socio-political milieu from which it does speak. The voice that speaks from Coetzee's writing is thus textured by the antagonism that prevails between the desire to speak from beyond the dictates of politicized reality, and the awareness that politicized reality is a defining aspect of its ability to express itself in the first place.

It is probably an exercise in reductive logic to attempt to identify a common term among these various scenes of conflict that animate Coetzee's work, especially since it is the conflict itself, rather than the variety of situations which that conflict describes, that reverberates most consistently throughout the oeuvre. My aim in organizing my material according to the scheme described above, however, has been to create a sense of trajectory in my reading of Coetzee. The movement inscribed in this trajectory is one from initial observation (situating the conflict in a kind of schism between poststructuralist and Romantic influences), on to a general appraisal of its role in a project of literary self-expression (the theme of confession), to a consideration of its meaning in a more personal sense (the importance of the farm in Coetzee's autobiographical writing), and finally to an articulation of its emergence in a writing praxis that confronts the immediate political environment of the self. In doing so, I hope to have given a sense of the intensity with which the idea of conflict permeates Coetzee's work, and to have registered something of the interpretive possibilities that it affords us as critical readers of his work.

What remains to be done in this concluding chapter is to tie together my observations concerning the centripetal force of conflict in Coetzee's writing by defining it more closely as a personal approach to writing. I would like to conclude my argument, in other words, by suggesting that there is a common thread that weaves its way through Coetzee's work – a thread that is strongly associated with the various manifestations of conflict I have been describing so far – and it is this: the constant testing of an idealism of the most radical kind against the scrutiny of a dogged and remarkably severe analytical intelligence. It is as if there have been two opposing forces at work in Coetzee's writing ever since Eugene Dawn found himself at odds with his pitiless manager, Coetzee (*Coetzee, Dusklands* 2); or as if the camp doctor is still running in pursuit of his enigmatic ward, Michael K (*Coetzee, Life & Times of Michael K* 167). It is easy to forget that Coetzee is often his own most stringent critic, just as it is easy to lose sight of the fact that what is at the other end of his critical approach is often the expression of a feeling of the most startling intensity. In the agonistic space that is opened between these two extremes (the intimation of pure feeling, on the one hand, and the cold glare of the analyst, on the other) we can begin to identify something like a personal signature, or a composite of the self who writes and the self who emerges from the writing. Thus, I begin my conclusion by considering a theme in Coetzee's work where the conflict between the ideal of pure feeling and the insistence of a detached analytic sensibility is arguably most pronounced, namely in his depictions of love and making love.

2. Erotic Encounters

In *Diary of a Bad Year*, a novel that is in many ways the story of an old man's attempt to come to terms with the decline of his erotic powers, there is a passage in which JC relates the story of his Hungarian friend Gyula's active love life, a life that takes place entirely within the confines of his own mind. In his old age, writes JC, Gyula has dispensed with the need to make love in the real (that is to say the corporeal) world, and has acquired instead the ability to conjure up the “living

image” of the woman he desires in his head, where he is able to pursue his love affair “through all its stages, from infatuation to consummation” (Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* 175). Even though he appears to take it quite seriously, JC is not convinced by his friend’s method and his reflection on it is troubled by a sense of its unsavouriness:

I had every reason to get a grasp of this phenomenon that he called ideal love on the sensual plane, every reason to get a grasp of it and take it over and practise it on my own behalf. But I could not. There was the real thing, which I knew and remembered, and then there was the kind of mental rape Gyula performed, and the two were not the same. The quality of the emotional experience might be similar, the ecstasy might be as intense as he averred – who was I to dispute that? – yet in the most elementary of senses a mental love could not be a real thing. (Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* 179)

Gyula's method, which he has perfected over the years and which is based on his ability as a photographer – that is to say, on his belief in his superior eye, an eye for the telling detail – is to observe the woman he has taken a fancy to until she reveals, in “unique unconscious gesture” (Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* 177), her erotic essence to him. On this gesture, or essence, he then elaborates in his imagination until he has constructed a version of her that is so complete he is able to tell how she would move and respond – how she would be, in a word – in her most intimate moments. Finally he is able to indulge his desire and make love to the mental replica at his leisure, conducting her to the “utmost transports” (175). When JC questions what appears to be an essentially masturbatory practice, Gyula dismisses his criticism and calls it instead a form of “poetic”, or “ideal” love (178). For him there is no distinction between making love to an avatar and making love to a real person. This is so because both of them – the “living image” of the woman in his head as well as the corporeal version of her walking around on earth – are manifestations of the same ideal essence, or the same “soul” (177). A woman, for Gyula, appears to be no more and no less than the physical emanation of an ideal core, and once he has found a way to access that core directly – that is to say, imaginatively – he foregoes the need for commerce with the body entirely.

This is indeed a highly idealized notion of what it means to make love to someone. It is an idealism that has its roots, in this instance, in Plato, and in the Platonic idea of the indivisible soul as the essence of what makes us human.⁷⁵ Gyula is an inheritor of the Platonic tradition of the soul because he is from Hungary, and thus considers himself privy to the secrets of the Greek tradition as it has filtered down through centuries of European culture. JC, on the other hand, is excluded from the practice of such a sophisticated art, based as it is on a refined perception of the soul in unconscious gesture, because he is from a “savage continent”, and what comes “naturally” to Gyula's eye will remain forever invisible to his (Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* 178). Gyula, in turn, remains quite deaf to JC's barbed references to feminist tropes in his appraisal of his friend's method. This is most noticeable when JC compares Gyula's thoughts on womanizing to fishing, and observes that a womanizer and a woman belong together like “a fish and a hook” (177).⁷⁶ It is hard, in short, not to detect an undercurrent of irony, or even of sarcasm in what is on the face of it a sincere recounting of a rather arcane erotic confession.

What the passage brings to light is a certain scepticism on JC's part concerning his friend's boast about being able to grasp in a woman that which constitutes her authentic identity, or that part of her – secret, hidden from view – which forms the essence and continuity of her being. It is, however, not an unequivocal scepticism. Being himself an old man bereft of the power to seduce, JC would appear to have a special interest in Gyula's circumvention of the physical enfeeblements of old age.

⁷⁵ The Platonic argument for the immortality of the soul is set forth in *Phaedo*, the Dialogue in which Socrates attempts to dissuade his friends from their grief on the day before his execution. See especially *Phaedo* §64a–69e, in which Socrates argues that death, for the philosopher, is to be welcomed rather than feared, because the body and its bodily needs interferes with the pursuit of the ideal good, and it is only once he has been separated from his body that the philosopher is truly able to partake of the immortal soul.

⁷⁶ I have in mind here Margaret Atwood's well-known poem from the collection *Power Politics*:

you fit into me
like a hook into an eye

a fish hook
an open eye

(Atwood, “you fit into me”)

He wants to believe in the truth of his friend's method, he wants to take it over as his own and “practise it on [his] own behalf” (Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* 179), but something prevents him from doing so. “[I]n the most elementary of senses a mental love could not be a real thing ... we cannot do without the real thing, the real real thing; because without the real we die as if of thirst” (179), he says. Quite apart from his aversion for the chauvinistic sting in his friend's attitude, then, and apart from his own supposedly uncultured, or “savage” eye, there is something else in JC's makeup that prevents him from becoming initiate in the secrets of mental love.

What this something else is, this attachment to the “real thing” (the “real real thing”), is never quite explained. An obvious implication could be that it refers simply to the physical side of making love, but while that is presumably an important part of it, I do not think it makes for the full story. JC's scepticism, I think, is directed rather at the notion that such a thing as a person's authentic core exists at all, and if it did exist, whether it could ever be identified and experienced – whether it could ever be fully known – in the way that Gyula supposes when he talks about making love to his mental constructs. The “real thing”, for JC, is then first and foremost a matter of coming to terms with the failure of the kind of idealism espoused by his friend, based not so much on any technical or ethical deficiencies in his method as on the fallacy of his presupposition that there is an “erotic essence” to be had at all. The “real thing”, in other words, is that which takes place in the knowledge of the failure of the ideal, or that which has the ideal as its unattainable horizon.

Misfiring erotic encounters occur frequently in Coetzee's work. Almost without fail, one has a sense that they fall short of some vaguely defined, yet powerfully held ideal of what lovemaking should be. In some of Coetzee's books the failure of the erotic becomes a thematic preoccupation, as in *Youth*, where it is a constant topic of reflection for the brooding protagonist: “Is sex the measure of all things?” he asks himself. “If he fails in sex, does he fail in all things?” (Coetzee, *Youth* 133). Even those books which are less directly concerned with the realm of the erotic invariably contain a

suggestion of disillusionment in the face of sex. At the end of *Life & Times of Michael K*, for example, when Michael is on the receiving end of a sexual favour in a public toilet in Sea Point, the description goes out of its way to emphasize the unappealing nature of the event: “He wanted to push her off but his hands recoiled from the stiff dead hair of her wig” (Coetzee, *Life & Times of Michael K* 178). Coetzee's first novel, *Dusklands*, sets the tone when it gives the following description of a sexual encounter between Eugene Dawn and his young wife, Marilyn: “Though like the diligent partners in the marriage manuals we attend to each other's whispers, moans, and groans, though I plough like the hero and Marilyn froth like the heroine, the truth is that the bliss of which the books speak has eluded us” (*Dusklands* 7).⁷⁷

There are a great many examples of dismal sex in Coetzee's work and to list them all would make for dispiriting reading. The point is that erotic encounters in Coetzee's work almost always take on a visage of disappointment, of frustrated desire, of desire that does not manifest in the space which has been allotted for its manifestation. Often one has the impression that despite the tactile intimacy of those involved – despite their physical, concrete togetherness – there is something lacking in their experience, something that fails to materialize. Physical togetherness is no guarantee for an evocation of the ideal in the erotic lives of Coetzee's protagonists; on the contrary, descriptions of physical intimacy appear to work more readily as leaden reminders of the conspicuous absence of that ideal.

But what precisely is the nature of this ideal that hovers around the depiction of sex in Coetzee's work, this ideal that is invoked but never comes? I would like to attempt an answer by drawing on a passage from *Summertime*. The passage I have in mind describes one in a series of less-than-felicitous erotic encounters in the life of John, the protagonist:

⁷⁷ Derek Attridge, writing about Beckett's influence on Coetzee, notes that one of the salient features of this influence is the “comedy of the body ill-matched to the mind,” a feature for which the description of sex is eminently suited (“Sex, Comedy and Influence: Coetzee's Beckett” 77). Attridge goes on to make the point that the comic detachment of Coetzee's style is tempered by his awareness of the self's location in a historical milieu – a milieu whose demands on the self cannot so easily be ignored (86).

One night John arrived in an unusually excited state. He had with him a little cassette player, and put on a tape, the Schubert string quintet. It was not what I would call sexy music, nor was I particularly in the mood, but he wanted to make love, and specifically – excuse the explicitness – wanted us to co-ordinate our activities to the music, to the slow movement.

Well, the slow movement in question may be very beautiful but I found it far from arousing. Added to which I could not shake off the image on the box containing the tape: Franz Schubert looking not like a god of music but like a harried Viennese clerk with a head-cold.

I don't know if you remember the slow movement, but there is a long violin aria with the viola throbbing below, and I could feel John trying to keep time with it. The whole business struck me as forced, ridiculous. Somehow or other my remoteness communicated itself to John. 'Empty your mind!' he hissed at me. 'Feel through the music!'

Well, there can be nothing more irritating than being told what you must feel. I turned away from him, and his little erotic experiment collapsed at once. (Coetzee, *Summertime* 68)

John's partner in this episode is Julia Frankl, a woman with whom he once had an intermittent affair and who is now relating to his biographer, Mr Vincent – some years later and somewhat defensively – the part that John played in her life. The passage is one of many in which she describes John's sexual manner, and the picture that emerges is not flattering: "I found this new lover of mine bonier than my husband, and lighter. *Doesn't get enough to eat*, I remember thinking" (Coetzee, *Summertime* 37); "In his lovemaking I now think there was an autistic quality" (52); "Two inscrutable automata having inscrutable commerce with each other's bodies: that was how it felt to be in bed with John" (53). What emerges most strongly from her criticism of John's erotic persona – a criticism that is shared, for the most part, by the other interviewees in the novel – is his failure to connect, or his failure to invest himself in the shared act of physical intimacy. It is as if he is not present, or as if there is something insubstantial about his presence: he "[d]oesn't get enough to eat"

(68).

The image of John as an insubstantial lover is emphasized, in the passage above, by his attempt to evoke a state of passion through the introduction of an external medium, the medium of music. Music, in this instance, is not meant simply to set the mood (“Music is not about foreplay. It’s about courtship. You sing to the maiden *before* you go to bed with her, not while you are in bed with her,” complains Julia, *Summertime* 69); rather, it is supposed to encompass the act itself, to become the substance and the medium in which intensity of feeling is produced and sustained, even while it is playing itself out. When John commands Julia to “[e]mpty [her] mind” and to “[f]eel through the music,” he is urging precisely for her absence from their lovemaking, just as he, presumably, is trying to absent himself. What he wants, it appears, is for both of them to suspend their sense of personal involvement in what they are doing and to transform themselves into vessels of pure experience. John's role in his own little “erotic experiment” is thus somewhat ambivalent: he is the orchestrator of the event – the one who brings the music and doles out the commands – but he is also the instrument, the one whose body is required, in a purely functional sense, to invoke the spirit of the erotic. He supplies the paradigm as well as the material for the event, but he does not supply – or does not aim to supply – its meaning. Its meaning is supposed to come from somewhere else. Julia explains it thus:

He wanted to prove something to me about the history of feeling, he said. Feelings had natural histories of their own. They came into being within time, flourished for a while or failed to flourish, then died or died out. The kinds of feeling that had flourished in Schubert’s day were by now, most of them, dead. The sole way left to us to re-experience them was via the music of the times. Because music was the trace, the inscription, of feeling.

Okay, I said, but why do we have to fuck while we listen to the music?

Because the slow movement of the quintet happens to be about fucking, he replied. If, instead of resisting, I had let the music flow into me and animate me, I would have

experienced glimmerings of something quite unusual: what it had felt like to make love in post-Bonaparte Austria. (Coetzee, *Summertime* 69)

What this passage suggests about the nature of erotic experience is quite unusual – perhaps even more unusual than the solipsistic practice advocated by Gyula in *Diary of a Bad Year*. There are two things about it in particular that are worth drawing attention to, and that help us to get closer to the peculiar form of idealism that forms such an integral part, in its absence, of the erotic lives of Coetzee's protagonists. The first of these is the notion that there is a realm of feeling that does not depend for its existence on those who experience it. For a feeling to have a “natural history” of its own typifies that feeling as a species of being, one that has its own active part in a world beyond the subject who perceives it. Whereas Gyula brings himself to the heights of erotic ecstasy by capturing what he believes to be the other person's authentic core, John divests the experience of the erotic from its origin in the depths of another's being and apportions it instead to a nebulous realm of impersonal feeling. John insists, at the cost of himself and his lover, that there is a reality outside their own sense of what they are doing, a reality that is somehow more worthwhile than whatever sensations they might produce for themselves when they make love. He conceives of what is right in front of his nose – his lover, her person – chiefly as a means to participate in a larger order of feeling – a feeling with its own “natural history”, or its own essence. It is not quite a sensual reality John is after, then; nor is it the reality of the individual soul. Rather, we could say that John is operating under the auspices of a different order of ideal – the ideal of aligning his erotic experience with a reality that supersedes the sensual and exists beyond the individual's inner being, and that has left behind nothing but its “trace” in the music of Schubert.

The second aspect of the passage I want to draw attention to here is the notion that it is music that gives access to the realm of feeling John is trying so earnestly to reach. Specifically, I would like to consider the implications of his claim that music is capable of bearing the “inscription” of feeling. The role that is thus given to music supplies a bridge between what I have so far been treating as a

question of the erotic, and those concerns which may be said to influence Coetzee's work in a more pervasive sense - concerns which have to do with the meaning and value of artistic representation. Music, here, ties together the preoccupation with the real ("the real real thing", Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* 179) that underscores the erotic experience of Coetzee's protagonists, and the question that a book like *Summertime* raises about the fidelity of what is being represented to a reality beyond the narrative itself. When John asserts that the "sole way left to us to re-experience [the kinds of feeling that had flourished in Schubert's day] was via the music of the times" (Coetzee, *Summertime* 69), he is making a claim for the authenticity of the feelings evoked by that music: he is saying, in short, that his own experience is akin to the experience as it existed in its original form, and that gave rise to the music in the first place.

However, if we look closely at the way in which John describes that original feeling – the feeling he hopes to reproduce for himself by sublimating his erotic being to Schubert – we notice that he qualifies it in certain important and revealing ways. Notably, he alerts us to the historical dimension of what he is trying to achieve: "He wanted to prove to me something about the *history* of feeling," says Julia (Coetzee, *Summertime* 69, my emphasis). The kind of feeling John is aiming for here – the "glimmerings" he wants them both to experience – is something that comes into being "within time", that exists only "for a while" and then "die[s] out" (69). To this mercurial symbiosis between a feeling and its historical setting, he gives some gravity by specifying, quite meticulously, the particular period he has in mind: "post-Bonaparte Austria" (69). If we set aside for a moment the ineptitude of John's lofty ideals here, and we take what he says at face value, we can discern something about the conception of history that underlies his peculiar theory of feeling, and that plays an important part in the way in which Coetzee sets up the conflict between the idealism that characterizes the inner lives of his protagonists, and the historical necessities against which those ideals are so often severely tested.

What strikes the reader immediately is that John's description of the time in which Schubert composed his music is not conceived in strictly chronological terms. He does not say, for example, that by opening themselves to the music he and Julia would have experienced "what it had felt like to make love in early eighteenth century Austria," or something to that effect. Nor does he refer to Europe in generic terms: it is Austria in particular he speaks of, an Austria that is defined quite narrowly by its existence in the aftermath of Napoleon's defeat. The way in which he describes the period from which the feeling he is after emerges reveals a conception of history that is strongly inflected by an awareness of the larger socio-political upheavals that define the narratives of place. The emphasis, in other words, is on the way in which epoch-defining structures of power ("post-Bonaparte") influence the historical context from which those feelings that constitute the reality of lived experience emerge. What this implies is that the authenticity of a feeling – the measure of its connection to reality – is somehow associated with the various historical power relations that give definition to the peculiar time and place in which that feeling originates. When John claims that he is able, through music, to "re-experience" a feeling, it is thus not quite a transcendent order of experience – it is not an emotional high pulled down from the aether through the pure aesthetics of tonal harmony – but is, rather, a continuity of the complex relationship that exists between individual feeling and the historical realities that give shape to that feeling. For John the reality of an emotional experience does not reside in its capacity to overwhelm the senses, or in its ability to elicit an intensity or ecstasy of feeling in one's private being (as it does for Gyula), but derives rather from the scope it affords for a sense of the relation between what one feels and the world in which that feeling comes to life.

3. The Seduction of Music

The notion of history that I am describing here – or, more precisely, the notion that the reality of a feeling is in important ways a product of its historical circumstances – is an idea that Coetzee

develops in his essay, “What is a Classic? A Lecture.”⁷⁸ In it he sets out to investigate, first through a consideration of T.S. Eliot's definition of the classic and then through an account of the historical reception of the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, what it might mean to claim that one has been spoken to, “across the ages”, by the classic (Coetzee, “What is a Classic? A Lecture” 10). At the heart of his investigation lies what can only be described as an autobiographical moment: the teenaged Coetzee, bored and housebound on a summer afternoon, hears the music of Bach (*Well-Tempered Clavier*) drifting over from the student residence next door; he is transfixed; for as long as the music lasts, he is “frozen”, he “dare[s] not breathe” (9). That incidental contact with the classic, says Coetzee, was for him a “moment of revelation” and of the “greatest significance in [his] life” (10).

It is against the background of this moment that Coetzee sets out to answer the question of what it might mean to be spoken to by the classic. From his critical assessment of Eliot, he draws two contrasting notions of the influence the classic has on our lives. The first of these (the “transcendental-poetic”, Coetzee, “What is a Classic? A Lecture” 9) takes seriously the claim that to come into contact with the classic is a kind of transcendental experience, a sublime moment that gives access to an Eliotic “transpersonal order” and that becomes the mythical point of origin for a subsequent artistic vocation. The second, opposing notion conceives of the classic in “socio-cultural” terms (9). According to this notion, Coetzee's moment of transfixion when he heard Bach for the first time was actually a recognition of “high European culture” – and an unconscious decision to master “the codes of that culture” – as a way out of the “historical dead end” presented to him by his situation as a young white male in South Africa in the 1950s (11). “In other words,” asks Coetzee, “was the experience what I understood it to be – a disinterested and in a sense an impersonal aesthetic experience – or was it really the masked expression of a material interest?” (11). The question Coetzee asks himself becomes a question of how the classic obtains its meaning:

⁷⁸ I have also mentioned this essay in chapter one. See section 2 – “Shameful Incidents.”

does it have an essential, substantive meaning that transcends the vagaries of circumstance, or does it draw meaning to itself based on what it stands for within a given socio-historical situation?

The answer, it turns out, is neither, or not quite either. Instead, by way of a historical account of the survival of Bach's music through the generations – a survival that requires the rigorous “day-by-day testing” afforded by the traditions of musical apprenticeship – Coetzee makes the deceptively simple point that the classic is that which “emerges intact” from the passage of history, or that which exists because “generations of people cannot afford to let go of it and hold on to it at all costs” (“What is a Classic? A Lecture” 19). It is a deceptive answer because it does not resolve the opposition Coetzee has sketched for us between the two contrasting notions of the classic, namely the “transcendental-poetic” and the “socio-cultural”. By defining the classic as that which survives, he seems rather to be describing a situation in which the meaning of the classic emerges from the friction between the two:

So we arrive at a certain paradox. The classic defines itself by *surviving*. Therefore the *interrogation* of the classic, no matter how *hostile*, is part of the history of the classic, inevitable and even to be welcomed. For as long as the classic needs to be *protected from attack*, it can never prove itself classic. (Coetzee, “What is a Classic? A Lecture” 19, my emphasis)

“[S]urviving”, “interrogation”, “hostile”, “protected from attack”: evidently Coetzee conceives of the space from which the meaning of the classic emerges – a space that is drawn between the pressures of historical materialism, on the one hand, and the insistence of transcendent value, on the other – as a space of unrelenting conflict. For him there is no easy resolution in the matter of the classic, no synthesis between that which we assume to be valuable and the assault on that value by the world of current affairs. To experience such a classic would not mean to reach through history in order to salvage from the past a fixed value for the present, but entails rather an immediate sense of

the classic as a site that bears the traces of the conflict that has shaped it into what it is today. What Coetzee is suggesting, I think, is that the value of the classic derives from how much it has been able to absorb of its passage through history without losing the ability to communicate those patterns of association that give it its distinct aesthetic being. The classic conceived in this way becomes a kind of event, one that is characterized chiefly by its struggle to retain a voice in which it may speak its own struggle.

It is revealing that Coetzee uses an autobiographical moment to give voice to his argument concerning the value of the classic. By using the figure of himself and his own experience as a mooring point for his discussion, he seems to be implying that the self – or, properly speaking, the subject-in-writing – is involved somehow in sustaining the state of conflict that he has put forward as the condition of existence for the classic. The significance of such an involvement is twofold. In the first place, it suggests that the self may be thought of as a figure or entity in which the experience of conflict between socio-cultural and transcendent values becomes palpable. When Coetzee speaks about his younger self “mooning around” in the backyard and then being struck dumb all of a sudden by the music of Bach (“What is a Classic? A Lecture” 9), he is not merely presenting that self as a passive recipient of an external value. What he is doing can be understood rather as a kind of marking, or staking out of a terrain in which historical concerns and the idea of transcendent value have a kind of simultaneous, discordant existence. The self being represented here thus becomes a sort of terrain or terraneous condition for the textured conflict that gives rise to artistic meaning.

The second implication of Coetzee's use of an autobiographical figure in his essay is related to the first, but it is also quite different in that it requires a shift in perspective. Let us say that the value of a work of art derives from the sort of productive antagonism between two different orders of meaning, the transcendent and the socio-historical, that Coetzee has been describing for us. For this

to be possible, and for his argument to have a measure of sense outside the purely rhetorical, it is necessary to imagine or to present to ourselves in our minds a point of intersection where these two forces coincide. It is necessary, in other words, to make some room for their fraught and evidently hostile interaction to occur. The name that is given to this intersection, or to the space in which these two opposing orders of meaning coincide, is John. The shift in perspective occurs when we think of the autobiographical subject, John, not as a pre-existing condition for the relations between the two to occur, but rather as a product of their confrontation. The self that is thus imagined is very much a figure that comes into being or originates at the crosshatching of the “transcendental-poetic” and the “socio-cultural”.

The autobiographical subject itself thus begins to acquire something of the paradoxical charge that Coetzee has been describing for the classic. Or, to put it differently, the pattern that Coetzee creates for the classic in his essay – the interrogation of a timeless, transcendent ideal of value by the uncompromising forces of socio-historical process, and the actual classic as that which results from this process of interrogation – is similar in kind to the pattern of antagonism I mentioned in the opening part of this conclusion as a kind of personal signature in his work, namely the constant testing of intimations of pure feeling against the scrutiny of a rigorous analytical intelligence.

That this pattern is a defining feature of Coetzee's approach to the practice of writing, and more explicitly that his approach to writing provides an approximation of the sense of self that resides in his autobiographical fiction, can be seen in one of the early passages in *Youth*. Shortly after John has become embroiled in the first of a series of ill-fated love affairs, he comes home to his flat one day to discover that the lover in question, Jacqueline, has been reading his diary. Jacqueline is by no means impressed with what she finds written there (and, if the preceding passages are any indication of what John has told his diary about her, she has good reason not to be), so she packs her bags and leaves him. The episode prompts John to reflect on his own diary-writing habits, and on

what is at stake in writing more generally:

The question of what should be permitted to go into his diary and what kept forever shrouded goes to the heart of all his writing. If he is to censor himself from expressing ignoble emotions ... how will those emotions ever be transfigured and turned into poetry? ... Besides, who is to say that the feelings he writes in his diary are his true feelings? Who is to say that at each moment while the pen moves he is truly himself? At one moment he might be truly himself, at another he might simply be making things up. How can he know for sure? Why should he even *want* to know for sure? (Coetzee, *Youth* 10)

This passage, with its implicit critique of the confessional impulse, and its questions about the relationship between the true self and the “truth” of that which is written, contains in kernel form Coetzee's assessment of the problems surrounding the mode of self-expression in Rousseau's *Confessions*, as discussed in the first chapter (see especially section 2.1 “Coetzee and the Question of the Self”). And then it goes even further, as Carrol Clarkson notes, by setting up, linguistically, “the sense of a dynamic dialogic interface between writing and written selves” (*Countervoices* 39), thereby allowing the process of interrogation itself to be interrogated while it is taking place. John's rumination leaps in no time at all from the basic question, namely which parts of himself should be kept out of his writing (writing as censorship), to the more pressing question, namely how he might know whether *anything* he writes emerges from his true self (writing as self-interrogation). It is this basic drive to question his own motives – an intense desire to get to the truth that is matched by an equally intense scrutiny of anything that presumes to speak in the name of truth – that forms the bridge between John's sense of being and the pattern of conflict that is so characteristic of Coetzee's writing.

4. Reality Check: *The Childhood of Jesus*

At the end of the first chapter (“The Subject of Confession”), I argued that we are able to sense a shift in register in Coetzee's more recent work: a reflection, from within the aesthetic paradigm of his fiction, that resembles the moves of atonement we discern in the tradition of confessional writing, or a kind of negotiation of the legacy of the self that emerges from “the massive autobiographical writing-enterprise that fills a life, this enterprise of self-construction” (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 17).⁷⁹ In the light of these observations, it seems fitting to conclude my thesis by considering what we may perhaps call the afterlife (now that John Coetzee has been killed off by his author in *Summertime*) of the dynamic tension in Coetzee's writing between the desire for a transcendent, subjective truth, and the realization that the experience of truth is always and incontrovertibly conditioned by the socio-historical context in which it arrives. I turn my attention, then, to Coetzee's most recent book, *The Childhood of Jesus*. It is a novel that can be read as a retrospective affirmation of the abiding importance in Coetzee's aesthetic sensibility of the conflict between the ideal of transcendence and the awareness of the mediated nature of reality. In order to understand the import of the novel, it is necessary to turn back the clock a few decades, to consider Coetzee's statements on what it meant to him to be writing from the historical moment of apartheid South Africa.

In 1987, a time that corresponds with the genesis of *Age of Iron*, Coetzee received the Jerusalem Prize for fiction – a prize that is awarded biannually to “a writer whose work best expresses and

⁷⁹ Most recently, in an essay on the Australian author Patrick White (“Patrick White: Within a Budding Grove,” published in the *New York Review of Books* in November 2013), Coetzee devotes a number of paragraphs to the question of how a writer should go about ensuring that his papers are destroyed after his death (“The best answer seems to be: do the job yourself”), before describing a recently published, unfinished work by White (*The Hanging Garden*) in which the driving force behind one of the principal characters, Eirene Sklavos, appears to be a quest for transcendence. She is, in Coetzee's estimation, one of “White's elect”: “outsiders mocked by society yet doggedly occupied in their private quests for transcendence, or as White more often calls it, the truth” (Coetzee, “Within a Budding Grove”). Suffice to say that the tension between a private salvation, sought for in artistic form, and the implacable process of history appears to be as much an animating force in Coetzee's literary sensibility today as it has ever been.

promotes the idea of the 'freedom of the individual in society'" ("The Jerusalem Prize"). It was a time, as I mentioned in the previous chapter ("Politics, Voice and the Self") of great political turmoil in South Africa. One year previously, in an attempt to bring to heel the surge of revolutionary unrest that was sweeping through the country, P.W. Botha had declared a nationwide state of emergency, a move that gave the apartheid government "well-nigh unlimited" powers of intervention, and that made itself manifest in all the usual instruments of authoritarian control: violent suppression of protests, indefinite detention of suspected activists, secret death camps where agents of the state could go about the business of torture at their leisure (Kannemeyer, *J.M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing* 375-376). Coetzee's acceptance speech for the Jerusalem Prize makes no bones about the devastating effects of these conditions (and of the heritage of colonialism that lies behind them) on the psyche of the writer. South African literature, he writes, "is a less than fully human literature, unnaturally preoccupied with power and the torsions of power, unable to move from elementary relations of contestation, domination and subjugation to the vast and complex human world that lies beyond them" (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 98). Coetzee laments the invasive and, in his view, spiritually deforming realities of the South African situation and expresses a desire to follow in the footsteps of his contemporary Milan Kundera instead, who won the prize two years previously and who spoke, in his address, of *Don Quixote*, praising the novel (and the origins of the novel form) as an alternative to the grimly causal logic of history (a logic from which systems of retribution and reprise are the inevitable outflow):

How I would like to be able to join him in that tribute, I and so many of my fellow novelists from South Africa! How we long to quit a world of pathological attachments and abstract forces, of anger and violence, and take up residence in a world where a living play of feelings and ideas is possible, a world where we truly have an occupation. (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 98)

Now, almost thirty years later, Coetzee appears to have gotten his wish. *The Childhood of Jesus*, his

latest novel, situates the pantomimic adventures of the self-appointed knight from La Mancha as a kind of Ur-text, and is about as far removed from the violent struggle and psychic perversions of apartheid politics as it is possible to get. Two refugees from an unspecified past, a middle-aged man named Simón and a young boy named David, arrive in the strangely out-of-sync, Spanish-speaking city of Novilla, where they attempt to settle into a new life. Apart from a few minor bureaucratic setbacks (“The answer is no. I am not going to give in, so don't press me... this is not the correct way to proceed,” says Ana, who receives them at the relocation centre, Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus* 19), things proceed quite smoothly for them. Simón obtains a job as a stevedore at the river docks, and within a few weeks they have been granted an apartment in the East Village, a comparatively desirable part of town (51). The food in Novilla is bland and lacking in variety – mostly they eat bread – and Simón soon discovers that his fellow citizens are unnervingly disinterested in sex, but these matters are less pressing to him than his primary quest, which is to find David's mother. Despite having no knowledge of her or what she looks like, says Simón, he or the boy (or both of them) will recognize her at once when they see her (19). Soon enough he does find someone who consents to being the boy's mother: a rather unsympathetically drawn character name Inés, who takes the boy as her own only to coddle him and keep him away from Simón, who relinquishes all claim to the boy once he has found him a mother.

The Childhood of Jesus is very strange book. About their previous lives Simón and David retain no memory at all – their names were assigned to them upon arrival, and they had to spend six weeks in a transit camp learning Spanish – and there is a strong sense throughout the novel that they have passed into a kind of limbo – a vaguely defined, protean space in which everyone appears to have come from somewhere else, and in which it is only a matter of time before one's memories – along with one's appetitive desires – vanish completely. If it is an allegory, as Joyce Carol Oates remarks in her review of the book, then it is an allegory without a clearly defined correlative in the field of the extra-textual: it is not easy to say what it is an allegory *for* (“Saving Grace”). Northrop Frye

famously defined a kind of sliding scale for allegory, or a continuum according to which literary works occupy a spot on a line somewhere between the “naive”, in which the didactic import of the work is manifestly evident, and the “elusive”, or “paradoxical”, in which the writing employs a variety of techniques to disrupt the easy association between the so-called literal and descriptive aspects of symbolic language (Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* 89-92).

One way of reading Coetzee's novel – and it is the reading I follow here – is to say that it tries to situate itself in a space that is somewhere beyond Frye's allegorical continuum, in the sense that its denotative field – that which would correspond to the implicit, real-world situation for which an allegory is supposed to be the symbolic representation – appears to be the field of symbolic representation itself. The way in which this relationship makes itself felt in the writing is in the matter-of-fact appearance of a number of strangely jarring pronouncements relating to the epistemic substructure of the narrative universe in which the story unfolds: ruptures in the language of the story that offer glimpses of a world beneath it that is not the same as our own. A striking example is when Simón takes out a children's copy of *Don Quixote* from the library in order to teach David how to read. The boy asks him who wrote it, and he states quite simply that its author is a man named Benengeli (Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus* 154), who is in fact the mythical author created by the real-world Cervantes as the supposed chronicler of Quixote's adventures (Cervantes, *Don Quixote* 65-70). The limbo in which Simón and David find themselves is thus not quite the same limbo to which you and I might proceed when we depart from this life, but is rather a kind of limbo for fictional beings: a heaven that has as its earth the speculative realm of allegorical allusion and fictional play that exists in our world as the symbolic realm of literary language. Another way of saying the same thing is that we seem to have entered, so to speak, the world that lies beyond the gate that appears in the final chapter of *Elizabeth Costello*.

Although Coetzee makes a point early on of deflecting us from a search for a *llave universal*, or a

universal key that will unlock all the closed doors in the novel (*The Childhood of Jesus* 4), it does indeed seem as if some of the more perplexing non sequiturs in the book begin to unravel themselves if we consider the novel as a sustained experiment in writing a story from a position that situates the realm of symbolic or allegorical play as its concrete field of reference, or as its real-world analogy. Likewise, such a reading of the book provides a useful point of entry for making sense of those of its features that might otherwise strike the reader as rather wilfully obtuse, or deliberately naive. I have in mind here, as an example, a passage that occurs quite early on in the novel, in the second chapter, when Simón has to prove his mettle in order to get a job as a stevedore. What the work entails is the menial task of carrying heavy bags of grain from the hold of the ship, up a short ladder, across a gangplank and onto a horse-drawn cart parked on the wharf. The passage in which Simón tries to do this for the first time can be read in many ways; one way is to say that it comes across as a deliberately oversimplified example in an imaginary handbook for first-time fiction writers. Rule number one is that the protagonist must have an obstacle to overcome. And thus, we read:

Perched on top of the heap is a big fellow with brawny forearms and a wide grin whose job it evidently is to drop a sack onto the shoulders of the stevedore waiting in line. He turns his back, the sack descends; he staggers, then grips the corners as he sees the other men do, takes a first step, a second. Is he really going to be able to climb the ladder bearing this heavy weight, as the other men are doing? Does he have it in him? “Steady, *viejo*,” says a voice behind him. “Take your time.” (Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus* 12)

The banality of the situation is magnified when we discover, later on in the book, that the stevedores are actually a fraternity of sorts who esteem their labour according to a variety of philosophical Stoicism,⁸⁰ one that derives, in all probability, from the evening classes in philosophy which they

⁸⁰ “So you would like to liberate us from a life of bestial labour. You want us to quit the wharves and find some other kind of work, where we would no longer be able to hoist a load onto our shoulders, feeling the ears of grain in the bag shift as they take the shape of our body, hearing their rustle, where we would lose touch with the thing itself –

earnestly attend at a centre for self-improvement called the Institute, and where they discuss such things as chairs and tables, and the ideal types of chairs and tables (Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus* 120). The brief how-to section demonstrating the workings of dramatic tension that I just mentioned is deflated even further when we realize that the larger purpose behind the work has more to do with the philosophical self-actualization of the brotherhood of stevedores than with anything as pressingly actual as supplying the community with food.

The sense one has, in other words, is that there is something lacklustre about the source of dramatic tension in the book. In the example I just gave, there is a kind of bare-bones feeling to the episode, as if it is the remnant or wreckage or phantom of a more full-blooded dramatic scene, and this lack is compounded by the aura of philosophical complacency that hangs over the city of Novilla. If an allegory is an attempt to recreate, in however simple (“naive”) or complex (“elusive” or “paradoxical”) a form, a relationship between the elements of some substructure of “historical events” or “moral precepts” according to the symbolic codes of another, literary form (Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* 90), then we seem to have to do, in *The Childhood of Jesus*, with a representational structure that attempts to recreate (or struggles to recreate) the elements that are involved in the form of allegorical representation itself. And in the same way that an allegory of the “elusive” or “paradoxical” variety at the far end of Northrop Frye's scale – say, for example, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* – appears to sacrifice its structural integrity by self-consciously divorcing itself from the field of the actual – or by disrupting the easy association between the literal and descriptive aspects of its language – so, too, Coetzee's novel appears to be sacrificing something of its cohesive force by divorcing itself (or insulating itself) from the rhetorical techniques embedded in the mode of the allegorical. If *The Waste Land* can be read as a metaphor for the disassociation between the field of the symbolic and the field of the actual, we might read *The Childhood of Jesus* as a kind of extended metaphor for the disassociation between the continuity of a narrative and the

with the food that feeds us and gives us life,” says Álvaro, the foreman at the docks (Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus* 113).

substructure of allegory that gives it its pulse.

Which brings us, finally, to the boy, David, and to the recurring suggestion in the novel that he is “gifted” in some way. The most obvious hint of what this “gift” might entail occurs when Simón is trying to convince the boy that there is no such thing as a private language:

He looks into the boy's eyes. For the briefest of moments he sees something there. He has no name for it. *It is like* – that is what occurs to him in the moment. Like a fish that wriggles loose as you try to grasp it. But not like a fish – no, like *like a fish*. Or like *like like a fish*. On and on. Then the moment is over, and he is simply standing in silence, staring. (Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus* 186)

If we take seriously the titular conceit that the child in the novel is supposed to have some kind of redemptive promise or feature, then we might identify this feature precisely as the metaphorical or allegorizing spark that is absent from the weirdly dissonant composition of the narrative. That is to say, what Simón sees in the eyes of the boy appears to be a kind of essence of metaphor (“*like like like a fish*”), or the relational aspect of metaphor concretized into a discrete quality or essence. What the citizens of this limbo need in order to solve the predicament of their bloodless existence, is to re-establish the imaginative leap of faith – or, to return to the language of our imaginary handbook for fiction writing, we might call the “imaginative leap of faith” a “suspension of disbelief” – that connects the disparate elements of their world to the allegorical realm from which they have departed. Allegory, in this sense, and all the various ambivalences, or relational difficulties, or opportunities for play that it entails between the field of the symbolic and the field of the actual, becomes, in Coetzee's latest novel, the kind of Ur-myth, or the genesis to which he is trying to return.

In *Republic*, Socrates professes his inability to give a description of goodness in its essential,

transcendent form (Plato, *Republic* §506d-e). What he is able to do in its place, he tells his interlocutors, is “to talk about something which seems to [him] to be the child of goodness and to bear a very strong resemblance to it” (§506e). He goes on to present the famous allegory of the cave, in which the tangible realm of human affairs is represented as a shadowy place of darkness (or a “prison cell,” §517b) where humans are bound in chains, spending their lives looking at reflections on a wall. Outside the cave is the true “realm of knowledge”, where one might perceive the sun, which is analogous to goodness itself, the very “source and provider of truth and knowledge” (§517c). For the chosen one to whom it is given to escape his bonds and venture upwards into the domain of the sun, the transcendent realm of truth is a blindingly magnificent place:

He wouldn't be able to see things up on the surface of the earth, I suppose, until he'd got used to his situation. At first, it would be shadows that he could most easily make out, then he'd move on to the reflections of people and so on in water, and later he'd be able to see the actual things themselves. Next, he'd feast his eyes on the heavenly bodies and the heavens themselves, which would be easier at night: he'd look at the light of the stars and the moon, rather than at the sun and sunlight during the daytime...

And at last, I imagine, he'd be able to discern and feast his eyes on the sun – not the displaced image of the sun in water or elsewhere, but the sun on its own, in its proper place. (Plato *Republic* §516a-b)

For Coetzee, it seems, the logic is reversed: the proper locus of reality is the realm of literary representation itself, with all the difficult negotiations between the desire for transcendence and the unsparing interrogation at the hand of history that it entails. And the world beyond the allegory, if *Childhood of Jesus* is anything to go by, is at best a kind of limbo: a place, as Coetzee writes elsewhere, in which ideas, “unpicked from their context and laid out on the laboratory table, usually

turn out to be uncomplicated, even banal” (“Homage” 7). The thought holds equally true for the idea of the self in Coetzee’s autobiographical fiction. If we were to attempt to separate that self from the aesthetic paradigm that gives shape and texture to its experience – the murky terrain of self-questioning and doubt, half-expressed feelings of compromised desire, the unrelenting pressures of a demanding socio-historical milieu – and that is, perhaps, the closest thing we have to an authentic expression of that experience, we would, in all likelihood, be less than satisfied with the results.

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