
Textual Solipsism in J.M. Coetzee's Dusklands

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This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to and quotation in this dissertation from the work or works of others has been acknowledged through citation and reference.

Signed by candidate

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation I examine through a close reading of J.M. Coetzee's Dusklands (1974) the textual dynamic that impels the two narrator-protagonists toward the solipsist position – the ground of the true Cartesian. I show how Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee are presented as products of Western print culture and children of René Descartes: literate and acutely self-conscious. I note how each conceives himself according to Descartes' mind-body dualism as primarily a thinking thing. I argue that this self-conception is reinforced by their paradoxical presence-as-absence as figures in a fiction. Dawn and Jacobus appear to be fixed by historical coordinates, yet each constantly subverts his historical-realist denotation by sallies of the imagination that prove him to be a purely textual emanation – a figment of J.M. Coetzee's imagination, a dense anachronistic intertext. I indicate that it is upon these grounds that Dawn and Jacobus qualify as solipsists of a kind – apparently fearful that nothing beyond themselves is knowable and therefore existent. I describe how this solipsist detachment informs their debased relations with others. I extend this aspect of my discussion to the commonplace, casual acts of reading and writing, suggesting that to read or write is to position oneself in relation to human others less real than the primary other of oneself.

Part One focuses on Eugene Dawn and "The Vietnam Project". In section One I discuss Dawn's Cartesian inheritance by examining textual evidence in "The Vietnam Project" and salient aspects of Descartes' philosophy; I consider also Dawn's report on Vietnam. In section Two I hinge my discussion on Martin Buber's understanding of the act and event of relation. I consider here Dawn's vexed relations with his wife Marilyn and supervisor Coetzee; on the subject of Marilyn I consider the case of the voyeur. Section Three elaborates on Dawn's voyeuristic impulse with reference to his classified photographs and his dreams. In section Four I link Dawn's referencing tendency and his awareness of himself as a text to the ludic dimension of Dusklands. I gloss Dawn's 'action sequence' in section Five, and in section Six consider the act of his writing and his increasing self-enclosure.

In Part Two I turn to Jacobus and "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee". In sections Seven, Eight, and Nine, I dwell on the extent and significance of Jacobus's literacy and numeracy. In section Ten I register Descartes' influence on Jacobus, and discuss more fully the tension between his material and his figurative being. In

section Eleven, via William Plomer and William Wordsworth, I set out to determine whether Jacobus's solipsist fear is at all authentic.

Frequently I support a point with a quotation from Coetzee's critical writings; I engage glancingly with other of his fiction. Principally by way of T.S. Eliot I locate Dusklands in the Western literary tradition.

I emphasize throughout this account the dual signification of Dawn and Jacobus: as material entity and as figure. This distinction should be understood as provisional and tenuous, since in the medium of fiction these two 'states of being' interfuse. Although I recognize that Cartesian dualism is written into the Colonial enterprise, my first concern in this account is the textual dynamic of Dusklands.

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O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and
count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that
I have bad dreams.

Hamlet. II.ii.256-258.

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No human being is pure person, and none is pure ego; none is entirely actual, none lacking in actuality. Each lives in a twofold I. But some men are so person-oriented that one may call them persons, while others are so ego-oriented that one may call them egos. Between these and those true history takes place. The more a human being, the more humanity is dominated by the ego, the more does the I fall prey to inactuality. In such ages the person in the human being and in humanity comes to lead a subterranean, hidden, as it were invalid existence – until it is summoned.

Martin Buber. I and Thou (1970). 114-5.

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Introduction

J.M. Coetzee's Dusklands (1974) is a novel of two parts: "The Vietnam Project" and "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee". The two narrator-protagonists, Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee, are acutely self-conscious characters. Their overweening egotism undercuts their relations with others. It is principally their self-interest and detachment that qualifies them as solipsists of a kind. Introducing his book A Common Sky: Philosophy and the Literary Imagination (1974) A.D. Nuttall points out that "Solipsism as a settled system of belief is quite properly regarded as something absurd, or even comic; no one but a philosopher – no, a lunatic philosopher – could believe that" (11). Nuttall's remark underpins the range and trajectory of my argument in this study. Dawn and Jacobus are not pure solipsists. Rather, certain of their acts carry a solipsist accent, or they might be said to tend toward the solipsist position. To understand this solipsist tendency one must appreciate the peculiar textual dynamic of this novel. The solipsist impulse of these two characters is as much a privately expressed preference as a function of their status as texts within a text. One of my concerns is to explore the extent to which John Coetzee¹ presents them as textualized and textualizing entities.

The term solipsism has its roots in Latin: a conjunction of 'solus' (alone) and 'ipse' (self) (The Concise Oxford Dictionary 1009). The concept of the human self alone in the world can be traced to the philosophy of René Descartes (1596-1650). For Descartes, man is essentially a thinking thing. The seat of man's true being is the mind; the body serves as the mind's extension and material casing. Reason and systematic doubt characterize Descartes' philosophic method. This method opens a gap between the observer and the world, the knower and what exists to be known. The nature of this gap corresponds to the nature of the gap Descartes posits between mind and body. Although one cannot conceive the mind existing without its extensive framework of bone, blood, flesh, and sinew – Roald Dahl's brain in a jar, for instance – one may distinguish between body and mind according to a difference

¹ To avoid confusion, henceforth I refer to the author of Dusklands as John Coetzee. On occasions when it is clear enough that I am talking about this author I refer simply to Coetzee. I refer to the narrator-protagonist of "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee" as Jacobus, and the 'translator' of Jacobus's account as J.M.

in nature. In Descartes' view the mind is of a different order to the body. Similarly, though not practically possible, for the purposes of attaining true knowledge of himself and all that surrounds him the human individual may be set apart (set himself apart) from the plenum of being that is the world. According to this scheme one apprehends what is true and what is not true by a series of perspectivizing steps. First the gap between mind and body, next the gap between self and environment. Based on a reading of Coetzee's first novel Stephen Watson speaks of the "mental aberration" of "divided consciousness" at the root of the colonial enterprise, presented in Dusklands as "a special feature of Western humanity":

If the narratives of Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee are anything to go by, the colonising project of the West was set in motion when this same man embarked upon his Cartesian project of separating subject from object, self from world in a dualism which privileged the first of the two terms and thereby assured his domination of nature and any other obstacle he might confront. (Watson 1996: 19-20)

Coetzee presents Dawn and Jacobus as beneficiaries of Western literate culture. Both think in terms of the written word, and print in particular. The Cartesian thread runs through Western print culture just as it runs through the tradition of Western philosophy. By way of their author familiar with Descartes' philosophy, Dawn and Jacobus seem to reveal an independent preference for the hermetic dimension of print. Can the influence of print culture and the influence of Descartes be disentwined? It is a question I implicitly address throughout this study of Dusklands; I attempt a direct answer in my conclusion.

Solipsism is rightly the turf of the pure Cartesian. The true solipsist will deny that anything beyond his own mind is knowable and, in the extreme case, since not knowable, existent. Who is to say other human beings are not apparitions, figments of one's imagination? Perhaps they are substantial beings resembling oneself, perhaps they do not yield to the touch, perhaps they breathe, gesture, speak, but – observe the mind-body partition – may not all these persuasive impressions be the deceptions of one's senses? Pure solipsism is a fine metaphysical conceit but in reality hardly a tenable position. A watered-down version of the term occurs in

everyday discourse. One may speak of writing and silent reading as solipsistic activities – activities for the self alone. This use of the term in no way implies an encompassing denial of extensive reality. It does however foreground introspection, self-absorption, detachment from an immediate environment. Proust testifies to these aspects of the silent reading experience in the following reminiscence:

Then the last page had been read, the book was finished. I had to halt the mad rush of my eyes and of the voice that followed them noiselessly, stopping only to catch my breath, in a deep sigh. Then, so as to give the tumult, let loose inside me for too long to be able to still itself, other movements to control, I would stand up, would begin walking up and down by my bed, my eyes still fixed on some point that it would have been vain to seek for inside the room or without, for it was a soul's distance away, one of those distances that are not measured in metres or leagues, as others are, and which it is impossible to mistake for them when one sees the 'remote' stare of those whose thoughts are 'elsewhere'. (Proust 1994: 20-21).

Writing is a similarly self-oriented activity that fosters detachment from place. In a cocoon of silence one sits alone with pen and paper, or before a computer screen, and lifts words from the great streaming vocabulary in one's brain to set them down in ranks on the page or screen. Words engender words; it is through extended and attentive reading that one improves one's facility with words in speech and in writing. This much is obvious. Less obvious is the dialogic nature of writing. To address the blank page is to embark upon dialogue first with oneself and second with an absent but presumed other. All writers are foremost readers; and there is some truth in Philip Larkin's remark that "one reason for writing ... is that no one's written what you want to read" (76). Writing in this view is a responsive act: turning to idiosyncratic purpose the reams of words one has scanned in the works of others.

At various points in his narrative Eugene Dawn admits his debt to books. It is clear that he considers himself foremost a thinking thing. He is at pains to dissociate himself from his rebel body. He yearns for the rapture of pure contemplation, he dreams of immaterial being. At first sight Jacobus would appear not to be as tractable to this sort of textual-solipsist appraisal as Dawn. After all, one discovers by way of

the Deposition of 18 November 1760 (appended to “The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee”) that the historical Jacobus Coetzee was illiterate. But it should be remembered that Jacobus Coetzee of Dusklands is no eighteenth century frontiersman, nor Eugene Dawn a specialist in psychological warfare situated in California in 1973: they are emanations of the ‘I’ of John Coetzee, author of Dusklands. That is to say, they are figures in a book (Coetzee 1978: 24). On the plane of history Dawn and Jacobus are separated by an ocean and a rift of approximately 212 years. On the plane of fiction (the plane of Dusklands) they share a highly textualized consciousness. Imaginative reality is more present to them than objective reality. To indulge a loose but illustrative contrast: Dawn is the brooding introvert, the deep reader shy of the world of action, who yet claims to be a “specialist in relations”; Jacobus is Dawn’s ‘illiterate’ correlate, eager in overt acts to arrogate the world to his purpose. Their egotism prevents them from sustaining balanced relations with others. Both wince at the thought that as individuals they are inessential to the world; they live to disconfirm the fear that life can go on without them. Each acts according to a narrative in which he alone enjoys absolute being. To imagine otherwise – to imagine, for instance, that true being is affirmed through disinterested relation with others – is to acknowledge the contingency of identity, which Dawn and Jacobus will not allow themselves to do. Dusklands could usefully be read as an aetiology of the failed I-you relation of the colonial encounter. Yet, like Conrad’s Heart of Darkness (1902), Coetzee’s novel addresses a more fundamental question, namely one’s encounter with the other in oneself (oneself as other). In the course of my discussion I hope to show how the apparently simple acts of writing and reading serve to position each of us in delicate, if ethically weighted relation to the others of ourselves.

There are obvious and less obvious links between Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee. There is in “The Vietnam Project” as in the second novella a deliberate unsettling of the truth value of the text. John Coetzee blurs the boundary between document and fiction more explicitly in “The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee” than “The Vietnam Project”. But whereas in the former text one is presented with versions of Jacobus and versions of his narrative, in “The Vietnam Project” one encounters a distinct protagonist who experiences for himself the blur between text and textual ‘reality’. We observe in Dawn and Jacobus two characters who entertain the ideal of an

autonomous mental existence. They imagine the mind separate from the body, they dream of the self sustained by intercourse with the self alone. They do not acknowledge their reliance on others to validate their being, they draw to themselves all powers of self-determination. Yet in their engagements with other people it emerges that they are only self-sufficient to a degree and no more; they require others to affirm their individuality. Coetzee is concerned to demonstrate this basic fact of lived reality. But because Dusklands is a fiction, Coetzee is also free to indulge the fantasy of these self-sustainable selves – a self such as Jacobus who has other things to think about than what the world would be like without him; and Dawn, who posits himself as the victim of a too razorous self-consciousness only to assert himself after his ‘suicide attempt’ as the perpetrating consciousness above it all, knowing it all. Of course in a very real sense Dawn and Jacobus have no existence outside Coetzee’s novel, and even within the text their material being is only ever gestured at and vouched for by words. Although this practical view does not advance our understanding of Coetzee’s novel very far, it is important to bear in mind that the essence of these two characters is figurative – and this knowledge forms one limit of our criticism. A too clinical dissection of their motives and actions will either be vexed by thin air or cut through to the prosaic substance of their author’s biography, which forms the other limit of criticism. Coetzee implicitly justifies these limits in a remark in Doubling the Point (1992): “... in a larger sense all writing is autobiography: everything that you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it” (17). This is not to say that in this discussion biographical detail and anecdote is used to illuminate or offset isolated moments in Dusklands. On the contrary, such detail would be of little interest and less purpose in this study, in which my chief concern is to examine the quite specific textual dynamic of Coetzee’s novel. Certain of my points I choose to highlight with fragments from Coetzee’s critical writings. Indeed it is instructive to accompany a reading of his novels with a reading of his criticism; in an interview (1992: 246) Coetzee is candid in pointing out the connection between the workroom of his criticism and the playground of his fiction.

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Part One: "The Vietnam Project"

ONE

"I am living a crystal life nowadays"

Eugene Dawn professes himself a deep reader and later demonstrates his creative talent as a writer. In line with all serious readers and writers Dawn may be said to be acquainted with the solitariness entailed in engaging in silence with words on the page. 'Solitariness' is the appropriate term here since in most cases silent reading and writing are acts innocent of the metaphysical connotation of 'solipsism'. Considered alone Dawn appears simply an overearnest reader with literary ambitions; but in relation to others one discerns a solipsist accent to his acts. He thinks himself a specialist in relations, yet his personal relationships are anything but healthy. A fundamentally insecure individual, he attributes treacherous motives and mean schemes to both his supervisor Coetzee and his wife Marilyn. His work on the Vietnam report draws him into an imaginative realm where human beings have no living presence but exist as figures in a mythic framework or as the terms of an equation. Dawn finds himself consumed by the question of penetrancy. He evaluates in mythic terms his relationship with his wife and supervisor. His own flesh disgusts him. He thrills to gaze at the twenty-four photographs classified for his project on Vietnam, just as he draws sly pleasure from looking at his wife as if through a strange man's eyes. In his domestic setting Dawn does not drop the mask he wears while at work on his report. He remains the analyst, the mythographer, the statistician, the specialist in psychological warfare. There is a door between Dawn's domestic/civilian world and the world of his report, and Dawn allows this door to stand open.

(i) Contemplation

Dawn admits the irony of his name in the first line of the novella: "My name is Eugene Dawn. I cannot help that" (1). 'Eugene' derives from Greek (*eu + gen-*) and

means well-produced or well-born.² In the light of the novel's title 'Dawn' appears a deliberately incongruous surname for the narrator-protagonist of the first novella of Dusklands. Yet connotations of optimism and a new beginning are consonant with Dawn's work on the New Life Project, in which he outlines for United States military personnel a revised approach to the propaganda war in Vietnam. Dawn's personal narrative largely consists of clipped, declarative sentences. His opening words are startlingly guarded, belying a lack of confidence: "Here goes". At the outset he seems to anticipate interrogation or criticism. This defensive tone is the first evidence of Dawn's paranoia in the wake of his Vietnam report.

Dawn early claims his value to the world as a creative person (1) and insists that he is by nature an obedient, industrious, orderly individual. He claims to be "bad at confrontations" (1) and repelled by war (48). He works at the Kennedy Institute, where "we all have glass cubicles, cubicles because we are monads, glass to discourage our eccentricities" (31). He squirms at the thought of homogeneity: he considers objecting to the gray surfaces everywhere observable at Kennedy but is dissuaded at the thought of his objection provoking "counterattack": "My carrel in the library is gray, with a gray bookrack and a little gray drawer for stationery. My office ... is also gray. Gray desks and fluorescent lighting: 1950's functionalism" (7). At the age of 33, at work on his contribution to the New Life Project for Vietnam in the basement of the Harry S. Truman Library, hemmed in by bookshelves, Dawn thrives in his solitude. As a "creative person" Dawn is not short of metaphors; he considers himself "a specialist in relations rather than names" (36). Yet his mode of thought is equally of an analytic, synthetic cast. His report reveals a mind attuned to detail, adept at reducing a problem to its parts. He makes connections between disparate areas of knowledge, draws fine distinctions: "It is on the point of a fine distinction that the world turns" (27). He locates himself "in an honorable line of bookish men who have sat in libraries and had visions of great clarity" (29). Dawn thus properly considers himself an intellectual, more comfortable dealing with words and ideas than with people.

² The Concise Oxford Dictionary. *Eugenics*: the science of producing fine offspring.

Dawn refers to himself as once upon a time “a good child and a clever child” (5). He is accustomed to the approval of his superiors and anticipates success at the projects he embarks upon. He admits “being possessed of a high degree of consciousness” (5) and attributes his introspective tendency (and, implicitly, his hermeneutic flair)³ to early deep reading:

It was on the Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1939 edition, that I ruined my eyesight. I was a bookish child. I grew out of books. I am living a crystal life nowadays. Exorbitant formations flower in my head, that sealed airless world. First the enveloping skull. Then a sac, an amnion: moving, I feel the slip-slop of passive liquids; at night the moon draws faint tides from ear to ear. There I seem to be taking place. (Coetzee 2004: 30)

Dawn employs the metaphor of “a sac, an amnion” to suggest not just enclosure from the world, but womb-like ensconcement. He imagines his intellect suspended in amniotic fluid like a foetus, vulnerable and miraculous, cloistered from the outside world. A secret life pulses in the secret world inside his skull, where at night “from ear to ear” certain tides take effect. Dawn explicitly connects the hermetic world of books with the “sealed airless world” of his brain. To be certain of the connection one need only read the two paragraphs that precede the above quotation, that open Part III. Dawn recalls keeping a crystal garden in his room as a boy: “Crystal gardens are grown in a medium called sodium silicate”. He attributes his knowledge of sodium silicate and crystal gardens to his reading of an encyclopaedia. He draws metaphoric substance from the physical features of his boyhood crystal garden – the “lances and fronds” that “erected themselves frailly from the bottom of the preserve-jar”. Books are responsible for the transition between Dawn’s boyhood crystal garden and his “crystal life nowadays”. Books as the substrate from which he grows; his being crystallized in intellect; the intellect delicate as a foetus: thus Dawn justifies the figure of his mind as an amnion.

Dawn has great antipathy for his body. He despises its animal rhythms, its cravings and urges. He regrets that he must be a creature of flesh and bone and blood. He

³ Conversation with Peter Knox-Shaw, 16 September 2005.

would prefer to be all mind. He speaks of himself as a divided being and admits no continuity between his extensive self and his consciousness. The essence of his self he locates in his intellect. Although he would not be able to apprehend the physical world without the apparatus of his senses Dawn wryly dismisses the outward manifestation of his being as dull, inconvenient, contumacious. He grudges his body its vagrant existence and devotes considerable energy to checking its assertions of independence: "I am intense only because my will is concentrated on subduing the spasms in the various parts of my body, if spasm is not too dramatic a word. I am vexed by the indiscipline of my body. I have often wished I had another one" (5). Dawn's characterization here recalls Auden's line on Yeats: "the provinces of his body revolted",⁴ with the implication that the body is a country and the mind a ruler obliged to appease or dispel provincial rumours and humours. One discovers a perfect match for the connotation of Auden's line in Part III of Dawn's narrative: "Something is wrong in my kingdom. Inside my body, beneath the skin and muscle and flesh that drape me, something is bleeding" (32). One usually associates the verb "drape" with a large flowing piece of material – a cloak, gown, curtain, or cloth. By employing "drape" in tandem with "skin and muscle and flesh" Dawn construes his essential self as hidden or disguised. Place no stock in my appearance, intimates Dawn, it reveals nothing: "I need coddling. I am an egg that must lie in the downiest of nests under the most coaxing of nurses before my bald, unpromising shell cracks and my shy secret life emerges" (1). Dawn's tendency toward self-dramatization is consistent with his sense of himself as a divided entity. To be conscious of oneself as an actor in a broader drama presupposes self-detachment. It is at such moments that a Cartesian spirit presides: "René Descartes driving his wedge between the self in the world and the self that contemplates that self" (Coetzee 2004: 20). Indeed Descartes is a significant permeating presence in both parts of *Dusklands*. Not only does Dawn seem actively to invoke Descartes in describing his duality of being, but Cartesian rationalism figures prominently in Dawn's Vietnam report. To better appreciate Dawn's conception of himself as a divided entity it is worth taking a short excursion in the philosophy of Descartes.

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⁴ "In Memory of W.B. Yeats." Auden 1976: 197; line 14.

(ii) Descartes

In the history of Western philosophy Descartes' epistemology is perhaps more significant than his ontology. In A Discourse on Method (1637) Descartes establishes systematic doubt as the surest procedure for philosophic inquiry. He undertakes to clear his mind of assumptions and convictions in order to erect for himself a structure of knowledge that is true according to his method of rejecting any proposition that admits the least ground for doubt. The proposition 'I think' becomes for Descartes a touchstone of truth. In repeating these two words he confirms for himself that he exists, if only as a thinking thing: 'I think, hence I am'. Having established his primacy of being in intellectual awareness, Descartes goes on to query the link between his mind and body:

although I certainly do possess a body with which I am very closely conjoined; nevertheless, because, on the one hand, I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in as far as I am only a thinking and unextended thing, and as, on the other hand, I possess a distinct idea of body, in as far as it is only an extended and unthinking thing, it is certain that I [that is, my mind, by which I am when I am] am entirely and truly distinct from my body, and may exist without it. (Descartes 1975: 132-133; translator's interpolation)

Descartes realizes himself in the first place as a self-aware creature (89). He takes the logical step from this proposition to endorse contemplation over other sorts of activity (110). He points out that though the mind may be distinct from the body it would be inaccurate to posit the mind as an altogether separate entity, since sensory experience attests to the two entities' integrated relation.

Nature likewise teaches me by these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst, etc., that I am not only lodged in my body as a pilot in a vessel, but that I am besides so intimately conjoined, and as it were intermixed with it, that my mind and body compose a certain unity. For if this were not the case, I should not feel pain when my body is hurt, seeing I am merely alone, just as a pilot perceives by sight when any part of his vessel is damaged; and when my body has need of food or drink, I should have a clear knowledge of this, and not be

made aware of it by the confused sensations of hunger and thirst, for, in truth, all these sensations of hunger, thirst, pain, etc., are nothing more than certain confused modes of thinking, arising from the union and apparent fusion of mind and body. (Descartes 1975: 134-135)

It is worth dwelling for a moment on Descartes' simile of a pilot in a vessel. The image posits the human intellect as a distinct and internally self-sufficient entity boarded off from the buffets of material reality. Assuming the "vessel" is an ocean-going vessel, which in the context of seventeenth century Europe is likely to be the case, connotations of the image include isolation at sea, a hull that might be punctured, freedom as pilot to steer a course for one's vessel, other human consciousnesses as passing ships (in the night). These are suggestive connotations. It should be observed that the image of the pilot in the vessel is intended to illustrate a detail of Descartes' argument rather than serve as its central figure. Gilbert Ryle caricatures the simile in The Concept of Mind (1949) as "the view of 'the ghost in the machine'" (Scruton 38). It is this caricatured version of the simile that finds its way into Dawn's Vietnam report. Descartes' simile is valid to the extent that the minds of others will always be unknowable because encased in flesh. One is no more able to inhabit another's mind than inhabit another's body. Lodged, encased, boarded off, secluded: insofar as the analogy separates the intellect from its extended structure of flesh, each of the foregoing terms speaks of confinement but implies a different degree of willingness. With Eugene Dawn, one might with little hesitation imagine one's "thinking and unextended", or essential, self to be imprisoned in this "too too solid flesh".⁵ Thus the mind and body are "distinct" entities, yet "intimately conjoined". And not only distinct in themselves, but the mind of a different order to the body. Whereas "from its nature" the body "is always divisible" the mind "is entirely indivisible":

... when I consider myself in so far only as I am a thinking thing, I can distinguish in myself no parts, but I very clearly discern that I am somewhat absolutely one and entire; and although the whole mind seems to be united to the whole body, yet, when a foot, an arm, or any other part is cut off, I am

⁵ Hamlet. I.ii.129.

conscious that nothing has been taken from my mind; nor can the faculties of willing, perceiving, conceiving, etc., properly be called its parts, for it is the same mind that is exercised [all entire] in willing, in perceiving, in conceiving, etc. (Descartes 1975: 139; translator's interpolation)

Conceived in this way the mind is at once an integral and integrated entity. It is in itself "one and entire", yet housed in flesh and inextricable from that housing. Descartes had great difficulty attempting to reconcile his view of the human mind as immaterial with his view of the body as wholly substantial (Scruton 38). That Spinoza and the Empiricists quite revised the Cartesian model is beside the point; Descartes' method and findings have a special relevance to a discussion of Coetzee's fiction. The proposition 'I think' does more than establish with certainty the existence of a thinking self: it prioritizes the first-person perspective and privileges reason as a means of attaining knowledge of the world. The world beyond the self is secondary to the self's awareness of the self: "I am able to know what I think, feel, experience with an authority that is quite different from any authority that attaches to my knowledge of another person or thing" (Scruton 38). Consequent on the image of the mind installed in the body as a pilot in his vessel is Descartes' belief that contemplation is of all pursuits the most worthwhile. Reason and doubt become the instruments of the Cartesian self's engagement with the world.

Dawn is aligned with Descartes when he contrasts his view of the self with his supervisor Coetzee's view: "[Coetzee] thinks of me, even me, as merely a self with interests. He cannot understand a man who experiences his self as an envelope holding his body parts together while inside it he burns and burns" (32). Although Dawn considers his body a kind of prison or envelope confining the certain core of himself – his intellect – he appreciates his flesh as a barrier separating his consciousness from what Kant was to nominate the noumenal world, or world of objects. For Dawn, action has the appeal of the queer or the novel. He approaches "the highest happiness, intellectual happiness" (6) secluded in the basement of Harry S. Truman library bounded on all sides by ranked and stacked books. Yet he is kept from extended villegiature in the "paradise" (6) of contemplation by flesh that asserts its substantiality: "My spirit should soar into the endless interior distances, but dragging it back, alas, is this tyrant body" (32). Hunched over his books, he yawns,

his back muscles stiffen, his head aches. Early each morning he labours at the creative part of his project “when the enemy in my body is too sleepy to throw up walls against the forays of my brain” (6). Just as for Descartes, body and mind are for Dawn entities separate and dissimilar, at odds with each other. Their awkward coexistence translates later into a divorce of word and action, leading Dawn to act “out of character”. Insofar as Dawn locates the essence of his being in intellect, there is a sense in which he considers his body alien or other to his essential self. Yet as the following passage suggests he is not altogether without love for his flesh.

Gray planes, the shadowless green light under which like a pale stunned deep-sea fish I float, seep into the grayest centres of memory and drown me in reveries of love and hatred for that self of mine who exhausted the fire of his twenty-third, twenty-fourth, and twenty-fifty years beneath the fluorescent glare of Datamatic longing in dying periods for 5 PM with its ambiguous hesperian promise. (Coetzee 2004: 7)

As a string of words this utterance unfurls easily enough. But at the level of implication there is less an outward unfurling than a curling back or spiralling inward. If “stunned” pertains, then Dawn implies that the dark waters of reverie are his preferred element. He would rather be altogether submerged in consciousness, in the “making dark”⁶ of imaginative becoming, than “float” vulnerable into waters where light stuns thought or, implicitly, where thought must articulate itself unsatisfactorily in action. And yet he “drown[s]” in the “shadowless green light”. For though he may be hospitable to endless swimming cogitation, Dawn is human and therefore rightly of earth and air and made for action. He characterizes his inner conflict in the elemental opposition of fire and water: at once regretful and glad to be an integral creature of passion, creature of contemplation. There is no escape from the dilemma, only other ways to characterize it: “If this inner face of mine, this vizard of muscle, had features, they would be the monstrous troglodyte features of a man who bunches his sleeping eyes and mouth as a totally unacceptable dream forces itself into him” (7). The dilemma is consummate: embodiment as a waking dream.

⁶ “Junk.” Wilbur 1988: 185; line 28.

The phrase “ambiguous hesperian promise” recalls “the violet hour” of Eliot’s “The Waste Land” (1922):⁷ “At the violet hour, when the eyes and back / Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits / Like a taxi throbbing waiting” (Eliot 71; lines 215-217). “The Waste Land” is a landmark text – a palimpsest of borrowings quarried from what Eliot perceived to be the ruins of the Western literary tradition. Both Dusklands and “The Waste Land” signal the putrefaction of Western consciousness. Like Eliot’s Tiresias, Dawn and Jacobus possess a “vanity that requires no response”; as postmodern figures they “have foresuffered all / ... And walked among the lowest of the dead”; they are “patronising” in manner; they know too well how to descend into themselves by “stairs unlit” (Eliot 72: lines 241; 247; 248). Another of Dawn’s comments – “Dull dreams in a dull bed” – echoes a line in Eliot’s “Gerontion”: “Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season” (Eliot 41: line 77). Arrived at “Gerontion” one lights on further evidence of thematic consonance with Dusklands:

Think now

History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors
 And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,
 Guides us by vanities. Think now
 She gives when our attention is distracted
 And what she gives, gives with such supple confusions
 That the giving famishes the craving.

...

Think

Neither fear nor courage saves us. Unnatural vices
 Are fathered by our heroism.
 (Eliot 40: lines 33-39; 43-46)

These lines have fine epigraphic value to Dusklands. First, in pointing to Dawn and Jacobus’s deluded sense of history as a story writ large (“deceives with whispering ambitions, / Guides us by vanities”).⁸ Second, in characterizing the reflexive method

⁷ Conversation with Peter Knox-Shaw, 20 January 2006.

⁸ See John Coetzee’s 1987 public address, “The Novel Today”, for the distinction he draws between the discourse of history and the discourse of the novel. Consider in particular: “I reiterate the

of Dusklands (“gives with such supple confusions / That the giving famishes the craving”). That is to say, Coetzee’s achievement in this novel is to present two narrator-protagonists so infused with the Cartesian spirit that they serve as their own critique.

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(iii) The Ghost Inside the Villager

In Section 1.31 (“Western theory and Vietnamese practice”) of the Introduction to his Vietnam report, Dawn considers the nature of the United States propaganda voice broadcast into Vietnamese settlements. It is neither the voice of the father nor the voice of the brother, writes Dawn, but “the voice of the doubting self, the voice of René Descartes driving his wedge between the self in the world and the self that contemplates that self”:

The voices of our Chieu Hoi (surrender/reconciliation) programming are wholly Cartesian. Their record is not a happy one. Whether disguised as the voice of the doubting secret self (“Why should I fight when the struggle is hopeless?”) or as that of the clever brother (“I have gone over to Saigon – so can you!”), they have failed because they speak out of an alienated doppelganger rationality for which there is no precedent in Vietnamese thought. We attempt to embody the ghost inside the villager, but there has never been any ghost there. (Coetzee 2004: 20)

The phrase “ghost inside the villager” recalls Ryle’s ‘ghost in the machine’ caricature. Dawn here advises against the easy transposition of a specifically Western ontology to Vietnamese society, admitting his scepticism of the validity of this “subtler programming of division” in the context of Vietnam (20). Dawn indicates in Section 1.411 (“Testimony of CT”) that this latter approach emphasizes the need for United States military personnel to conceive of the Vietnamese not as an homogeneous group

elementary and rather obvious point I am making: that history is not reality; that history is a kind of discourse; that a novel is a kind of discourse too, but a different kind of discourse; that, inevitably, in our culture, history will, with varying degrees of forcefulness, try to claim primacy, claim to be a master-form of discourse, just as, inevitably, people like myself will defend themselves by saying that history is nothing but a certain kind of story that people agree to tell each other – that, as Don Quixote argued so persuasively but in the end so vainly, the authority of history lies simply in the consensus it commands” (1988: 4).

but as a collection of individuals: “There is only one rule in Vietnam: fragment, individualize” (24).

Our mistake was to allow the Vietnamese to conceive themselves as an entire people huddled under the bombs of a foreign oppressor. ... If we had rather compelled the villager, the guerilla band, the individual subject to conceive himself the village, the band, the subject elected for especial punishment, for reasons never to be known, then while his first gesture might have been to strike back in anger, the worm of guilt would inevitably, as punishment continued, have sprouted in his bowels and drawn from him the cry, ‘I am punished therefore I am guilty’. He who utters these words is vanquished. (Coetzee 2004: 24)

In theory at least, an indiscriminate, frontal approach is less effective than a programme of what might be called corrosive nihilation. If the villager can be led to conceive of himself as a subject alone, differentiated from others of his kind, then the seed of doubt is planted in him on which the “worm of guilt” may feed. Rather than the United States parade as the Other to be feared and loathed, let the Vietnamese villager recognize and take fright at the Other in himself. When the villager becomes prey to the peculiar doubts and qualms of the Cartesian *cogito*, it remains only for the propagandist to step back as a countryside of disintegrating Vietnamese selves in their huts and villages quietly capitulate to the disembodied Cartesian voice. This, Dawn notes, was the argument behind the programme of political assassination (CT) carried out by the Special Forces in the Delta region between 1968 and 1969 (22). With a view to improving on the limited success of CT, Dawn urges US authorities to abandon the strictly Cartesian model. The “more promising strategy” is the mythic approach. Let US propaganda adopt the stern, infallible voice of the father. Let Vietnamese operatives manage the brother-voice with its “rough humor, cajolements, threats, and ... certain slyness of insight” (21). In this scheme the father is the skygod, the mother the earthgoddess. According to Dawn the “outdated” version of this myth requires that “heaven and earth, father and mother” maintain a symbiotic relationship (26). This conception allows the father to be supplanted on condition that his usurper be reconciled with the earthmother. The earthmother is free to join her sons in endless conspiracy against the father, yet for all her treachery be insured against

annihilation. Why, asks Dawn, accord the maternal authority this privilege, this longevity? On the contrary, Dawn argues, there is ample reason to posit the skyfather as the ascendant constant of the pair:

We live no longer by tilling the earth but by devouring her and her waste products. We signed our repudiation of her with flights toward new celestial loves. We have the capacity to breed out of our own head. When the earth conspires incestuously with her sons, should our recourse not be to the arms of the goddess of *techne* who springs from our brains? (Coetzee 2004: 26)

Dawn's use of 'we' indicates that in this mythic paradigm the United States figures as skyfather, Vietnam as earthmother. It is the mythic dimension of the Cartesian mind-body duality. Dawn's myth invokes familiar prejudicial connotations of mind as rare, essential, masculine; body as elemental, base, feminine. The model further serves to illuminate Dawn's fraught relationship with Marilyn and his ambivalent stance toward his supervisor Coetzee. Of particular significance is Dawn's stress on "[our] capacity to breed out of our own head". Self-sufficiency is the key word here: auto-regeneration. Dawn points to the fecund imagination as a site of patenting and renewal. In the revised myth the "goddess of *techne*" is a daughter-goddess. She is the skygod's "parthenogene daughter-queen", of air (*idea*) rather than earth (substance). 'Parthenogene' is a telling adjective to employ with respect to this neo-Athene. Parthenogenesis (Gk. *parthenos* virgin + *gen-* produce) is the name given to the reproductive process involving gametes but without fertilization common to invertebrates and certain plants (The Concise Oxford Dictionary 746). The botanical link recalls Dawn's earlier characterization of himself as having grown out of books in the manner of a plant, and his comment that he is "living a crystal life nowadays". Parthenogenesis as a mode of self-reproduction chimes with Dawn's image of himself as a thinking thing sufficient unto itself. Richard Wilbur's "making dark" of the imagination becomes in this scheme the fertile site that gives rise to the daughter-queen Athene. In Dawn's countermyth the offspring of the skygod's autoerotic "celestial" love is at once daughter and queen. That the skygod should marry his child seems an odd and superfluous development, unless one concedes that in this myth the child is closer to a half copy of her parent, with certain distinguishing traits, than a perfect replica (her gender supports this conclusion). This fuller understanding

of the proposed countermyth allows a clearer perspective of Dawn's relationships with others, specifically his wife Marilyn and his supervisor/author Coetzee.

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(iv) Intratext and Script

One might wonder whether Dawn's work on the Vietnam report is extricable from his domestic situation – that is, whether deteriorating relations with Marilyn stimulate his recasting of the “master-myth of history”, or whether Dawn conceptualizes this countermyth independently of his domestic context and only latterly comes to interpret his foundering marriage in precisely these mythic terms. It is safe to conclude that there is a close fit, an intratextual relation, between Dawn's report and his personal narrative (Knox-Shaw 113). A few points justify this view. The opening line of the novella signals a double-edged apprehension (“My name is Eugene Dawn. I cannot help that. Here goes.”). Dawn is firstly apprehensive of submitting his report to his supervisor Coetzee's scrutiny, secondly apprehensive at publishing his personal narrative as a report of a similar kind for his author Coetzee's and other eyes' perusal. Dawn's Introduction to his report occupies Part II of “The Vietnam Project”. There is a loose but significant correspondence between the six phases he discusses in his report and the five parts of John Coetzee's novella. Roman numerals are employed both to partition Dawn's narrative and designate the six phases of psychological warfare Dawn discusses in his report.

As mythographer Dawn appears to stand outside the system which he recommends for use in Vietnam and actively applies to those most familiar to him – Coetzee (tyrant father), Marilyn (treacherous earthmother). As author and authority on the subject, in much of his Introduction he positions himself outside the system's ambit, yet a number of remarks point to his implication. Terminology, theory, and equations (at least in the Introduction: extrapolate for the main report) are matched by a number of strikingly personal remarks: “We are all somebody's sons” (27); “I am a hero of resistance” (27); “I sit in the depths of the Harry Truman Library” (28); “I have to pull myself together” (28); “I am in a bad way as I write these words” (28). This sort of comment foregrounds Dawn's fractured self-possession and serves as an embedded critique of the methods he actively endorses in his report. The discrepancy of tone

alerts a reader to the difference in medium between Dawn's narrative and report. John Coetzee has noted how fiction is hospitable to a degree of honest feeling unwelcome in discursive prose: "When a real passion of feeling is let loose in discursive prose, you feel that you are reading the utterances of a madman. ... The novel, on the other hand, allows the writer to *stage his passion*" (1992: 60-61). There is reason to believe that in the closing paragraphs of his Introduction Dawn becomes increasingly possessed by the spirit of his utterances. One comment in particular – "I look forward to Phase V and the return of total air-war" (28)⁹ – even if not as strident in tone, recalls Kurtz's scrawled postscript to his report for The International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs: "Exterminate all the brutes!" (Conrad 1989: 87). Dawn's register in the concluding paragraphs of his Introduction suggests that in the interests of propriety he has a finger in the dyke¹⁰ of his passion reservoir. He stresses his disintegrating Cartesian consciousness: "I have to pull myself together", "What I say is in pieces", "I speak to the broken halves of all our selves" (29). The weary imperatives that find their way into this closing section of the report underline both his wretched mental state and the constraints of the genre:

I suffer from headaches. I sleep badly. I am eating myself out. If I knew how to take holidays perhaps I would take one. But I see things and have a duty toward history that cannot wait. What I say is in pieces. I am sorry. But we can do it. (Coetzee 2004: 29)

Dawn seems to write these sentences under a dubious light (flickering fluorescent overhead panel) or on gasps of consciousness. Nevertheless he is determined to communicate the pith of each brief point. They are weary appeals; less plea than statement. If at this moment he perceives himself a hero, then it is as a tragic hero who dispenses with the script in a final effort to conjure applause from an empty auditorium.

* * *

⁹ Dawn spends much of his time in the Harry S. Truman library: it was during Truman's term of office as United States president that atomic bombs were detonated over Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

¹⁰ I borrow the image from Coetzee's essay "Achterberg's 'Ballade van de Gasfitter': The Mystery of I and You" (Coetzee 1992: 78).

TWO

“I am a specialist in relations”

Dawn feels inadequate in the presence of others. He inflates to unlikely proportion those figures whose lives border his own: Marilyn, Coetzee. Whereas he would prefer not to be locked in a body, he is discouraged that they should seem content in their personhood. To Dawn they are a kind of reproach. Haunted by the suspicion that he is not essential to Marilyn’s universe, not essential to Coetzee’s universe, he is goaded to further detachment and introspection. A constant arrow-shower of doubts leaves him with a feeling of inner bleeding:

Sometimes I think the wound is in my stomach, that it bleeds slime and despair over the food that should be nourishing me, seeping in little puddles that rot the crooks of my obscurer hooked organs. At other times I imagine a wound weeping somewhere in the cavern behind my eyes. (Coetzee 2004: 32)

He thinks of himself as hollow and colourless. As a personality he feels vague at the edges, the boundaries of his person not drawn in firm lines.

(i) Martin Buber

In a 1977 essay¹¹ on Gerrit Achterberg’s sonnet sequence “Ballade van de Gasfitter” John Coetzee invokes Martin Buber on the subject of the I-You relation. Coetzee reminds the reader of Buber’s claim that the “primary word” – now lost – is not *I* but *I-Thou*. Any attempt through language to reinstate the primal relation is futile: “All versions of the *I* are fictions of the *I*. The primal *I* is not recoverable. Neither of the words *I* and *You* can exist pure in the medium of language” (Coetzee 1992: 75). As a system or structure or mechanism with rules in place to ensure determinacy of outcome, language is not a site conducive to the dynamic of pure relation. Coetzee cites Gabriel Marcel’s criticism of Buber on just this point:

¹¹ “Achterberg’s ‘Ballade van de Gasfitter’: The Mystery of I and You.” Printed in Coetzee 1992.

Buber has himself forcefully insisted upon it ... that each Thou becomes a thing or lapse into thinghood ... But this is still not saying enough: I would add for my part that it is of the essence of language to effect this transformation. When I speak of you ... even when I expressly declare that you are not a thing, that you are the opposite of a thing, I reduce you in spite of myself to the condition of a thing ... We are confronted by a profound and doubtless essential contradiction. (Marcel in Coetzee 1992: 75)

With Buber, one may reply to this criticism by distinguishing between the word *Thou* that one speaks and the person *Thou* that one means to address. But as Coetzee records in an endnote to the essay, this objection overlooks the fact that “language does not preserve the stress of intention” (1992: 403). Language gives no access to a primal *I-Thou* wordpair nor does it restore the primal *I-Thou* relation. Buber’s use of the pronoun ‘Thou’ lends a recondite air to his scheme, yet, more than ‘You’, ‘Thou’ accords priority to the other and preserves the austerity of the event of relation. As a template for the world of objects language has its limitations. But as Coetzee points out in his essay on Achterberg, language also permits certain freedoms: “As elements of a system of reference, *I* and *you*¹² are empty. But the emptiness of the *I* can also be a freedom, a pure potentiality, a readiness for the embodying word” (1992: 72). In this sense the pronouns *I* and *you* facilitate dialogue between two unfixed subject positions. In the act of reading or writing, *I* and *you* are a means of engaging with the other not present. They signify but do not specify the other’s presence. The last phrase in the last quotation in particular points to a dialogic relation: “a readiness for the embodying word”. Not all agency rests in the writer’s hands: in an important sense he is subject to the presence of the other although the other is necessarily absent.

The You has little solidity to the gaze of the I. On the contrary, the You is absent; or is present only passively, as an object of the awareness of the I; or is capable only of an inactive locativity defined in relation to the I. In other

¹² The lower case implies a stepping down from the plane of privileged relation.

words, the You is absent or evanescent or dependent on the I; and the relation of I to You, being barely transitive, cannot be reciprocal.

(Coetzee 1992: 72-3)

Not a reciprocal relation, but a relation confirmed by an absence. One begins to see why language permits no return to the primal *I-Thou* relation: the primal relation is (before and therefore) beyond the reach of language. As a medium of exchange language is equal to day-to-day interaction. Language denotes objects; language lends currency to abstractions; language condenses and inflects the world through representation. Magda of Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* (1977) speaks of words as the "coin" of one's engagement with the world. It is worth citing a fragment of her narrative to enlarge on her rather mechanistic view of language: "Seated here I hold the goats and stones, the entire farm and even its environs, as far as I know them, suspended in this cool, alienating medium of mine, exchanging them item by item for my word-counters" (Coetzee 2004b: 28). Insofar as language serves as a miniaturist embodiment of the world it is constitutionally unfit to represent 'spirit'. In Buber's phrase, "Spirit is not in the I but between I and You" (89). The spirit of relation must elude embodiment if it is to remain spirit. Just as Dawn points out the military propagandists' mistake of attempting "to embody the ghost inside the [Vietnamese] villager" when "there has never been any ghost there", so too the mistake of imagining that words, themselves objects of a kind (Magda's "word-counters"), can capture and contain in themselves the spirit of relation. The written word – commonly thought of in pejoratives, such as stubborn, dumb, incontrovertible – aspires to permanence, a quality quite alien to the evanescent event of true relation. To the extent that these adjectives are valid the written word does not gesture at itself as a site for a relational dynamic.

Before returning to the text of *Dusklands*, it is worth dwelling for a moment longer on Martin Buber and the I-You relation. In *I and Thou* (1937) Buber emphasizes that to articulate 'I' is to invoke 'You' and to say 'You' is to foreground 'I': "I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You. All actual life is encounter" (Buber 62). One might imagine a spectrum calibrated to different degrees of relation: at one end the purest I-You, the human-God relation; in the middle the common I-You, human-human relation; at the other end the purest I-It, the human-inanimate (rock, tree)

relation. But a formulation of this sort is misleading. It ignores Buber's basic claim that "Relation is reciprocity" (67). In matters of relation there can be no question of value or degree: quantity and worth are concerns quite alien to the act of relating to an other.

Relation is reciprocity. My You acts on me as I act on it. Our students teach us, our works form us. The 'wicked' become a revelation when they are touched by the sacred basic word. How are we educated by children, by the animals! Inscrutably involved, we live in the currents of universal reciprocity. (Buber 1970: 67)

For Buber, one's being is as surely affirmed by a child or an animal as by a work in progress. Relation does not proceed unidirectionally from a concentrated (conscious) locus of being (for example, adult human) to a less concentrated (less conscious) locus (for example, rock). There is no accounting for one's investment in the other or the other's investment in oneself when the other as much as oneself is an element in the plenum of being, investing in and invested in by others of all kinds at all times without knowing the extent of any single investment (in so far as "invest" has currency as a term in this context). That is most likely the point Buber is emphasizing with a statement of the kind: "Inscrutably involved, we live in the currents of universal reciprocity". Relation is a two-way concession. Mutuality is the condition of the I-You statement. Whereas the "world as experience belongs to the basic word I-It", the "basic word I-You establishes the world of relation" (Buber 56). "Truly, man was not meant to live alone!" says the Magistrate in Waiting for the Barbarians (Coetzee 1982: 80). Relation is not a structure but a dynamic between two beings. To attempt to quantify this dynamic causes the dynamic to vanish: I-You becomes I-It: "This is part of the basic truth of the human world: only It can be put in order. Only as things cease to be our You and become our It do they become subject to coordination. The You knows no system of coordinates" (Buber 81). This point serves as a cue for a discussion of Dawn's relationship with Marilyn.

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(ii) Marilyn

Dawn wishes himself free of his wife Marilyn. He thinks of his wife as “a conformist who hoped to marry in me her conformist twin” (9). He believes that Marilyn and people like Marilyn who lack “a core of belief” lack also the vision to appreciate his work on the Vietnam project. Dawn’s work on his report is a source of tension in their marriage. He senses Marilyn’s jealousy growing in proportion to his deepening immersion in his work. Their relationship lacks all passion, their sex resembles the engagement of machines. Rapport between them appears not to extend beyond the genital connection: “... the length of gristle that hangs from the end of my iron spine and effects my sad connection with Marilyn” (7). Dawn mentions marriage manuals and notes that “though he plough like the hero and Marilyn froth like the heroine” Marilyn and he in their sexual engagements are yet to enjoy with “the bliss of which the books speak” (8). It would appear that Dawn finds comfort in these textual models. According to the marriage manual he is the dutiful husband; according to a different narrative he is the hero. By casting himself in these roles he avoids the thought that he may be the source of discontent in the relationship, the unspontaneous partner. He does not derive pleasure from sexual intercourse so much as satisfaction (Eliot’s “pneumatic bliss”)¹³ at an efficient transaction: “I do my duty” (8). Just as Marilyn grudges Dawn his interest in his Vietnam report, so Dawn suspects Marilyn of conducting extramarital affairs. For the voyeuristic pleasure of the exercise he begins to watch her “through a strange man’s eyes”: “New perspectives excite me. My eyes, no doubt, glow” (11).

The case of the voyeur is instructive in understanding the connection between the physiological organ of sight (eye) and the semantic organ ‘I’. As unobserved observer, the voyeur imagines himself secure in his I-hood. He believes himself removed from the world of relation where identity is unfinalizeable because at every moment open to challenge, compromise, modification through encounter with others. The voyeur retreats into himself in order to relish through glazed or glowing eyes the spectacle of others’ interaction with others. At such moments Dawn thinks himself altogether removed from the world of relation, on the outside looking in. In fact he

¹³ “Whispers of Immortality.” Eliot 1963: 55; line 20.

remains fully present, only more deeply embedded in himself. The voyeur's satisfaction is hollow to the precise extent that his 'I' is hollow. As the 'I' distances itself from the 'you' so the substance of 'I' and 'you' is excavated. All is relation; the 'I' cannot stand alone. The voyeur's gaze is proprietorial: he is sustained by the illusion that what he views is his to claim. Dawn corroborates this point: "If Marilyn is unfaithful she is so much the dearer to me, for if strangers prize her she must be valuable, and I am reassured" (11). Three pejorative 'endearments' indicate the slant of Dawn's perspective here: "dearer", "prize", "valuable". The word "dearer" should be read as 'more precious' – precious in the sense of a precious stone, rare and therefore costly ('dear'); "prize" implies the framework of a game; "valuable" is a term usually reserved for objects. In short, Marilyn is no longer the *you* to Dawn's *I*. Dawn's *I* discovers its tenuous being in Dawn's *eye*. In Dawn's field of view Marilyn becomes an object whose value is relative to her use. That Dawn is happy to defer to other men's reactions for an estimation of the value of his wife is a measure of his presumed absence from the world of relation. In the following statement from Buber one discerns a useful gloss of the voyeuristic tendency: "What has to be given up is not the I but that false drive for self-affirmation which impels man to flee from the unreliable, unsolid, unlasting, unpredictable, dangerous world of relation into the having of things" (Buber 126). That is to say, the voyeur engages in a furtive, debased form of relation that equates to a retreat from the fundamental indeterminacy of outward encounter with others. One detects this "false drive for self-affirmation" as much in Dawn's musings on Marilyn as in his engagement with his classified photographs. Before we consider Dawn's dreams and photographs, let us examine his relationship with his supervisor Coetzee.

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(ii) Coetzee

Dawn oscillates between admiration for and dread of his supervisor Coetzee. In Coetzee's presence he is inclined to act the sycophant: crawl, cower, and "concede all in the hope that he will love me" (2). He respects Coetzee, but equally is intimidated by the man. Alone with pen and paper, bold in his solitude, Dawn refers to Coetzee as an "ordinary man ... utterly without vision" (1), a "cynic" (9), an opponent with whom he must do battle (15). Character to character on the fictional plane their

relationship is interesting enough. Yet by lending his name to Dawn's supervisor, Coetzee the author encourages another level of reading. First, one is reminded of the author's freedom to interpolate biographical fragments into his fiction. Second, there are moments when Dawn seems to be addressing not his supervisor Coetzee, but his author. Beyond the intercharacter relation, these instances are intriguing for the light they shed on a metafictional dynamic between author and character. Consider the following:

Although he [Coetzee] is not actually a brilliant man, he thinks authoritatively. I would like to master that skill. ... In Coetzee I think I could even immerge myself, becoming, in the course of time, his faithful copy, with perhaps here and there a touch of my old individuality. (Coetzee 2004: 31)

At a metafictional level Dawn's sentiment is ironic, for he is after all a character conceived by John Coetzee. To wish to "immerge" himself with his creator is to wish a return to the womb, or the authorial imagination that gave him life. 'Life' here is the attenuated life of a character in a fiction: attenuated because confined and defined by words. If it is the case that all writing is autobiographical, then Dawn's words above should really be treated as a fairly direct comment from John Coetzee on the creative process he has set in motion. The transparency of address recalls Hamlet (or Shakespeare) advising the players of "The Murder of Gonzago" (or players of Hamlet)¹⁴ on correct stage manner and characterization. Dawn seems to translate his relationship with his supervisor into mythic terms in the section of his report that sketches the relationship between the "tyrant father" of the sky and the rebellious sons of the earth. In Section 1.51 ("Countermyths") Dawn points out that "[t]he blow that wins the war against the tyrant father is not a death-thrust but a humiliating blow that renders him sterile (impotence and sterility are mythologically indistinguishable). His kingdom, no longer fertilized, becomes a waste land" (26). This mention of the skyfather's sterility/impotence¹⁵ corresponds with Dawn's early evaluation of his supervisor Coetzee as "[o]nce upon a time a creative person himself" but "now a failed creative person who lives vicariously off true creative people" (1). The

¹⁴ Hamlet. III.ii.1-45.

¹⁵ One notes here a further connection with Eliot and "The Waste Land": in particular, the Parsifal myth according to which the sterile king-father's reign must be broken if cultural regeneration is to take place.

connection is idiomatic. The figure of sexual fecundity is commonly applied to the person (artist or craftsman) who has the potential to bring into being or turn to substance what was before an idea or perspective peculiar to that person. The artwork as child of the imagination, coaxed by its parent's hand into existence. Dawn supports this view in Part V of his narrative ("These words I love" (43)). That Dawn believes himself necessarily an antagonist to his supervisor is illustrated in characterizations such as the following: "The petty reaction of Coetzee to my essay is to be expected in a bureaucrat whose position is threatened by an up-and-coming subordinate who will not follow the slow, well-trodden path to the top. He is the old bull, I the young bull" (5). Dawn here describes in dramatic terms what would appear to be a workaday relationship. 'bureaucrat' is an evocative term (writing-desk/chest-of-drawers + power: 'filing-cabinet official'): Dawn reduces Coetzee to a functionary lacking imagination. The bull metaphor suggests that confrontation is inevitable in a community where demonstrable prowess is accepted as the only criterion for hierarchic ranking. It recalls Coetzee's earlier comment on military people not understanding the conventions of the "intellectual duel" (3). As ever, Dawn's imagination is overactive. With his finger on his pulse he places fictional constructions on their relationship. "I am bad at confrontations," says Dawn on the first page on the novella; "I wore my straight shoulders and bold gaze for the interview [with Coetzee]". Dawn thinks of posture as something to be worn, like clothes. Straight shoulders and a bold gaze recommend themselves for the scenario of the interview. Entertaining the notion of a wearable identity is symptomatic of Dawn's textualized consciousness.

* * *

THREE

“I stretch my hand, the ghosts retreat”

(i) Photographs

Eugene Dawn carries around with him a set of twentyfour photographs classified for his report on Vietnam. He draws comfort leafing through the images, mulling on their detail. He contextualizes his habit as follows:

On evenings when the sober edge of reality is sharpest, when my assembled props feel most like notions out of books (my home, for example, out of a La Jolla decor catalog, my wife out of a novel that waits fatefully for me in a library in provincial America), I find my hand creeping toward the briefcase at the foot of my desk as toward the bed of my existence but also, I will admit, as toward an encounter full of delicious shame. (Coetzee 2004: 15)

That is to say, at those moments when Dawn has an acute sense of himself as a textualized entity and of the circumstances of his life as contrived by another (out of a book), he resorts to the vicarious pleasure of the voyeur. By installing himself as the I who gazes but who is not gazed at in return, Dawn bolsters his sense of himself as an individual with agency. With irony he attempts to allay the suspicion that he is a figure in a book or term in another’s history. He studies the human figures captured in his collection of photographs from a coign of vantage outside the pictured event. He looks into the human eyes looking out of the photograph, yet is not seen. As with all photographs, it is as if he in the here and now gazes through a pane opaque on its other side to the figures caught in the there and then of time past. In Camera Lucida (1980), a collection of meditations on the nature of the photograph, Roland Barthes observes that photographs exhibit “nothing but the exorbitant thing”: “The Photograph is violent: not because it shows violent things, but because on each occasion it *fills the sight by force*, and because in it nothing can be refused or transformed” (Barthes 91; his italics). One photograph in Dawn’s collection shows a United States sergeant and a Vietnamese woman in an “openly sexual” posture

degrading for the woman; in another photograph, two sergeants pose with severed Vietnamese heads. Dawn's "delicious shame" consists in witnessing both the irrefutable thingness and subliminal violence of these representations without in the least feeling himself accountable. He is the observer in an adjacent dark room who looks through a one-way glass panel that appears as a mirror to those inside the interrogation chamber. He is in sly, tangential relation to the characters involved in the event of the photograph; he is removed from the act of direct relation. Dawn has in his possession another print, a film still, of a prisoner in a tiger cage whose face is turned toward the camera but half-obscured by shadow. At ease in his quiet suburban home Dawn passes his fingertips over the "cool, odorless surface of the print" secretly wishing to break through into the present indefinite event of the photograph without implicating himself in its reality. It is of course a vain wish. Barthes recognizes this point and cites a useful condensation from Maurice Blanchot on the nature of the photograph:

I cannot penetrate, cannot reach into the Photograph. I can only sweep it with my glance, like a smooth surface. The Photograph is *flat*, platitudinous in the true sense of the word. ... from the eye's viewpoint, "the essence of the image is to be altogether outside, without intimacy, and yet more inaccessible and mysterious than the thought of the innermost being; without signification, yet summoning up the depth of any possible meaning; unrevealed yet manifest, having that absence-as-presence which constitutes the lure and fascination of the Sirens". (Barthes 1984: 106; his italics)

"Absence-as-presence" encapsulates the nature of Dawn's being as a character in Dusklands. He is the "flat, platitudinous" figure of a person who may or may not have existed in California in 1973, or anywhere else at any other time. He is "altogether outside" the real world, then and now, secure in the cloister of Coetzee's fiction for as long as copies of that fiction exist. He bears a resemblance to and is in certain respects intimate with his author, yet even to his author he is strange since forever cast off from that mind that made him. Dawn's being is never more manifest than the words that signal his presence: he claims material being and ironically wishes himself free of his flesh when he is as absent as a figure in a photograph. Dawn is a

wordraith who in the utter textuality of his being is thrall to the return gaze of other faces and forms composed as text on the surface of the photograph.

*

(ii) Dreams

Having submitted to his supervisor Coetzee the Vietnam report for evaluation, Dawn believes himself to be of diminished consequence to his colleagues and familiars. He suspects a conspiracy afoot among his colleagues to ignore and avoid him. He determines to counter their ploys: "If they refuse to see me I will become the ghost of their corridors, the one who rings the telephones, who does not flush the toilet" (33). There is a symmetry between Dawn's phantom existence during the day and his encounter with dreamvisitants at night. In dreams faces and figures from his twenty-four photographs drift free of their contexts to mingle mutely before his inner eye.¹⁶

My fingers, expressive, full of meaning, full of love, close on their narrow shoulders, but close empty, as clutches have a way of doing in the empty dream-space of one's head. ... The faces come back, they loom before my inward eye, the smiling teeth, the hooded gaze; I stretch my hand, the ghosts retreat, my heart weeps in its narrow slot. (Coetzee 2004: 34)

Dawn is little satisfied by his dreams. Though present to the drifting dreamfigures he can broker no intimacy with them. To them, as to his colleagues, he is present but absent. The phrase he employs to describe his disappointment – "my heart weeps in its narrow slot" – indicates that Dawn (surely with small surprise) is returned to the crude Cartesian dualist model for which he earlier iterated preference. The phrase calls to mind early anatomical cross-section sketches of the human body, or plastic life-size models common to high school Biology classrooms. In either case one's

¹⁶ In Waiting for the Barbarians the Magistrate is troubled by similar dreams. One dream stands out in which he encounters on a vast snowy plain a hooded child figure in the motions of building a snowcastle. Unable to discern beneath the figure's hood the facial features of a human being the Magistrate indulges an act of charity: "Between numb fingers I hold out a coin" (Coetzee 1982: 37). This gesture is consistent with his well-meaning but ill-judged treatment of the barbarian girl during his waking hours. As with Dawn, prejudice and egotism prevent the Magistrate from enjoying wholesome and satisfactory relations with others in reality and in dreams.

impression is of the human body as a rigid mannequin complete with struts for limbs, colourful wires for nerves, compartments for internal organs. In these dreams Dawn's Cartesian detachment is enacted in reverse: he thinks himself within reach of these figures who drift by silently imploring sympathy, but the moment he reaches out they withdraw: so long as he installs himself as the *I*/eye remote in his tower he can enjoy no meaningful encounter. It is no surprise that beneath the "knife" of his daytime analysis the "lucid, tired structures" of Dawn's dreams reveal "nothing [he] did not know" (33).

* * *

University of Cape Town

FOUR

“They may be clues, I put them down”

(i) Casestudy Dawn

Dawn’s ability to step back and regard himself at a distance is variously manifested in his narrative. He references his acts and itemizes certain objects as if to prove to a reader the facticity of his being, his material presence in a world of certifiable objects. A few examples:

As I write this moment I catch my left fist clenching. Charlotte Wolff calls it a sign of depression (*The Psychology of Gesture*) (Coetzee 2004: 4).

Marilyn sat on the bed dressed in a housecoat, paging through a magazine whose smiling, healthy plates (Sunsilk, Coca-Cola) floated through her fingers ... (33).

We came back at dusk and ate a hearty supper (flapjacks, ice cream, orange juice, three items) (35).

My little alarm clock (Benfitte, Paris) is a great help (45).

Though consistent with the analytic rigour of his report on Vietnam, this referencing tendency is misplaced in Dawn’s personal narrative. His citation of objects is irregular, on one occasion incorrect.¹⁷ Certain interpolated details contribute a mite to the realism of his narrative: “(sunsilk, Coca-Cola)”. Others are gratuitous: “(Benfitte, Paris)”. Yet others are redundant: “(... three items)”. One might interpret these narrative quirks as effects of an analytic mind applying its talents out of context. Dawn seems to forget that his personal narrative will be read neither by his supervisor nor military personnel; as a narrative it requires no formal substantiation. On the

¹⁷ The title of Charlotte Wolff’s book is A Psychology of Gesture.

other hand, one may read Dawn's report as growing out of the circumstances of his life even as it grows back into those circumstances. The report locks him into the perspective of the propaganda specialist. In a number of places tacitly, and overtly in the last tract of his narrative, Dawn gestures at himself as an object worthy of study. In Part III, for instance, having elaborated on his debility of body and spirit by way of metaphors and allusions ("Herakles roasting in his poisoned shirt"; "Sinbad's story of the old man of the sea is also apposite" (32)), Dawn notes that "[t]here are significances in these stories that pour out of me, but I am tired. They may be clues, I put them down" (32). He derives comfort from drawing parallels between his case and better known textual variants (Herakles, Sinbad). Allusions of this kind lend his account authority in the manner of the citations and footnotes that one presumes pepper the body of his Vietnam report.¹⁸ But even as he wishes others would take a greater interest in him he is conscious of becoming increasingly incidental to other lives: "Coetzee hopes that I will go away. The word has been passed around that I do not exist. His secretary smiles her grave smile and looks down. But I do not go away" (32).

Dawn craves the attention and approval of others. This craving becomes more intense in proportion to the distance he puts between himself and the two figures – Marilyn, Coetzee – most likely to affirm him in his being. His referencing tendency serves as a gauge of his self-consciousness. In Part I and Part III Dawn follows a track of disclosure, complaint, rumination. In the 'Introduction' of Part II he shifts guise from equanimous doctrinaire ("The problem of victory is technical") to earnest advisor ("we can do it") to devotee of the cause ("It is my duty to point to our duty"). The Loco Motel episode of Part IV repositions Dawn in relation to himself and others. In Part V he openly refers to himself as a case study. Accommodated at a rehabilitation facility, he is pleased and relieved to be no longer the analyst, the theorist, the one who undertakes to probe the mystery of the other. *He* becomes the other who baffles the doctors. He acknowledges his doctors' authority and is amenable to their frank inquiries. He declares himself a cooperative patient, at moments contributing "an insight – a neat condensation here, an odd displacement there" (49). Yet for all his

¹⁸ Coetzee advises Dawn to draft an introduction to his report written in "words of one syllable", "with lots of examples and for God's sake no footnotes" (4) – which implies that Dawn's main discussion is technical and thoroughly substantiated.

courtesy to the doctors (“I do not forget that I am a patient, for whom it is presumptuous to take too active a part in the diagnosis of his condition” (47)), he retains his self-analytic impulse. It emerges that Dawn only cooperates with his doctors to the extent of keeping his ‘secret’ intact. He smugly states his true position as follows.

I watch their eyes and think: you want to know what makes me tick, and when you discover it you will rip it out and discard me. My secret is what makes me desirable to you, my secret is what makes me strong. But will you ever win it? When I think of the heart that holds my secret I think of something closed and wet and black, like, say, the ball in a toilet cistern. Sealed in my chest of treasures, lapped in dark blood, it tramps its blind round and will not die.
(Coetzee 2004: 48)

Dawn emphasizes in Part V his acquiescence in the simple routine prescribed by his rehabilitators. He exhibits himself as a smiling zealot of order and obedience. He slips easily into the child self he once was, who ate his beans and did his homework and therefore was a good child. He repeats for his minders the simple dicta he has been fed: “Discipline is good for me. Exercise is good for me. Carpentry is very good for me” (45). But these are moves in a game; and Dawn is well acquainted with the rules of this game.

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(ii) Games

In a real sense war is a game of terrible proportions. As a specialist in psychological warfare Dawn’s task is to recast the parameters of the war game in Vietnam to ensure greater US military success. The phrase ‘theatre of war’ usefully indicates the connection between action and play, reality and the game. Today one commonly refers to a person who takes part in a theatre production as an ‘actor’. In Shakespeare’s day the equivalent term was ‘player’. To a degree in contemporary usage ‘act’ and ‘play’ are interchangeable as verbs in the phrase ‘to act/play a part in a production’. The primary sense of the verb ‘to act’ implies decision and consequence (world outside the theatre); the secondary sense implies ‘to play’ or ‘to pretend’.

Children 'play' games; adults and children alike are licensed to 'play' a game of sport; one goes to the theatre to witness a 'play'. Whereas 'to play' (a role) retains a sense of juvenile levity, 'to act' has a more serious, consequential aura. Poetry makes nothing happen, says Auden;¹⁹ yet by this he does not imply that art is altogether without value in a world of action. Art is part act, part play; a subversive mix of privilege and possibility. Consider Coetzee's remarks on this dynamic of freedom and constraint:

If the arts constitute a higher activity than physical culture, it is surely for the reason that they continue to vary the forms and rules of the games they play. Art as polymorphous play, then, playing at inventing rules with which it plays at constraining itself. (Coetzee 1992: 104)

The phrase "polymorphous play" points to the intrinsic flexibility of art. This characteristic implies the possibility of self-reflexivity. Dusklands is a fine example of art holding the mirror up to itself. Dawn's high self-consciousness seems to promise him transcendence over his narrative (the solipsist snug in his cell): he appears to be the one who writes, who must therefore be able to lay down the pen, leave off the telling. Certainly he is a step beyond Razumov in Under Western Eyes (1911) who is permitted to speak the essence of himself without recognizing the irony of his words: "I am not a young man in a novel" (Conrad 1996: 132). Dawn's self-awareness binds him to his fiction. He stirs his words to a consistency that allows him to regard himself as in a mirror, yet through this mirror of words he cannot break; he remains an enslaved Narcissus. In a 1978 essay, "Four Notes on Rugby", John Coetzee notes a parallel between the temporal dynamic of a game of football and written narrative.

The allure of the football game is, in the first place, the allure of time redeemed from chronicity, an island of eighty minutes lifted out of the time of one-thing-after-another which is the time of entropy, of the running down of the universe. The game promises to give meaning to a stretch of time (in this

¹⁹ "In Memory of W.B. Yeats." 1976: 197; II. line 5.

it is like narrative), and it fulfills this promise often enough to bring the spectator back. (Coetzee 1992: 123)

Both sporting games and written narrative occupy a demarcated period, operate on a principle of beginning and end. Enclosure and closure are equally relevant to sporting games and written narrative. Enclosure: a game of sport occurs in an agreed-upon bordered space – a chessboard, a football pitch, a tennis court; written narrative exists between two dustcovers. Closure: there must be an end to the game as much as a result – a winner, a loser, a draw; similarly, for all its promise of endless embodiment and continuity with an event's before and after, at some point the flow of words in a narrative must stop, the end arrive and voice be silent. In his essay on rugby Coetzee goes on to observe that for many people a Saturday afternoon rugby game promises both the spectacle of athletic speed and skill, and the consolation of time "redeemed from chronicity".

To postreligious people whose lives are submerged in *chronos*, who feel themselves dying while they are living, it provides the experience of time given meaning – which one might call a low-level experience of transcendence – often enough to make Saturday afternoon more significant than Sunday morning. (Coetzee 1992: 123)

The 'religious' satisfaction provided by sporting games is closely knit to the measure of transcendence located in reading or writing fiction. Insofar as a writer or reader is outside the spatio-temporal co-ordinates of the world described in a novel, the writer or reader is god-like. The writer god-like for his puissant whims that determine what a character thinks and speaks and does in the world of the text; the reader god-like because at once located outside narrative time (power to close the book and allow *chronos* of reality to wash over him) and inside narrative time (denial of *chronos*). In The Sense of an Ending (1967) Frank Kermode distinguishes between *chronos*, the temporal continuum without apparent beginning or end, and *kairos*, the meaningful period: "*chronos* is 'passing time' or 'waiting time' – that which, according to Revelation, 'shall be no more' – and *kairos* is the season, a point in time filled with significance, charged with a meaning derived from its relation to the end" (47). Yet to be removed from the time of narrative is not sufficient qualification for the

“phantasmatic omnipotence” enjoyed by the writer and, to a lesser extent, reader (Coetzee 1992: 65). Rather it is a writer’s necessarily outside control of the time of narrative that affords him god-like status. Coetzee’s comments on the issue are illuminating.

... by its nature narrative must create an altered experience of time. That experience can be heady for both writer and reader. For the reader, the experience of time bunching and becoming dense at points of significant action in the story, or thinning out and skipping or glancing through nonsignificant periods of clock time or calendar time, can be exhilarating – in fact, it may be at the heart of narrative pleasure. As for writing and the experience of writing, there is a definite thrill of mastery – perhaps even omnipotence – that comes with making time bend and buckle, and generally with being present when signification, or the will to signification, takes control over time. (Coetzee 1992: 203-204)

We may usefully apply Coetzee’s observations here to Part IV of “The Vietnam Project”, when Dawn is confronted by his wife Marilyn and the law enforcement officers in his room at the Loco Motel.

* * *

FIVE

"I have done a deed."

(i) The Loco Motel Episode

Dawn's existential dilemma is staged to good effect at the Loco Motel. He begins Part IV of his narrative exultant at having moved from contemplation to action: "I marvel at myself. I have done a deed. It is not so hard after all" (35). Having absconded with his son he sits in his motel room on the outer limits of the town Dalton/Heston (of the name he is not sure) and writes "in an exuberant spirit and in the present definite" (35). Evidently the writing of Part I and Part III and the Introduction of Part II does not qualify as deedlike action. A deed is an act undertaken with resolve, an act with consequence: a "brave, skilful, or conspicuous act" (The Concise Oxford Dictionary 248). To abscond with Martin is for Dawn a deed; to write in the present definite for Dawn likewise qualifies as a sort of serious action. That Dawn considers first person present definite narration and absconding with his five year old son acts worthy of acclaim, indicate his apparent exile from the world and discourse of ordinary action. He feels obliged to remark the "bracing air of reality" of his district world (35). This comment and others to the same effect he seems to record in earnest, yet one cannot mistake an ironic undercurrent. For all Dawn's emphasis on the 'realness' of place and event in Part IV, the reader observes little alteration in the flow of his narrative. His words are as ever a more or less adequate representation of a particular reality. Yet it has suddenly become a priority for Dawn to insist on the actuality of his experience. He does not stress the reality of his words; that claim he will make in Part V. Rather, he notes mundane detail ("If I turn my eyes upward and slightly to the left ..." (35)) in an effort to signal his spatio-temporal coordinates and so lay claim to an authentic historical moment. He wishes he were better able to "spin motels and roadhouses into long, dense paragraphs" (37). It occurs to him that a true writer need possess "a lexicon of common nouns" as well as a "firm grasp" of distinct realities such as "cicadas, Dutch elm blight, and orioles" (36-37). The implication is that he lacks these qualifications; yet he does not grow exasperated, but quietly speculates: "Perhaps I was not born to be a writer" (37).

Throughout this first section of Part IV Dawn refers to the here-and-now as if it were a new medium in which he must now exist. This new medium is evidently the fresh air and bright light of present tense reality. To confirm Dawn's preferred medium one need recall the simile he employs to describe himself in Part I of his narrative: "like a pale stunned deep-sea fish I float" (7). Water is his element: in specific, the dim watery depths of language.

One may well inquire why Dawn associates language with water and present tense action with air. One is reminded of a few lines from Robert Graves's poem "The Cool Web": "There's a cool web of language winds us in, / Retreat from too much joy or too much fear: / We grow seagreen at last and coldly die / In brinness and volubility" (1966: 45; lines 9-12). One discovers evidence of the association elsewhere in Coetzee's oeuvre too. In the Postscript to Elizabeth Costello Lady Chandos closes her letter to Lord Hoffmansthal with the remark: "Drowning, we write out of our separate fates" (2003: 230). In his essay on Achterberg Coetzee notes that "the final peril of drowning is that, having died our death out of language, we die back into language" (1992: 78). The final sequence of Foe takes place underwater, in "the home of Friday" where "bodies are their own signs"; Friday 'speaks' but "without breath, without interruption"; his speech is "soft and cold, dark and unending" (1986: 157). One may contrast the view of language as fluid with the view of language as a check to the flood of phenomenal stimuli, a means of stabilizing William James's "buzzing, blooming confusion" of reality. A passage from Walter Pater is illuminating:

At first sight experience seems to bury us under a flood of external objects, pressing upon us with a sharp and importunate reality, calling us out of ourselves in a thousand forms of action. But when reflection begins to act upon those objects they are dissipated under its influence; the cohesive force seems suspended like a trick of magic; each object is loosed into a group of impressions – colour, odour, texture – in the mind of the observer. And if we continue to dwell in thought on this world, not of objects in the solidity with which language invests them, but of impressions unstable, flickering, inconsistent, which burn and are extinguished with our consciousness of them, it contracts still further: the whole scope of observation is dwarfed to the

narrow chamber of the individual mind ... Every one of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of the world. (Pater qtd. in Nuttall 160-1)

Pater significantly points to the flammable quality of our impressions: “unstable, flickering, inconstant, which burn and are extinguished”. Sensory stimuli as sparks to ignite the nucleus of one’s being; language as watery salve to the heat of materiality. This view fits with Dawn’s self-characterization as one “who experiences his self as an envelope holding his body-parts together while inside it he burns and burns” or Herakles “roasting in his poisoned shirt” (32). Dawn basks in language as a fish in water (“like a pale stunned deep-sea fish I float”). One observes in Pater’s account an apparent contradiction in image: he initially speaks of a “flood of external objects” but then describes objects as metaphysically flammable. Two moments in Dusklands prove that the contradiction is superficial: Dawn notes the efficacy of the flood of fire that is a napalm strike (29), while Jacobus anachronistically speculates on a device to spray flame (79). For Pater, language as much resolves the blur of experience as alienates the individual from the material field. Pater’s perhaps too radical view suggests that with the slightest verbal gesture one is suddenly moved from participant to unimpeachable spectator. He posits a universe of monadic individuals cocooned in glass bubbles from the flux of experience, incapable, despite the common currency of language, to standardize their impressions or experience of the world. There is truth in Pater’s claim that language itemizes and differentiates reality – objects “loosed into a group of impressions”. Yet to deny that these objects have independent being, to insist that they become “extinguished with our consciousness of them”, is to forget that every day human individuals are themselves extinguished while objects in the world persist. In the manner of Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee, it is arrogant to suppose that the fundamental aspect of the world is compromised by an individual’s sudden disappearance from the world. Pater’s account admits what Nuttall terms the “petrifying power of words” (188): the capacity of language to compute according to formula an illimitable spectrum of experience. Language here is the solace of the solipsist, who, at least in Dusklands, positions himself in direct relation to words and not people. For Buber language is a means of relation, not in any case the object of that relation. Coetzee’s Magda supports this view: “It is not speech that makes man man but the speech of others” (2004b: 137). In the light of these observations one is

better able to appreciate the contingency of Dawn's solipsism. Since words are for him a necessity for action, and given his acute self-awareness, Dawn cannot but trespass the turf of the true Cartesian, cannot but express solipsist sympathies.

In Part IV of his narrative Dawn appears to be unfamiliar with the realist mode and present tense. Yet this is hard to believe, since his foregoing narrative is technically more sophisticated than the object-designation procedure he follows here. Again, one detects thick irony in his remark "that contact with reality can be invigorating. I hope that firm and prolonged intercourse with reality, if I can manage it, will have a good effect on my character as well as my health, and perhaps even improve my writing" (36). That Dawn continues to stress the reality of the motel scenario indicates that at least one part of him has stepped out of the role of voyeur and "specialist in relations" he has hitherto played with his whole being. I say "at least one part of him" since he seems to write with an unsteady hand and his voice quavers more with apprehensiveness than exultation. It is as if Dawn is treating in all seriousness the practical view that the whole of his existence is contained in the pages of this novella. Specifically, he now engages the present tense and feels the brush of actuality as if for the first time: everything before is a retrospective spinning of narrative threads in anticipation of this one crowning setpiece action of whose outcome Dawn is already aware. Gifted with his author's omniscience but obliged to maintain the pretence of fallible character, Dawn is overdetermined in the context of this novel. If he appears a jaded narrator that is because he has too large a share of his author's knowledge, he is too close kin. He knows himself and the trajectory of his story too well. The following passage is illustrative.

It is not, I see, after all difficult to cut ties. I had only to say to myself, enunciating the words clearly: "You will pack a bag. You will take your son's hand and walk out of the house. You will cash a check. You will leave town". Then I did these things. Giving myself orders is a trick I often play on my habit of obedience. Thirty-three is the mythologically correct age for cutting ties. (Coetzee 2004: 36)

The prescriptions of his report ("Giving myself orders ... my habit of obedience. ... the mythologically correct age") continue to inform his acts. Dawn's humour in these

lines belies a deeper insecurity. By acting according to formula Dawn assures himself of his currency as a term in a system. He is conscious of himself as an actor in a play (I use the terms advisedly). The drama of this section of narrative hinges on Dawn's apparent inability to manage himself reasonably in the presence of others. He plays the cornered, panicky, misunderstood recreant and supports his performance with feigned incredulity at this out-of-character action. He is of course only out-of-character to the extent that he does not identify his material being as his true character: he would prefer to "sink through circle after circle of wordless being" (38).

Most striking about the confrontation sequence at the Loco Motel is the slippage of Dawn's authority as writer. He dons the guise of writer but is unconvincing in this role. Even as he finds himself unable to 'write' events as they happen, as narrator he does not falter in unspooling his story. It emerges that he is already familiar with the events that will shortly transpire. During this sequence one realizes that Dawn is above all a voice. He stands sweating behind a curtained window in his motel room as two vehicles pull up outside, car doors slam, footsteps approach his room. He anticipates his visitors' knock on the door, half opens the door, is not surprised at the figures he glimpses waiting outside: "The *deja vu* feeling slips over me and I bathe in it gratefully" (39). A conversation ensues. Dawn is as ever amusingly self-conscious in his verbal exchange with first Marilyn through the doorslit and then the accompanying law enforcement officers through the closed door. He is aware of the textual contours of the encounter; the following comments are illustrative: "Low motives: I weep to be released from this drama of low motives" (40); "'How do I know who you are?' A silly question. I wish I could take it back" (40); "Here I stand in the middle of a dark room with police whispering outside. Out of what movie is it?" (41). The officers open the door with a spare key fetched from the motel office, enter the room, confront Dawn, who uses his sleepy son Martin as a shield. The following passage is of special interest.

I don't think it is fair that I should be burst in on like this, but I cannot say it to him, I am beyond talking. I don't want to think about it, but I think I am really in the soup. Fortunately I am beginning to drift, and my body to go numb as I leave it. My mouth opens, I am aware, if that is awareness, of two cold parted slabs that must be lips, and of a hole that must be the mouth itself, and of a

thing, the tongue, which I can push out of the hole, as I do now. I hope I am not going to be called on to say anything because besides going numb I am also sweating a lot and turning white, in a fishy way. Also, something which I usually think of as my consciousness is shooting backwards, at a geometrically accelerating pace, according to a certain formula, out of the back of my head, and I am not sure I will be able to stay with it. The people in front of me are growing smaller and therefore less and less dangerous. They are also tilting. A convention allows me to record these details. I have missed certain words. But if I am given a moment I will track them back in my memory and find them there still echoing. "... put it down ..." Put it down. This man wants me to put it down. (Coetzee 2004: 41-42)

In this passage one notes in particular Dawn's detachment. His body is become unfamiliar, he identifies with difficulty his principal organs of speech – mouth and tongue. He pales "in a fishy way" – evidence that he is out of his element. The "I" that he suspects will not be able to keep up with his consciousness in reverse is in this case the I of his physical being. As those others present in the room diminish in size and threat, Dawn transfers authority from body to mind: the comment "if I am given a moment" indicates that he is once more securely installed in the I of figurative being.

* * *

SIX

“These Words I Love”

(i) Writing

The Loco Motel episode past, Dawn resumes his narrative from an institution for the psychologically unstable. Following his assault upon his son, Dawn finds himself forced to submit to the authoritative gaze and interrogation of others. Despite his new status as patient under observation, he clearly still claims access to an authorial I. He pursues his narrative with a previously absent degree of relish, speaking fondly of the words he puts to paper:

These words I love. I sit them on my lap to burnish and fondle. They are beloved to me, each one, and having arrived at them I vow not to lose them. They lie quiet under my hand: they wink back at me, they glow for me, they are placid now that I am here. They are my fruit, my grapes growing for me. They are the stars in my tree. Around them I dance my slow, fat, happy dance of union, around them and around. I live in them and they in me.

(Coetzee 2004: 43)

It is as if Dawn has finally become reconciled to the fact of his tenuous reality as a figure in John Coetzee’s book. He cannot be said to exist beyond the covers of Dusklands except in further attenuated form in critical appraisals such as the present study. Nowhere more obviously than in the above extract does Dawn stress the substantial reality of the words he employs. Consider his metaphors: words as pets, obedient, quiescent, calm; as fruit to nourish his being; as stars constellated in the tree-universe of his narrative. No longer does Dawn posit himself as panlinguist above the claims and implications of language; no longer the spider of Part IV secreting his web of words (37). He now confronts the paradox of his figurative being, embracing the words that simultaneously promise and renege on the promise of his substantial reality: “I live in them and they in me”. He has his substance in words alone; indeed words are more present than he. One now perceives the irony of his

earlier protracted complaints on the burden of fleshly being: these complaints were intended to signal his utter material absence and his pervasive figurative presence.

In isolation a page of writing is mute: it requires a reader to mobilize and explicate its possible meanings. Although it is commonly assumed that the writer of a story is the most reliable authority on that story, it would appear that this is not necessarily the case. A writer may invent a situation and a cast of characters and be responsible for orchestrating the action of the story's plot, but beyond this puppeteer role the writer has no more privileged claim to an interpretation of character, situation, or plot, than a particularly attentive reader. The experience of writing a story is often thought to yield privileged judgements of that story. In Doubling the Point Coetzee indicates that the opposite may well be the case (he speaks with reference to Life and Times of Michael K (1983)).

What I say is marginal to the book, not because I as author and authority so proclaim, but on the contrary because it would be said from a position peripheral, posterior to the forever unreclaimable position from which the book was written. (I might even venture: the author's position is the weakest of all. Neither can he claim the critic's saving distance – that would be a simple lie – nor can he claim to be what he was when he wrote – that is, when he was not himself.). (Coetzee 1992: 206)

These remarks substantiate the notion that once out of a writer's hands a novel embarks on a more or less lengthy career in which it is at once the intimate of everybody and nobody: an individuated entity quite indifferent to claims made about it – claims by its author not least. A novel is an act as much as an event. For all his discretionary power at the time of writing, the novelist can no more alter or reverse the published work (rewriting would constitute a separate act and event) than anybody else. In Razumov's words: "It's done" (Conrad 1996: 41). Coetzee suggests in the above description that a writer as writer loses what authority he has the moment the book is released into the world as an event-containing object. To illustrate this point, and to contrast Dawn's experience, it is worth considering Antoine Roquentin's experience of writing in Sartre's Nausea (1938).

I had thought out this sentence, to begin with it had been a little of myself. Now it had been engraved in the paper, it had taken sides against me. I no longer recognized it. I wouldn't even think it out again. It was there, in front of me, it would have been useless for me to look at it for some sign of its origin. Anybody else could have written it. But I, *I* wasn't sure that I had written it. (Sartre 1965: 139; his italics).

Roquentin is here confronted with the indifference of the written word – indifference even to himself, the words' originator. To return to the passage from Coetzee quoted above, it is not the position in space that is "forever unreclaimable" (the writer at any moment may take up the pen and reinsert himself into the imagined matrix of time and place), but the position *vis-à-vis* the novel as not-yet-fully-actualized entity. It is this understanding of a novelist's relation to the novels he writes that partly informs Coetzee's hedged responses to interviewers' questions. In Doubling the Point Coetzee indicates his discomfort: "I am immensely uncomfortable with questions – like this one – that call upon me to *answer for* (in two senses) my novels, and my responses are often taken as evasive" (1992: 205; his italics). The two senses of "answering for" that bother Coetzee are, one, the sense of elucidating the text's meaning on behalf of the text (since the text cannot elucidate itself); and two, the sense of justifying or defending the text against criticism (since the text cannot carry out its own defence). It is worth quoting the few lines following Coetzee's initial response to exemplify the cautious rhetorical manoeuvring that characterizes his pattern of thought in these interviews:

To defend against that judgment I suppose I should, as a preliminary step, explain my difficulties, explain myself, spell out my position with regard to *answering for*. But my difficulty is precisely with the project of stating positions, taking positions. So what I am about to say will be difficult for me – *difficult for*, again, in two senses. (Coetzee 1992: 205; his italics)

There is a reluctance here to occupy a single position without acknowledging other, perhaps equally valid positions. Even – or rather, above all – language is implicated in the process of installing certain perspectives as final and complete. Italics draw attention to the nuance contained in a casual phrase: "*answering for*", "*difficult for*".

For Coetzee, nuance must be accounted for, accommodated. And the finer nuances are hardly to be observed from a single fixed position.

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(ii) Secrets

Dawn relishes the thought of the secret within him. This secret appears to be as much a secret to him as it is to others. The truth is that he is glad to be the repository of even the fiction of a secret (the secret truth of this secret may be that this secret does not exist). Whether or not there lies submerged in Dawn's unconscious a true explanation for his least accountable actions does not concern us. In any case Dawn appears not much interested in his doctors' provisional hypothesis "that my breakdown was connected with my background in warfare" (46). Of greater interest to us is Dawn's attitude toward this presumed black box of truths. Recall Dawn's phrase for his stabbing of his son: "one's own flesh and blood" (44). According to the terms of his description Dawn's assault on Martin qualifies as a suicide attempt. The suicide forsakes words for the louder language of action. That Dawn likens the knife to a pencil might be read as a mitigating appeal: 'Look, it is just a fruit-knife, I do not intend the boy serious harm, it is I who need attention!' On the other hand, the simile points to the concurrent violence entailed in the author Coetzee's representation of this act of violence. Dawn punctures his son's flesh just as his author punctures Dawn's consciousness, from which Dawn's sense of integrated time and space leaks away. The Loco Motel episode serves as a fine if parodic demonstration of an author's ability to "bend and buckle" time. But Dawn is altogether too knowing a figure to charge with attempted suicide. Putting a knife into the flesh of his son Martin is no attempt at suicide but merely a gesture in that direction. Consider Dawn's description of the stabbing: "Holding it like a pencil, I push the knife in" (42). There are two perspectives to consider. First, the perspective in which fictional characters and fictional events stand simply and seriously for real people and real events. Second, the perspective in which these characters and events are understood to be representations of the real, but representations undercut by a critical subtext: by irony. To accent the point differently, fictional characters and events are re-presentations of the real. According to the first view, a reader may wonder at Dawn's apparent callousness here: in the motion of injuring his son, how can he blithely liken

a fruitknife to a pencil? In line with the second view, one appreciates the connection Dawn implicitly draws between his 'real' act of violence and the 'real' act of writing. I qualify 'real' since Dawn no more injures his son in reality than in reality is responsible for writing his narrative. In reality he is a figure sketched by John Coetzee in the circumstance of injuring his son, which injury is necessarily less urgent than the point Coetzee is making about his own writing of the incident. Specifically, the simile "like a pencil" signals Dawn's detachment from the pain he is about to inflict on another. If his fleshly being disgusts him, one can be sure he would pall at the thought (let alone the act itself) of the mess and outrage consequent on puncturing flesh, whether his or another's. He is too prudent to stab himself: first, it would be painful, second, he has every reason to suspect no one would bat an eyelid if he did so. Nor does he hate Martin or believe that by sticking a fruitknife in Martin's back he is doing Martin a favour. Nor need one suppose that by stabbing his son (the rebel son, ally of the treacherous earthmother) Dawn is demonstrating whole-hearted faith in the mythic paradigm he outlines in his report. At most the mythic narrative is constructed as a salve to conscience – the 'conscience' of the US military, the conscience of Eugene Dawn. Myth is a pretext for a manner of action. Dawn's knowingness must not be underestimated. *Eugene Dawn knows what he is doing*. Or rather, to observe the delicate imbrication of fiction and reality, John Coetzee writes self-consciousness into the character of Eugene Dawn in order to demonstrate that the writing of this act is twofold, is always twofold if a character is to command any individuality of his own.

It appears to have taken four Parts and a swipe at self-annihilation for Dawn to realize that it is in his best interest to remain something of a mystery to himself. In the process he usefully demonstrates a basic point about art: a true work of art is holistic, more than the sum of its parts. It is a foolhardy critic who undertakes to completely reduce a work of art to its elements in the hope of laying bare the cogs of its working. In Doubling the Point Coetzee implicitly corroborates this point in his remarks on criticism: "what is criticism, what can it ever be, but either a betrayal (the usual case) or an overpowering (the rarer case) of its object? How often is there an equal marriage?" (1992: 61). The critic who knows the value of criticism will either endeavour to probe carefully the primary text to avoid disrupting its singular core, or frame a critical response in its own way singular, yet in dialogue with the source

text.²⁰ Dawn rightly perceives that a secretive element is integral to a certain kind of writing.²¹ Not so much the writing of the Vietnam report – writing constrained by a goal and critical method – but the writing of fiction, in particular *his* fiction. Describing his situation in words on paper Dawn demonstrates a measure of control over his future. After all, one of the attractions of the written word is its ability to order and render fixed and credible the flux of experience. Nuttall's example neatly illustrates the point:

Suppose a man is jilted by his mistress; he says 'she has left me' and at once the pain is less. Presumably the 'verbalising' here works by permitting the man to prove that he can keep his head above water. As long as he can express his situation in words he can show himself and others that he is not afraid to admit what has happened and, more subtly, that he is still in intellectual control of what has passed beyond his practical power.
(Nuttall 1974: 188)

One discovers evidence of Dawn's determination to be master of his circumstances in an early comment: "Nor, if I were to commit myself body and soul to some fiction or other, would I choose any fiction but my own. I am still the captain of my soul" (10). That as a character in a fiction Dawn should express his freedom to decide his fate underlines his inflated ego. His self-esteem grows as he knits the web of language tighter about him. Here too the solipsist accent grows stronger. The enterprise of art will always involve a greater than lesser measure of vanity. Vanity has its part in Dawn's wish to explicate himself, make himself the text, turn himself to purpose: "I approve of the enterprise of exploring the self. I am deeply interested in my self. I should like to see in black and white an explanation of this disturbed and disturbing act of mine" (46). Yet this wish is counterbalanced by a fear of entirely surrendering control of the text that is himself. Having written the Vietnam report Dawn knows what fate awaits him if he surrenders the pen to his good doctors' hands and fails to match their evaluation with a counter-evaluation of his own. He realizes that to

²⁰ See Attridge 90; 92.

²¹ There is a view of writing as intrinsically secretive: "Literacy scorns the 'base degrees by which it did ascend'; it leaves little room for the mystery of writing, which finds its apt expression in the name early given to the symbols of the old Teutonic alphabet. They are called runes: and etymologically the term means 'secret'" (Harris 15).

accede to their theorizing is to close the book on his story, which in its sceptical surmises might otherwise tack endlessly over the same territory. Deliberately he sketches his doctors' domestic setting to emphasize the values and purpose he and they have in common:

I watch the earnest, honest eyes behind their young owl-glasses: they sincerely want to understand me, in the light of the case histories they read at home in their leather armchairs, with a pretty wife in the kitchen and the kiddies asleep with their bunnies – I know it all, we are class brothers – so that I too may become a case history to be put away on the shelves, and their own dream of death be stilled. (Coetzee 2004: 47-48)

To be remembered, if not valued, seems to be Dawn's wish. He writes of his "deep respect" for the security guards at the rehabilitation facility, "big, heavy men with red faces and easy laughs" (45), whom he admires in their simple patriotic station as soldiers. He wishes to be recognized as a soldier in his own right, albeit a soldier of a different order, embroiled in a conflict on a different level. On this score, as on others, he reserves for himself a literary characterization: "Staggering in my bleeding armor, I stand erect, alone on the plain, beset" (27). He is less a soldier than an explorer of the intellect: "Had I lived two hundred years ago I would have had a continent to explore, to map, to open to colonization" (31-2). One should not overlook the inner conflict he is engaged upon with himself. In his report he claims to address "the broken halves of all our selves", urging "them to embrace, loving the worst in us equally with the best" (30-1). As one who is yet to reconcile the estranged halves of his own being he is hardly a touchstone of authority. Yet would it not be contrary to Dawn's interest to wish a reconciliation of the halves of his self? His authority seems to rest on his vaporous presence. Despite his demonstration of writing it is as voice that Dawn escapes categorisation. He does not claim historical actuality; nor, with Jacobus, is he simply a "pallid symbol". He is an absent presence, a paradox, both more and less than what he appears to be.

End Part One.

Part Two: “The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee”

SEVEN

“What is important is the philosophy of history”

(i) Beginnings

There is the historical Jacobus Coetsé, whose deposition of 1760 is enclosed as an appendix to the second part of Dusklands. There is the fictional Jacobus Coetzee, the I of the first person account “edited, with an afterword, by S.J. Coetzee”. S.J. Coetzee is as much a fictional construct as his translator son, J.M. Coetzee, ostensibly indistinguishable from the author of Dusklands. J.M. sketches in his Translator’s Preface his father S.J.’s credentials as academic at the University of Stellenbosch. The imagined series of lectures S.J. delivered at this University between 1934 and 1948 fixes a textual lineage between Coetsé’s 1760 primary document and John Coetzee’s 1974 fictional narrative. To gauge the extent of John Coetzee’s departure from the known details of Coetsé’s hinterland sojourn, a first-time reader should really consult the Deposition first, the Preface and Afterword next, and “The Narrative” last. Arranged as they are, the mock-genuine Preface gives one little reason for pause, while “The Narrative” and Afterword test a reader’s gullibility. One arrives at the single authentic document of the novel fully sceptical of its claim to historical truth. The epigraph to “The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee” from Flaubert might stand for both parts of Dusklands: “What is important is the philosophy of history”. A reader of Dusklands is implicitly urged to understand the writing of history as the writing of narrative. In “The Vietnam Project” Eugene Dawn speaks and writes candidly about his role as mythographer, writer of myths. What is myth but a casting of the future in historical terms? Myth as a story to endorse a form of action – for instance, military intervention in Vietnam. One recalls that Dawn dismisses the programme of political assassination (CT) in favour of a mythic scheme justifying air warfare. The former programme was couched in explicitly Cartesian terms, its method to “fragment, individualize” in order to undermine the self-assurance and cohesion of enemy forces. Yet Dawn’s counter strategy rests just as surely on a Cartesian foundation. Dawn

posits a panoptic celestial being (skyfather) in contest with estranged tellurian partner (earthmother) and male offspring (sons of the earth). The dualism of this scheme mirrors the Cartesian mind-body dualism, where mind is essence or transcendent spirit (implicitly masculine), and body is substance or dull mechanism (implicitly feminine). Dawn does not alter the metaphysical design but simply dresses it up in different terms. Cause is more significant than effect: we are shown Dawn engaged in a sort of forward historiography. Nor is he above the story of the future he writes: to borrow the form of George Santayana's dictum:²² Those who write the future are condemned to live it.

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(ii) Word of the Father

The tone of Jacobus's narrative is paternalistic. He poses as provident patriarch to the six Hottentots that accompany him on his inland trek north. He acknowledges with the equivalent of a half-nod the service of his helpers and presumes to represent their attitude towards him: "They saw me as their father. They would have died without me" (64). This father presumption resonates with Dawn's revised mythic template, which he fits to his relations with supervisor, wife, and son. Like Dawn, Jacobus is acutely self-conscious. He is presented as a character familiar with the dimensions of his being as a figment. Outwardly he conforms to historical type: eighteenth century frontiersman. He is a knowing character; much of his thought and action is accented with irony. He plays the anthropologist: "I should doubtless interpolate here something about man in his wild state" (65); he plays the cultural imperialist:

Whereas a wild Hottentot, the kind of Hottentot that met us that day, one who has lived all his life in a state of nature, has his Hottentot integrity. He sits straight, he stands straight, he looks you in the eye. It is a pretty thing to see, this confidence, for a change, for one who has moved so long among the cunning and the cowardly, though based on an illusion of course, a delusion of strength, of equivalence. (Coetzee 2004: 65)

²² "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to relive it." Epigraph to William L. Shirer's The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany. New York: Crest, 1963.

Remarkably articulate for an illiterate, one must remember that Jacobus is a representation of the historical personage Coetsé. Like Dawn, Jacobus is privileged with his author's modern mindset. This explains the fluency and philosophic rigour of his account; it explains also certain unlikely or anachronistic expressions. The following examples selected from the closing paragraphs of his narrative are illustrative: "immense world of delight" anticipates Blake (Knox-Shaw 116); "They died in a storm of terror, understanding nothing" echoes Shakespeare's "sound and fury, / Signifying nothing" (*Macbeth* V.v.26-7); "computing the percentage" and "economic pigs" are phrases that belong to the twentieth century. At no point does Jacobus demonstrate the grounds of his literacy: he does not trace letters with quill/pencil or scan words on a page. Rather, he puzzles the reader with hints and clues that suggest the extent of his literacy. Either in glancing reference or active demonstration he reveals himself conversant with models of rhetoric ("the irony and moralism of forensic oratory" (70)), the travelogue genre ("Between August 2 and August 6 we covered the fifty miles to the Groene River" (63)), adventure literature ("Tranquilly I traced in my heart the forking paths of the endless inner adventure" (65)), classical literature ("enveloped in spray like Aphrodite" (90)), and existentialist philosophy ("the undifferentiated plenum, which is after all nothing but the void dressed up as being" (101)). These examples indicate that Jacobus is familiar with a significant variety of Western literature.

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(iii) Print Freedoms

Jacobus is revealed to be a child of print culture most explicitly in his formal spoken address to the Namaqua outriders. His tone is throughout respectful, his construction lyrical: "We have come with peace in our hearts to the land of the Namaqua people. Many tales have reached our ears of the wealth, the generosity, and the prowess in hunting of the Namaqua people" (70). He maintains the stiff tone but simplifies the terms of his address to meet what seem to him looks of quizzical incomprehension. In reference to the earlier scuffle for gifts of goodwill he engages the register of judicious rebuke: "Keep what you have taken. But let us resolve henceforth to behave like men, to respect each other's property. ... We will respect what is yours, and you will respect what is mine" (70). Jacobus follows this speech with a

comment that puts beyond doubt his literate mindset: “This schoolmasterly threat in the tail I judged permissible when, watching their eyes for a fiery response, I saw by the third paragraph only gathering boredom and inattention” (70). Reference to a “third paragraph” indicates that Jacobus thinks in terms of the written, not the spoken, word. The spoken word transcribed directly to paper naturally offends the eye of a reader accustomed to cadence and capsularity. But this is not speech transcribed; it is a story narrated by a character literate in all but active demonstration. What does this mean? Should it really surprise us to encounter a fictional character – even an ‘illiterate’ character – at ease in a medium of words? Is it appropriate that we should detect on Jacobus as on Magda the “reek of print”? Moreover, what does Jacobus’s literacy have to do with the solipsist impulse? In order to frame answers to these questions, among other things one must appreciate the ludic dimension of Dusklands.

At a writers’ workshop in Lexington, Kentucky (March 6, 1984), John Coetzee is recorded as having said: “Whereas in the kind of game that I am talking about, you can change the rules if you are good enough. You change the rules for everybody if you are good enough. You can change the game”.²³ Another of his comments (already quoted) springs to mind: “Art as polymorphous play, then, playing at inventing rules with which it plays at constraining itself” (1992: 104). These two remarks are echoed in Jacobus’s reflection on how best to translate himself “soberly across the told tale” (99) and so conclude his narrative:

I had been set a task, to find my way home, no mean task, yet one which I, always looking on the brighter side of things, preferred to regard as a game or a contest. About tasks there is always something dreary, the taskmaster and the taskmaster’s alien will; whereas games, my games, I played against an indifferent universe, inventing rules as I went. (Coetzee 2004: 98)

Hoping to lend novelty to his narrative Jacobus ironically marks time with setpiece “hunting adventures”: “the kind that befitted a patient Bowman crouched in the lee of a bush or trotting on a bloodspoor. A snake leaned down from a branch and tapped me on the cheek. A sharp-pronged buck belied its character and wheeled on me”

²³ Epigraph to Penner 1989.

(99). He speaks openly of the constraints of his fictive being: “neither in these stories nor in the busy calculation of percentages could I ignore the element of obligation. I filled up time with hunger and thirst, two more duties of the traveller in the desert; but I pined for novelty” (99). Jacobus is a threshold being. As figure, he contains extravagant potential for signification. As entity pinpointed by historical co-ordinates he cannot evade his “duties” and “the element of obligation” that attends his station as historical exemplar or artefact: “In each game the challenge was to undergo the history, and victory was mine if I survived it” (98). The notion of a rehearsal fits well with Coetzee’s comments on the ludic aspect of fiction. Rehearsal: a testing of word and stance; a performance with margin for divergence; a trial (Montaigne’s *essai*); a foray. Understood in these terms, the colonial encounter is rehearsed on the site of Jacobus’s character, which accommodates other rehearsals too. Although the essence of Jacobus is figurative, although Jacobus may be worthy of other inscription (a *tabula rasa* or “monstrous blank page awaiting the record of an inconceivable history”),²⁴ paradoxically he must acknowledge at least partwise his historical bearings if he is to remain unfinalizeable.

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²⁴ Conrad 1996: 25.

EIGHT

“a true creature of Zeno”

(i) Number

If Jacobus refuses to directly admit his literacy, he is more candid on the score of his numeracy. On the basis of numeric facility he distinguishes between, on the one hand, the European, and on the other hand, Bushman and Hottentot: “It is pointless to ask a Bushman how old he is, he has no conception of number, anything more than two is ‘many’. One, two, many, that is how he counts” (61). S.J. notes in his parodistically pedantic account that in the course of Jacobus’s northward trek, “blood, rotten teeth, calculus, phlegm, vomit” (119) emerged from the latter’s mouth. In common parlance, the verb ‘to account for’ means to explain or provide reasons for an occurrence. ‘Account’ has mathematic roots, evident when stressed as *account*. Jacobus is presented as a creature that processes data in the manner of a computer. Regularly he computes the permutations of a scenario. The use of “arithmetic” in the following instance points to this function of his character: “In a moment of sober arithmetic I realized that, sick with who knows what fever, I had fallen into the hands of callous thieves ignorant of the very rudiments of medicine, barbarians, children of nature whose hospitality I had only yesterday insulted” (76).

The case of the Zeno beetle is instructive in understanding Jacobus’s stance toward others, and the Namaqua Hottentots in particular. Jacobus admires this beetle, “a true creature of Zeno”, for seeming to persist in life undeterred by assaults on its material being. To pull off one of its legs is not to bring it closer to death but simply to reduce it in size. For the Zeno beetle, apparently the loss of a leg or a wing is a purely mechanical inconvenience: ““Now I am only half-way dead. Now I am only three-fourths dead. ... You and I could spend eternity splitting fractions. ... Now I am only fifteen-sixteenths dead”” (96). Starting from the assumption that life is quantifiable, in the case of the Zeno beetle one ends up quantifying death.²⁵ Jacobus claims

²⁵ Conversation with Peter Knox-Shaw. 9 February 2005.

affinity with the Zeno beetle for the secret life he believes it clings to in the face of adversity. He speaks approvingly on behalf of the beetle: "The secret of my life regresses infinitely before your probing finger" (96). Just as the Zeno beetle curls up the moment it anticipates violation from without, so Jacobus (both before and after his sojourn among the Namaqua) understands cultural difference as cultural conflict. He describes his "captivity" (96) in the Hottentot camp when in fact he was kindly accommodated by the community while ill; he was never their captive. Because they appear to diverge from familiar European textual models of savagery, Jacobus queries whether the Namaqua qualify as true savages (97). He judges the Hottentots' assault on his person (following his biting the ear of a Hottentot child) "disappointing" (96). In the heat of the assault by numerous emboldened children and the odd stick-wielding adult, Jacobus is gratified to have demonstrated on his (mannequin) person the logic that dictates his engagements with others: "I am nothing to them, nothing but an occasion" (91). Throughout his narrative Jacobus makes it clear that human others are to him "nothing but an occasion". He is pleased to be given reason to retreat into his figurative self: "Beyond rage, beyond pain, beyond fear I withdrew inside myself and in my womb of ice totted up the profit and the loss" (91). Numeracy informs Jacobus's relations with others to the extent that his evaluative meter registers only compliment and insult, acquisition and loss, debit and credit. Further, the case of the Zeno beetle sheds light on the paradox of Jacobus's figurative being. He who removes the legs of the Zeno beetle is confounded by an asymmetrical relation between substance and spirit: in theory at least, one leg does not equate to one sixth of the beetle's living presence. Similarly, Jacobus may outwardly conform to the type of an eighteenth century frontiersman yet he constantly demonstrates himself a singular citizen of imaginative substance. Like Dawn, Jacobus thrives on an element of mystery. He does not wish to be pinned down and set up with a neat caption in the manner of an insect on a displayboard. He is glad to be the focus of an assault, the subject of a reading – provided the reading acknowledges the entwined but distinct dimensions of his being.

* * *

NINE

“yes, I might have enjoyed it”

(i) Aesthetics

Jacobus has an eye for spectacle and a taste for aesthetics. One notes, for instance, his casual evocative sketch of a first encounter with Namaqua representatives on an African plain: “we rode out peacefully to meet each other, as pretty a sight as you could wish, two little bands of men under a sun only a few degrees above the horizon, and the mountains blue behind us” (64). Jacobus assumes a reader’s familiarity with the *mise-en-scène* of deep Africa. Rather than originate a description of the scene he dictates from visual and verbal templates of the pastoral idyll: “Smoke of course ascended in thin trails into the sky” (71); “Fill in the morning smoke rising straight in the air, the first flies making for the corpse, and you have the tableau” (100). To Jacobus, pattern and form are of primary consequence. Presiding over retributive operations on his second journey to the Namaqua settlement he cocks a disinterested ear to the assaulted villagers’ screams: “I tried to listen to them as one listens to the belling of frogs, as pure pattern; but the pattern here was without interest” (103). He considers postponing the execution of his ex-servicemen to the following early morning: “midday executions lacking the poignancy of a firing squad in a rosy dawn. But I did not indulge myself” (101). Jacobus’s aesthetic sensibility encompasses even the circumstances of his own demise. He expresses preference for a traumatic and highly ceremonious death. He squirms to imagine dying of a “putrefying backside” – an insupportable ignominy, out of the question. Other, nobler exits from the world recommend themselves. I quote the following extended passage for what it reveals about Jacobus as a textualized locus of consciousness.

I would gladly have expired in battle, stabbed to the heart, surrounded by mounds of fallen foes. I would have acceded to dying of fevers, wasted in body but on fire to the end with omnipotent fantasies. I might even have consented to die at the sacrificial stake: if the Hottentots had been a greater people, a people of ritual, if I had been held until moonrise and then led

through rows of silent watchers to a stake where, bound by stone-faced priests, I underwent the Arcadian ordeal of losing toenails, toes, fingernails, fingers, nose, ears, eyes, tongue, and privates, the whole performance accompanied by howls of purest anguish and climaxing in a formal disembowelling, I might, yes, I might have enjoyed it, I might have entered into the spirit of the thing, given myself to the ritual, become the sacrifice, and died with a feeling of having belonged to a satisfying aesthetic whole, if feelings are any longer possible at the end of such aesthetic wholes as these. (Coetzee 2004: 82-83)

Death in battle is a commonplace of Western epic literature; death of fever or at the stake a likely scenario of Western comic and adventure literature. Jacobus's descriptive terms suggest melodrama: "moonrise", "silent watchers", "stone-faced priests". In the "Arcadian ordeal" he imagines, he appears utterly detached from the tortures inflicted on his physical person: "yes, I might have enjoyed it". Clearly, and quite literally, something here is *not* at (the) stake – precisely Jacobus's body. What does one make of this?

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(ii) Writer and Reader

We know that as a figure in this fiction Jacobus is something of a paradox: fixed, neat, credible, but also shifty, expansive, histrionic. The specifics of his historical character win our credulity, but when he struts and postures (as in the above passage) he thins and becomes transparent. One realizes that his words should be taken not for the reality but the *mentality* they denote. Jacobus imagines the event of his death at the stake as an event in which he is both participant and spectator. Like all readers of fiction he projects an image of himself into the story he entertains. Present but absent, he is glad at once to "become the sacrifice" and admire the spectacle. There is much truth in the fictional Dostoevsky's words in The Master of Petersburg: "reading is being the arm and being the axe *and* being the skull; reading is giving yourself up, not holding yourself at a distance and jeering" (Coetzee 1994: 47; his italics). Just as the writer by putting word to page writes an image of reality into being, so the reader steps word-by-word in the footprints of the writer and onto the shore of a reality that

is “always-already”²⁶ and is not yet. It is in this sense that I refer to reading as an exercise permitting encounter with the others of oneself. One identifies to a greater or lesser degree with a character who sits his horse under an African sun, who lies sequestered in a Namaqua hut, who returns after long absence to a quiet homestead; or with a character who thrills to gaze at obscene photographs, who feels invulnerable between the library stacks, who suspects his wife of infidelity. These are the *manqué* others of oneself: familiar strangers. Beyond character it may well be contextual affinity – or indeed lack of affinity – that inspires one to pick up a novel. It is after all reassuring to be addressed by a voice that for a period implicates one in a coherent narrative. Witness the testimony of an early deep reader:

This was the voice [Ursula Le Guin] I hadn’t heard since Narnia; the lovely, sure storytelling voice that, because of some temporarily perfect fit between teller and hearer, can talk a world into existence, and have you crave a fictive life that seems clearer in its lines and stronger in its colors than your own unnarrated existence. (Spufford 2002: 186-7)

Writing permits a more intimate encounter with these secret others. Specifically, it is as a text oneself that one is able to originate an other text. According to John Coetzee: “everything that you write ... writes you as you write it”; or in Buber’s phrase: “language does not reside in man but man stands in language and speaks out of it” (89). As writer, one is worked upon by immanent voices, which voices to be articulated for an audience beyond oneself must paradoxically submit to rephrasing as words mute and estranged on the page, prostitute to an endless succession of readers. Or, in another view: “the writer is he who restores her virginity to the universal prostitute, language” (Karl Kraus qtd. in Lecercle 106). Coetzee speaks of the dialogic nature of writing: “a matter of awakening the countervoices in oneself” (1992: 65). Whether these “countervoices” are in fact voices, or faint echoes of

²⁶ I borrow this compound term from Jean-Jacques Lecercle’s *The Violence of Language* (1990), in which he examines the “remainder” or necessary dark side of language: “this dark side emerges in nonsensical and poetic texts, in the illumination of mystics and the delirium of logophiliacs or mental patients” (6). Lecercle’s use of “always-already” is interesting and tangentially relevant to this discussion: “The progress of the phrase along the chain, going as it does from literature to language to politics, and from individual speaker to collective speaker or no speaker at all, is an excellent embodiment of the contradiction that is at the heart of language, because it is the core of every speaker’s experience of his language: when the subject speaks, it is always also, or always-already, language that speaks” (103).

voices, or voices yet-to-be, or whether they are closer to wordimage than wordsound, it is clear that to write is to introspect. From silence and solitude emerges the word. Writing involves temporary seclusion from others. Foremost the commerce with oneself:

I am writing a book which I hope will be read by hundreds of thousands of people, so I must be isolated from everyone. While writing the present book, I have left word that I'm 'out' for hours or days – so that no one, including persons who will presumably read the book, can interrupt my solitude. (Ong 1982: 101).

We begin to discern the contours of a fundamental paradox. In the days of manuscript culture, writing and reading were skills restricted to a privileged group. Johann von Gutenberg's printing press of 1450 sparked a democratization of the written word which in Europe initiated a consumer phase in which books became commodities. Even as nascent print culture laid stress on the "separation of functions, analysis of components, and isolation of the moment" (McLuhan 241), people began to imagine themselves differently in relation to others.

... the hot medium of print enabled men to *see* their vernaculars for the first time, and to visualize national unity and power in terms of the vernacular bounds: "We must be free or die who speak the tongue that Shakespeare spake." Inseparable from a nationalism of homogeneous English or French speakers was individualism. (McLuhan 1962: 138-9; his italics)

The invention of the printing press was a seismic event. Insofar as one may rightly speak of culture, society, politics, economics, industry as separate categories, without overlap, all were (to borrow Yeats's phrase) "changed, changed utterly".²⁷ Yet there is still a case to be made for reading and writing as *essentially* solipsistic activities. If print fosters a sense of group identity it is still by way of an individual's engagement with the word. Alas for political dictators but the written word carries its own authority, which any reader with sense and leisure will accept or reject on its own

²⁷ "Easter 1916." Yeats 1933: 203; line 15.

terms. Certainly print kindles nationalist and other sympathies, but the reader is necessarily first conscious of himself as an individual and secondarily aware of belonging to a community of similarly placed individuals. This applies in particular to the reading of fiction.

Books are a mass medium, but there is no way for readers to be aware of one another. The lines of attention run from reader to book, never laterally from reader to reader. A reader feels alone in a book, but is actually one of a crowd, all occupying the same points in textual space, all making a hubbub that none of them can hear. (Spufford 2002: 201)

Even in the reading aloud of a story to a roomful of listeners, each listener (including the reader) is a lonely visitant to the realm of the story, restricted to the status of embedded observer, able to mutely participate but unable to broker exchange with the characters of the fiction. To return to Jacobus and the prospect of his death at the stake: he entertains the image in the manner of a reader like yourself – with not the slightest hesitation. He suspects he might even take pleasure in the occasion. The truth is that he speaks the occasion into being and his pleasure is immediate: “I might, yes, I might have enjoyed it”. It is his “yes” that is revealing. We encounter here that presence-as-absence which so intrigued Eugene Dawn about his photographs. Jacobus lends utterly frivolous currency to the image of alter-Jacobus coaxed out of existence at the stake precisely because at this moment he speaks from his retreat as figure. Captain of his fiction, like Eugene Dawn, he is beyond the exigencies of plot and genre; he will steer where he will – a point which in due course he is courteous enough to signal.²⁸ It is important to stress here that Jacobus is akin to Dawn *and the reader* in taking vicarious pleasure in the imaginative reality he entertains.

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(iii) Boredom

Jacobus contrasts his sense of pleasing “aesthetic wholes” with the Hottentots’ lack of culture, their inclination to sloth. Recuperating in the Namaqua camp he observes

²⁸ See Coetzee 2004: 98-99.

himself “growing bored and impatient with [his] situation”. He points out that boredom “is a sentiment not available to the Hottentot: it is a sign of higher humanity” (85). According to this view, boredom is an experience reserved for those whose culture prioritizes system and industry, denied to those acculturated differently. Yet, according to Jacobus, a more malignant form of boredom is written into the Hottentot character – less boredom (temperamental) than sloth (constitutional). In a true sense the early European ethnographer wrote lassitude, incuriosity, improvidence, sloth into the Hottentot character in frustrated taxonomic reply to perceived Hottentot indifference.²⁹ This definition in terms of lack (improvident, incurious, etcetera) gives rise to certain contradictory viewpoints in Jacobus’s narrative. For instance, two pages prior to his “sign of higher humanity” judgement he allows that “in a fit of boredom the Hottentots might club my brains out” (82). He presumes they lack “all religion and a fortiori all ritual” (82) yet one evening finds himself witness to the elaborate ritual of the suggestive Nama Dove dance. It is he who wishes the participants would forgo the ceremony and commit themselves to “an honest sexual frenzy culminating in mass coitus” (86). By expressing his boredom here he accords cultural status to the villagers’ ritual, while indicating that culture (in these terms) is in all cases a pretence for acts of instinct. It emerges that these Namaqua are not consistent with Jacobus’s definition of a savage as one who shows “disdain for the value of human life” and takes “sensual delight in the pain of others” (97). This model of ‘true’ savagery Jacobus inherits from Western textual representations of the Other. With a bow to Dawn the voyeur Jacobus notes that he has “always enjoyed watching coitus, whether of animals or of slaves. Nothing human is alien to me” (86). This last remark is perhaps the clearest evidence that Jacobus *chooses* the solipsist perspective. There is evidence enough in his narrative that he fails to identify with others. He denies the priority of others’ existence not because he believes himself to be alone in the universe, his mind the only knowable and existent entity, but on the contrary because in the realist tracts of his narrative he knows others are indispensable to him as foils to his character type. Hottentot must be savage in order for Jacobus to be master. At moments when he embraces his figurehood the district reality summoned up about him evaporates with its objects and others. As figment Jacobus requires no trappings, he becomes all voice, a facility to process images, a sort of

²⁹ See J.M. Coetzee’s White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa (1988).

computer. Consider his return as vengeful “storm-cloud” to the land of the Great Namaqua. He arraigns his defector *handlangers* and pronounces on all a sentence of death. He pauses to consider the varieties of annihilation available to him in this land where everything is possible (66).

The only sound was the whistling of images through my brain. All were inadequate. There was nothing that could be impressed on these bodies, nothing that could be torn from them or forced through their orifices, that would be commensurate with the desolate infinity of my power over them. They could die summarily or in the most excruciating pain, I could leave them to be picked by the vultures, and they would be forgotten in a week. I was undergoing nothing less than a failure of imagination before the void.

(Coetzee 2004: 101-2)

Jacobus here mulls his “desolate” power of signification. In this circumstance he can imagine no counter narrative. He despairs to consider the bounds of his being. If he is to inhabit his realist, material self then he must keep to type; if he is to sound his expansive spirit then reality reduces to word and Jacobus as personage attenuates to figure.

* * *

TEN

“Thus I was not quite alone”

If the solipsist refuses to admit himself certain of the reality of the world or others in the world, he at least assures himself of his existence as a thinking thing. He doubts the evidence of his senses even if the presence of his senses is beyond doubt. He admits the integration of body and mind, but insists on mental being as primary, material being as secondary. He denies that his body is coextensive with circumjacent reality. He privileges the Self and the I of that Self. There is a seclusive element in the solipsist. The recluse shuns others for the sharp consciousness he has of their presence. The solipsist, on the contrary, either feels himself inescapably secluded from others or, as in the case of Jacobus, actively secludes (puts distance between) himself and others not to escape their presence but to justify the privilege of his person and perspective. The temperamental solipsist fears that the world lacks a fixed and fast reality; his ultimate fear is that even the *cogito* is dreamflimsy. A worldly or wilful solipsist like Jacobus, on the other hand, intuitively acknowledges the independent reality of others, but acts contrariwise. Others are objects to be set in order between co-ordinates amenable to the priorities of the Self. Jacobus the wilful solipsist denies the independent reality of others in order to cast himself as first and final dreamer and dream-subject.

(i) Descartes' dream

While languishing weak and feverish in the camp of the Namaqua, Jacobus turns his thoughts to his first encounter with Namaqua representatives an afternoon before on the sunstruck plain. He regrets the bathetic quality of the encounter. He further considers it ill fortune to be in the care of these strange people who earlier failed to register and respond to what he considers a suitably noble oration. His line of meditation is resonant of Descartes.

I meditated and perhaps even dreamed on the subject of dreams. Might I hope

that all the misfortune that had befallen me since I set eye on the Namaqua was a bad dream? Were the Namaqua merely demons? ... Did I fear that not only my sojourn among the Namaqua but all my life might be a dream?
(Coetzee 2004: 78)

The phrases “I meditated”, “Life as a dream”, and “the Namaqua as demons” point to Descartes’ *Meditations on the First Philosophy* (my italics). It is in this work that Descartes details his response to the suspicion that life may be of the substance and order of a dream.³⁰ Systematic doubt is Descartes’ counter to the suspicion that life as we know it may be the projection of a Deity of evil intent whose project is wholesale deception. To circumvent this presumed deception Descartes reconsiders the validity of the reports of the outside world issuing from his sensory organs.

I will suppose, then, not that Deity, who is sovereignly good and the fountain of truth, but that some malignant demon, who is at once exceedingly potent and deceitful, has employed all his artifice to deceive me; I will suppose that the sky, the air, the earth, colours, figures, sounds, and all external things, are nothing better than the illusions of dreams, by means of which this being has laid snares for my credulity ... (Descartes 1975: 84)

Jacobus’s meditation is of course undercut by irony. In a real sense he is a figment of John Coetzee’s imagination, a well-contextualized dream. For Jacobus to entertain the Cartesian fancy is before all else to draw attention to the tenuous grounds of his being. If one concedes this structural irony, there is yet another level to consider. As an illiterate Jacobus cannot have read Descartes (nor does chronology permit quotations from William Blake³¹ or rehearsals of the existentialist position³²). One must recognize that here as elsewhere in *Dusklands* the author subverts the realist mode to widen the philosophic scope of his account. In rehearsing this middle term of Descartes’ argument – who goes on to deduce a Deity perfect and good – Jacobus expresses his solipsist inclination. The ‘life as dream’ conceit does not preclude one’s own existence; in Descartes’ phrase: “Doubtless, then, I exist, since I am deceived;

³⁰ Peter Knox-Shaw: personal communication, 7 February 2005.

³¹ See Attridge 2004b: 16, fn. 26.

³² For an exemplary tract consider Coetzee: 2004: 78-80.

and, let him deceive me as he may, he can never bring it about that I am nothing, so long as I shall be conscious that I am something" (86). In this view it is the existence of others and an immutable world that cannot be affirmed.

I have already noted the impracticality of the solipsist conceit. Jacobus provides an amusing demonstration of this point when, sequestered in the menstruation hut, he wakes to meet the curious gaze of a Namaqua boy at his bedside. Jacobus points out to his visitor a difference in their order of being but immediately regrets his utterance: "I told it it was a dream and ordered it not to touch me, upon which it turned and left the hut on the balls of its feet. I crawled after it but it had vanished. I needed better food" (83). Jacobus evidently places less stock in logic than his own conviction for he expresses here a *preference* for the child not to unsettle with a touch the logical if wrongheaded conclusion that the child is a dream. Yet even here he is a jaded postmodern: he speaks of dreaming oneself and the world as a "fertile but on the whole effete topos" (78). Effete, since as figure Jacobus is in effect versed in more than Descartes; fertile to Jacobus and his author, since it serves to illustrate how metaphysics can be made to fit prejudice.³³ Though a figment, Jacobus genuflects to realism by crawling from his hut into the mid-afternoon heat and dust an enervated burgher ravenous for solid food. He forgoes decorous register in anticipation of "feeding time"; curt sentences convey his narrow priority; like an animal he is all appetite: "Klawer brought me the witch-woman's soup. I demanded meat. He fetched dried meat. I tore into it like a dog" (83). This is more than an embrace of material reality: it is the passion of the cannibal who honours the flesh by consuming it. The too strong simile "like a dog" indicates that this is a wry depiction of Jacobus's substantiality. That is to say, hunger and thirst are as much figments of narrative as Jacobus. In this manner Jacobus's solipsist stance is revealed to be impracticable: "solipsism – though consonant with the writing of history – is at jar with its enactment".³⁴ Like Dawn, Jacobus is a volatile quantity oscillating between poles of body and mind, substance and spirit. Certainly Descartes presides. Yet it is at moments like these that one discovers the difficulty of maintaining a linear argument in a novel as fraught with paradox and implication as Dusklands.

³³ One recalls Kant's hierarchization of humankind.

³⁴ Peter Knox-Shaw. Personal communication, 7 February 2006.

(ii) Carbuncle

A consistent indicator of Jacobus's material being is the carbuncle he develops on his backside. He reserves endearments for this pustular growth, as if it were his diligent child. He refers to it as his "flaming jewel" (89). He acknowledges its "faint throbbing, a little heart in time with my big heart" (84): "I imagined the swelling in my buttock as a bulb shooting pustular roots into my fertile flesh. It had grown sensitive to pressure, but to gentle finger-stroking it still yielded a pleasant itch. Thus I was not quite alone" (83). This curious characterisation is explained (oddly enough) by Eugene Dawn's mythic narrative in which the skygod bears a "parthenogene daughter-queen". According to Dawn's projection, the skygod's potency derives from his stature as *cogito*. From the brain of the skygod "springs" a "goddess of *techne*" who supplies him with the means (technology) to combat his estranged partner (earthmother) and tellurian sons (the Vietnamese) (26). As the abscess plants roots in Jacobus's "fertile flesh" he yearns to regard it in a mirror (86). In a later instance, unaccompanied in the wilderness, he hopes to find "a small limpid pool with a dark bed, in which I might stand and, framed by the recomposing clouds, see myself as others had seen me" (96). He wishes to step back and regard himself as aesthetically pleasing image. The narcissistic pleasure he expects to indulge is synonymous with the pleasure of writer or reader in projecting an image of himself into a fictive reality. Auden speaks on behalf of writers in particular when he states that "there is no end to the vanity of our calling".³⁵ The vanity of art is its enclosure: art may be of little practical consequence but this is certainly not to deny its independent significance. This is especially true of John Coetzee's novels.³⁶ As an extension of his body, Jacobus asserts his carbuncle's priority of being over those human others around him ("Thus I was not quite alone"). He does not seem to grudge

³⁵ "At the Grave of Henry James." Auden 1976: 243; lines 58-59.

³⁶ In support of this point I cite Coetzee's account of the South African censors' relative non-interest in his novels during the Apartheid years: "I have never had the authorities turn their full attention on me as happened to Andre Brink or Athol Fugard or Nadine Gordimer or Etienne Leroux. I regard it as a badge of honor to have had a book banned in South Africa, and even more of an honor to have been acted against punitively, as Fugard and others were officially, and Brink and others unofficially. This honor I have never achieved nor, to be frank, merited. Besides coming too late in the era, my books have been too indirect in their approach, too rarefied, to be considered a threat to the order" (Coetzee 1992: 298).

the carbuncle the pain it causes him: "I was divided between pride in my offspring's stubbornness and a prayer that for a brief while my heart would stop" (89). On the contrary, in line with his first (rejected) mythic paradigm³⁷ and Eliot's "The Waste Land" Dawn seems amenable to the carbuncle's attempt to supplant³⁸ him as patriarch. Amenable to the *attempt* to supplant: "*for a brief while* my heart would stop" (my italics). The carbuncle serves as an occasion for Jacobus to regard himself as an embattled material entity – like Dawn, he regrets not existing in more rarefied form. This is the paradox of Dawn and Jacobus's "ascending meta-historical consciousness": in order to transcend material being and historical specificity they must first suffer these constraints. Or, to phrase it differently, their realistic character is the condition of their figurative being.

Jacobus treats the carbuncle as evidence of his fecundity, his ability to propagate an 'independent' fleshly being. Somewhere in Jacobus's bizarre appreciation of his carbuncle lurks an onanism ("gentle finger-stroking ... yielded a pleasant itch") not unconnected with the solipsist impulse. The link is explicitly drawn in Jacobus's exultant description of his first night alone in the desert:

My feet rubbed each other in ecstasy, my thighs lay together like lovers, my arms embraced my chest. I contemplated the miracle of the heavens and slid into a dream in which a slow torrent of milk, warm and balmy, poured out of the sky down my eager throat. (Coetzee 2004: 96)

Jacobus here speaks of the outward halves of himself lying together. This is not the reconciliation Dawn sought to effect between "the broken halves of all our selves". Rather, we observe here the auto-erotic motions of an overlarge ego. Jacobus's dream reveals exorbitant self-love and a wish to be utterly provided for. One might reasonably number self-sufficiency among the solipsist's priorities. But this is not the case. Either, as we will shortly observe in the young Wordsworth, one perceives the fabric of reality to be a projection of one's brain and oneself a lone thinker or dreamer. Or, like Jacobus, one denies that others and the world have reality except as figures in a narrative in which as narrator-protagonist one fills the principal role. In

³⁷ See Section 1.5, "Myth of the Father" (Coetzee 2004: 24-25).

³⁸ An apt verb!

the latter instance, the world is prop and others prompters. As narrator-protagonist, for Dawn as for Jacobus, imagination is all.

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(iii) Narcissus

Having taken leave of (or abandoned according to form) his ailing servant Jan Klaver, Jacobus exults in being the sole protagonist of his narrative. He exercises body and vocal chord in a kind of primal initiation rite into the world.

I yodelled, I growled, I hissed, I roared, I screamed, I clucked, I whistled; I danced, I stamped, I grovelled, I spun; I sat on the earth, I spat on the earth, I kicked it, I hugged it, I clawed it. Every possible copula was enacted that could link the world to an elephant hunter armed with a bow and crazed with freedom after seventy days of watching eyes and listening ears.

(Coetzee 2004: 95)

Jacobus disports himself in this energetic and erratic manner to confirm that his self is indeed extensible and capable of action. He significantly exhibits himself the moment he is alone. As with the food episode in the menstruation hut earlier, he inclines toward the solipsist position principally in reaction to the presence of others. Here, alone on the African highveld, he drops altogether the pretence of dissociate being sufficient unto himself in order to commit himself bodily to the world. One notes in particular the violence of the demonstration. His expostulations test the limits of his vocal range. He exerts himself mechanically with such vigour not to confirm that the world exists independent of himself, but to gratify a knowledge clearly nurtured until now that he is only detached from the world as a fictional figure – that he is otherwise gladly of the world and in it. In ecstatic fashion Jacobus refamiliarizes himself with voice and body before improvising a “little ditty”: “Hottentot, Hottentot, / I am not a Hottentot”. The words of this minor two-line paean assert his racial election as Westerner. Moreover the song form implicitly invokes literary Romanticism, the early nineteenth century cultural reflex of industrial Europe. To the English Romantic poets the ballad and lyric were verse forms pre-eminently suited to the project of

restoring a link with nature.³⁹ If, according to Keats, “Beauty is truth, truth beauty”,⁴⁰ and if beauty is principally to be found in things natural, then the song recommended itself to the Romantics as a vessel of beautiful truth. The text of Jacobus’s ditty suggests deference to European literary tradition rather than African cultural practice. His gesture toward the indigenous *liedjie* is, if anything, patronising. This ethno-condescension is confirmed in Jacobus’s comment prior to abandoning Klawer: “We were living Bushman lives. I repaired my shoes” (93). If Jacobus’s stance toward others (including God) is patronising, then he stands in relation to himself as Narcissus to his image on the riversurface:

‘I love you too, God. I love everything. I love the stones and the sand and the bushes and the sky and Klawer and those others and every worm, every fly in the world. But God, don’t let them love me. I don’t want accomplices, God, I want to be alone’. It was nice to hear this come out. (Coetzee 2004: 95-6)

One notes in particular the informal tone of this utterance. Jacobus presumes to summon a deity to serve not as interlocutor, but echo wall. His own voice he savours. He affirms the rest of creation by dismissing it. The gesture is consistent with his logic of the gun: what the gun lays out at our feet is proof of a living world (79). Jacobus’s seclusive desire is evident here. The final comment confirms his egomania. Jacobus: Narcissus of the text.

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³⁹ 1798 saw the publication of Wordsworth and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads*, a watershed event. Wordsworth’s “Advertisement” is frequently cited as a manifesto of the Romantic undertaking in English poetry.

⁴⁰ “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” Keats 1996: 849; line 49.

ELEVEN

“the alien certainties of sun and stone”

(i) Landscape: Plomer

In William Plomer’s poem “A Transvaal Morning” the speaker resolves to “attain the bird’s eye view” for the relief it might bring to the dust and sun of a somnolent African landscape. This “bird’s eye view” chimes with the image of voyeur or solipsist as a single privileged I/eye. Like Marlow in Heart of Darkness, Plomer’s speaker remarks the uncanny stillness of his surrounds. He perceives traces of artifice in the landscape and threat in the silence, as if “something there is” in this place “that doesn’t love a wall”,⁴¹ that broods on the secret of its conscious life. In the following two stanzas consider in particular the speaker’s characterization of the landscape.

Shoulders of quartz protruded from the hill
Like sculpture half unearthed; red dust,
Impalpable as cinnamon softly sifted, filled
With heaped-up silence rift and rut.

...

The strangeness plucked the stranger like a string.
‘They say this constant sun outstares the mind,
Here in this region of the fang, the sting,
And dulls the eye to what is most defined’
(Plomer 1960: 30; lines 9-12; 17-30)

Why the implicit link here between, on the one hand, art (“sculpture”, “like a string [of a musical instrument]”) and refinement (“as cinnamon”), and on the other, the minor but sinister threat of certain insects (“the fang, the sting”)? In short, to escape a sense that he is alien and accessory to this landscape the speaker ascribes to it cultural intelligence, manifested here in a shoulder of quartz, here in a carpet of sifted

⁴¹ “Mending Wall.” Frost 1966: 53; line 1.

cinnamon. Affronted by the irrefutable presence of this landscape (trees, sun, dust, thrush) the speaker imputes antipathy to these things and so justifies his reaction – a poem – which is finally a reaction to himself in this landscape. Positioned in a landscape at ease in its otherness, does Jacobus not share some of the speaker’s discomfort? Jacobus experiences not so much existential angst as existential despair, which he specifies as “despair at the undifferentiated plenum, which is after all nothing but the void dressed up as being” (101). It is as figure privileged with his author’s knowledge that he meditates in these terms. As material entity rendered in the realist mode he cannot have read Sartre *et al*, because, first, he cannot read and, second, he is a century and a half too early for the existentialist philosophers. His claim to be “sick at heart” is unconvincing, since as a figure he is in no way compromised by his conclusions. He revives a mere page later as he orchestrates the execution of the prisoners: “I was calmer. My mind bobbed like a bottle on the sea. I was happy” (102). Jacobus does not despair, he is not “sick at heart”, to think that reality is a daylight dream that might sink into itself and disappear at the first touch. Himself a figment of his author’s imagining, he is at ease with this metaphysical conceit. As figure he despairs at his limitless power as signifier in the world of the text. This is not temperamental but metaphysical despair. He may become a white bushman, or plod obediently homeward, or “explode to the four corners of the universe” (99). On the other hand, as a material entity confronted with the “undifferentiated plenum” of historical reality, his despair is of a different order. At this level he cannot with a deft turn of phrase metamorphose into something other than an eighteenth century frontiersman because here he exists, first, as material being subject to contingent reality, and second, in the flat discourse of history. Antics of character and narrative belong to the novel, not history. He is exiled in a landscape of hare and tree and stone.

*

(ii) Hare, Tree, Stone

Jacobus speaks of the hare that falls prey to a bullet from his rifle as his “metaphysical meat”. Whereas a bullet from a gun will not effect the reduction of tree-as-idea to tree-as-object, in the case of the hare the bullet enables a sound transition:

a charge of shot into a tree means nothing, the tree does not bleed, it is undisturbed, it lives on trapped in its treeness, out there and therefore in here. Otherwise with the hare that pants out its life at one's feet. The death of the hare is the logic of salvation. For either he was living out there and is dying into a world of objects, and I am content; or he was living within me and would not die within me. ... The death of the hare is my metaphysical meat, just as the flesh of the hare is the meat of my dogs. The hare dies to keep my soul from merging with the world. All honour to the hare. Nor is he an easy shot. (Coetzee 2004: 79-80)

A tree is no less alive than a hare but an organism of a different order. The hare, mobile and conscious, succumbs to the bullet. Jacobus privileges the hare over the tree because the hare yields more easily to his gun, but also to his Manichean logic: inside-outside, self-other. The hare is demonstrably alive, demonstrably dead. It is for this reason also that the hare is less alien (other) than the tree, which is less alien (other) than the stone. Yet Jacobus claims stones as his "favourites". He mock-genuflects to the hare because the hare's transition from organism to object is more explicit than the transition of a quantity such as the tree. He claims to identify with entities – like the stone – that signify nothing beyond themselves, that are not volatile to the visible shift from being to non-being, that do not destabilize his visual and semantic field. Jacobus is vexed throughout his narrative by the dual Cartesian signification – body and figure – that vexes Dawn. With the accent on intellectual being, Dawn and Jacobus experience the added burden of an acutely textualized consciousness. Jacobus identifies with stones to the extent that stones lack consciousness. A stone can never be other than itself. Jacobus, on the other hand, is a purely textual presence, an empty I, a vehicle for myriad encounters and meditations. Jacobus dismisses other consciousnesses precisely because they will not submit to his conception of the world as easily as, for instance, a stone.

Jacobus identifies with stones most of all, "so introverted, so occupied in quietly being" (96). He claims this affinity for their solitariness and the secret interior he perceives they will not reveal. He recognizes that a hammerblow to a stone will succeed in exposing not a "black interior quite, quite strange to the world" but "a replete, confident, worldly image of that red or grey [stone] exterior" (77). He

acknowledges that, while alluring, the notion of a rich secretive interior to be plundered may well be a fiction “which the universe uses to draw out its explorers” (78). Fiction or not, what matters is the lure of the secret. With respect to himself as a material being he notes with due understatement that “[m]y gut would dazzle if I pierced myself” (78). If a human heart beats ~~healthily swaddled in darkness~~ it is equally true that to expose it to daylight in the interest of baring its ‘secret’ is to compromise its keen beat. Why the heart should beat at all is a mystery. To claim a mystery for oneself is to convert mystery into secret. Jacobus and Dawn acknowledge this point by cultivating the secretive element of their being particularly toward the close of their narratives. Presumably this makes them attractive specimens for analysis (reasoned rape). Like Dawn as his narrative tapers (“I am a cipher” (45)), Jacobus retreats increasingly into his figurative self in an attempt at mystification. A few remarks strikingly inconsistent with his historical character signal this retreat (see in particular the final page and a half of his narrative). One may extrapolate from Jacobus’s speculation to the view of art as a secretive enterprise. Art is more than the sum of its parts; art exists to defy definition, keep close its secret.

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(iii) Landscape: Wordsworth

Jacobus may well be contrasted with William Wordsworth in his Berkeleian mood.⁴² As a youngster walking to the village school Wordsworth on occasion felt impelled to reach out a hand to confirm by touch the physical reality of a nearby wall or tree: “I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature. Many times while going to school have I grasped at a wall or tree to recall myself from this abyss of idealism to the reality” (Qtd. in Sheats 16-17). Wordsworth acted in this way to certify that the tree was not the idea of a tree, or the wall the idea of a wall, but a tree and wall *tout court*. His hand’s contact with the tree or wall served to invalidate the idealist perspective. The Cartesian *cogito* is implied in Wordsworth’s statement quoted above. The phrase “I communed with all that I saw” could either be taken to mean that the I senses itself assimilable to the All, or that the I senses the All assimilable to the consciousness of the I. Wordsworth claims

⁴² Conversation with Peter Knox-Shaw, 20 January 2006.

the latter case to be true to his experience: “something not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature”. This claim bespeaks what Sheats calls “extreme subjectivism” (17) – an unwilling, inescapable sense that his mind projects the world and he alone inhabits that projection. With a hand gesture Wordsworth attempts to “~~compensate for an alarming disequilibrium of relationship between mind and object~~.... [He seeks] to recover a relationship in which both poles, inner and outer, guarantee and support each other” (Sheats 19). The young Wordsworth’s experience resembles Jacobus’s experience on the African highland, yet their understanding of their experience differs. Whereas Wordsworth quails to imagine the world a vast variegated image of his brain’s manufacture, with little discomfort Jacobus thinks of reality as “the void dressed up as being”. According to Jacobus, the experience is underpinned by an intimate relation between the semantic organ ‘I’ and the visual organ (eye):

Only the eyes have power. The eyes are free, they reach out to the horizon all around. ... I become a spherical reflecting eye moving through the wilderness and ingesting it. Destroyer of the wilderness, I move through the land cutting a devouring path from horizon to horizon. There is nothing from which my eye turns, I am all that I see. Such loneliness! Not a stone, not a bush, not a wretched provident ant that is not comprehended in this travelling sphere.
What is there that is not me? (Coetzee 2004: 79)

Jacobus’s exposition is misleading for the agency it attributes to the eye. In Wordsworth’s case, the eye is the vehicle for the brain’s projection of reality. For Jacobus, the eye absorbs and processes (destroys) a stable reality. Yet this reality is presented not as a flickering image but an independent medium through which he moves. There is a contradiction here. Jacobus’s “I am all that I see” is not equivalent to Wordsworth’s “I communed with all that I saw”. In the first phrase, Jacobus’s “I” emerges distinct from the “all”. In the second phrase, Wordsworth identifies the “all” as an emanation of his “I”.

One observes here, as elsewhere, a fundamental fault in Jacobus’s reasoning. His conclusions are not self-evident (except to himself) but gerrymandered to fit his notion of the world as a flattering extension of himself. Or rather, it is around his

conclusions that he constructs his argument. We have just observed how his essentialized 'I' leads him to posit himself as an essentializing Eye. In another instance, he speaks of the relation of "master" and "savage" as a spatial relation.

~~The African highland is flat, the approach of the savage across space~~ continuous. From the fringes of the horizon he approaches, growing to manhood beneath my eyes until he reaches the verge of that precarious zone in which, invulnerable to his weapons, I command his life. Across this annulus I behold him approach bearing the wilderness in his heart. On the far side he is nothing to me and I probably nothing to him. On the near side mutual fear will drive us to our little comedies of man and man, prospector and guide, benefactor and beneficiary, victim and assassin, teacher and pupil, father and child. (Coetzee 2004: 80-81)

This is an impressive condensation, but rigged at the outset by the value-laden terms "master" and "savage". This précis stems from an assumption of the Western wanderer as superior and the indigene as inferior. It is clearly not the case that on the far side of a spatial annulus the indigene "is nothing to me". Jacobus extrapolates from a simple strong prejudice to the 'archetypal' encounter, rendered pleasingly in terms of the picturesque. The relation between explorer and native might more accurately be understood as a temporal relation. Johannes Fabian notes how early Western anthropologists "promoted a scheme in terms of which not only past cultures, but all living societies were irrevocably placed on a temporal slope, a stream of Time – some upstream, others downstream" (Fabian 17). The early European ethnographer naturally positioned European communities on the bow-wave of modernity⁴³ and the communities of other continents in a static backwater time. Terms such as 'nation' or 'tribe', which serve both to designate and evaluate a human group, belie the early European ethnographer's non-synchronic or diachronic understanding of time (Fabian 17-18).

In a further instance of faulty logic Jacobus claims that the "gun saves us from the fear that all life is within us. It does so by laying at our feet all the evidence we need

⁴³ I borrow the figure from Bradbury and Mcfarlane 22.

of a dying and therefore a living world” (79). If this “fear” were a genuine existential fear – the fear of the young Wordsworth, for instance – then the gun would certainly not be the instrument with which to determine whether reality is of itself or a projection of one’s brain. The temperamental solipsist – the momentary, unwilling solipsist – would attempt to dispel his fear by reaching out a hand to encounter the tree or wall or human other. He who wields a gun either does not wish to be “saved” from the “fear” that there is nothing real beyond his mind (indeed, he earnestly wishes to preserve the illusion that he is alone, singular), or this “fear” is a pretext for a project of acquisition and exploitation. Inanimate, the stone offers no resistance to the Western explorer-settler searching out resources in a strange land. Where physical resources are the end (as in Colonialism), the human Other becomes less of an obstacle when conceived of as a means to the end.

As Eugene Dawn demonstrates, Cartesian dualism is easily applied to human relations: the Self as intellectual essence, the Other as material mechanism: “Just as Western people conquer nature in an effort to conquer their own self-division, so they cannot desist from enslaving other human beings who necessarily confront them as Other, alien and forever threatening” (Watson 20). Jacobus places a premium on the human eye and the gun because these support the notion of a natural, spatial relation between human beings. He erects the eye- and gun-argument to defend against the (genuine) fear that he may be the means to another’s end. This is the nub of Jacobus’s psychopathology. The indigene represents that which “promises to enfold, ingest, and project me through itself as a speck on a field which we may call annihilation or alternatively history. He threatens to have a history in which I shall be a term” (80-1). As hunter-explorer Jacobus is sustained by tangible reality. As narrator, he speaks as one privileged; his privilege permits him the belief that he is above the event of relation with others that in every other case determines one as an individuated self. If Jacobus appears cruel or callous or inordinately violent, these aspects of his character are a function of the Cartesian thread that runs through him as through the Colonial enterprise.

End Part Two.

Conclusion

The signal difficulty of this project has been in attempting to distinguish between, on the one hand, the specific historical signification of Dawn and Jacobus, and, on the other, their elusive figurative being – without suggesting that these are two quite separate dimensions, or indeed the only dimensions of these characters' being. Dusklands is a rich and intricate text, finely wrought and shimmeringly suggestive. Most of the conclusions in this account balance upon a delicate orchestration of textual detail. Often one has the sense of the text pointing one encouragingly in the direction of an argument that appears to be proof against the self-reflexive meditations of the two narrator-protagonists. One trots off down this gestured path only to lay hands on an argument that swings disconcertingly through 180 degrees at the slightest notice. Specifically, in its interplay of game and document Dusklands calls into question the validity of any firm and serious criticism that does not qualify itself with a measure of self-awareness. If criticism as a genre is compromised by its constraints, how appropriate is it to float a critical argument as earnest as it is methodical on the text of a novel by J.M. Coetzee? Might not an imaginative subtext to one's critical account facilitate better dialogue with Coetzee's fiction?

As figures in a fiction Dawn and Jacobus are permitted extraordinary latitude: for the period of their discourse they enjoy the sweep of their author's modern consciousness. Yet equally they appear fixed by tight historical co-ordinates. It must be stressed that in Dawn and Jacobus various contrary currents mingle that make even the broad textual-solipsist argument seem rather too simplistic.

At the outset of this account I qualified the "range and trajectory" of my argument with Nuttall's remark that no one but a "lunatic philosopher" could approve solipsism as a "settled system of belief". According to Nuttall, outright solipsism is "quite properly regarded as something absurd, even comic". I have scarcely mentioned Coetzee's humour in Dusklands – a deft, strutting, self-deprecating sort of humour⁴⁴ that emerges from the text as distinct on subsequent readings as upon an initial reading. For all Dawn's paranoia and Jacobus's pseudo-existential angst, both characters come very near to conforming to Nuttall's image of the solipsist as a "lunatic philosopher". We know that both characters are dedicated Cartesians. We

⁴⁴ Conversation with Peter Knox-Shaw, 20 January 2006.

have observed in both a psychotic element. Both cast themselves in comic if not absurd postures of self-absorption. Surely we do not mistake in them the makings of the solipsist? If we are to venture an honest answer to this question we must confront another question – a question raised in the Introduction to this study: Can the influence of print culture and the influence of Descartes be disentwined?

In the course of my discussion I have attempted to demonstrate what I choose to call the ‘essentially solipsistic nature’ of reading and writing. I have argued that both activities foster detachment from real others and real place, but equally detachment from oneself. To phrase it differently, to read or write is to transfer the accent from Self to the Other of oneself. That is to say, to read or write is to encounter oneself defamiliarized, oneself as Other. Both acts are “ethically weighted” to the extent that one decides the degree of detachment – how far one is prepared to cast off from familiar moorings. The greater the surrender to the text, the surer the dialogue with oneself. And, as Harold Bloom points out, the “mind’s dialogue with itself is not primarily a social reality”: one reads to make “proper use of one’s own solitude, that solitude whose final form is one’s confrontation with one’s own mortality” (28). In line with this view, reading and writing open to one the solipsist perspective in order to enhance one’s appreciation of the real world where others do not exist as vaporous figures, but fully present individuals; where relation is horizontal and disinterested. Rendered in these terms Cartesian detachment is a condition of print culture. Consider the book, and especially the novel, then, not simply an emblem but an instrument of democracy: a means of persuading countless, separate individuals of their affinity, if not equality.

This is the long answer to a question that perhaps required only a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’. But a short categorical answer to a short categorical question reveals little. A novel like Dusklands provokes a host of questions – and in the critic who attempts to allocate to each question an answer, a host of doubts. In the case of a fiction as skilfully constructed and construed as Dusklands, perhaps it is enough to realize that one’s questions have been processed by the text (rather than the other way around) and returned to one in good order; confirmed as valid.

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