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# **The Poetics of Reciprocity in Selected Fictions by J. M. Coetzee**

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A minor dissertation submitted in *partial fulfilment* of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Arts in English Literature

Faculty of Humanities

University of Cape Town

2007

## **Compulsory Declaration**

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

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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## **Acknowledgements:**

My supervisor, Dr Carrol Clarkson, for stimulating discussion, correcting misapprehensions, and committing herself to countless hours of explanations, verifications, and stylistic adjustments. It is to the insights and energy she contributed that the work owes its many refinements. The mistakes remain my own.

The University of Cape Town Funding Office for providing two bursaries, without which this project may not have been completed.

The University of Cape Town English Department, whose contributions towards conference attendance allowed me to present Chapters Two and Three to peers and professionals in their proto-states.

Those unnamed professionals at the conferences whose questions and observations redirected and refined my project.

Jennifer Malec, Simon van Schalkwyk, Donald Powers, and Gareth Mannheimer for keeping me sane.

My parents for their tireless support, financial and emotional. Without their financial assistance I could not have even begun this project.

T. S. Eliot, for showing me that theses, like words, are liable to crack under pressure.

## **Introduction: Reciprocity and the Differend in the relationship between *You* and *I***

I

David Attwell, in the interview that prefaces “The Poetics of Reciprocity” section of *Doubling the Point*, identifies a recurrent concern with the function of reciprocity in the work of J. M Coetzee.<sup>1</sup> “The *I-You* relation... connects with larger things in the whole of [Coetzee’s] work, what I would like to call broadly the poetics of reciprocity.” (Attwell 1992: 58) This dissertation seeks to examine the poetics of reciprocity as an aesthetic-ethical concern of Coetzee’s fiction.

By establishing Coetzee’s works as an extended critique of reciprocity in their thematic and structural elements, this dissertation presents a notion of reciprocity that acknowledges both an ethical imperative to engage with others and the aesthetic problems of depicting that ethical engagement in art. The aim of the dissertation is therefore to show the use of a poetics of reciprocity in raising and examining particular ethical and aesthetic issues in Coetzee’s work.

Reciprocity, in an *I-You* relation, relies on the co-dependence of the *I* and the *You*.<sup>2</sup> Coetzee explores the possibility of reciprocity in his examination of *I* and *You* in his essay-translation “Achterberg’s ‘Ballade van de gasfitter’: The Mystery of *I* and *You*.”<sup>3</sup> As the preliminary step to understanding the poem, Coetzee suggests reading ‘Ballad of the Gasfitter’ “in the Romantic tradition as the search of [a] plenary, undefined *I* (embodying itself in the course of the poem in various ways) for an enigmatic but necessary *You*.” (Coetzee 1992: 72) The *You* is a necessary correspondent to the *I*. The two correspond to form the combination word *I-You*, on which the identities of both *I* and *You* are contingent.

Coetzee derives this relation from the work of the Jewish theologian, Martin Buber:

The “primary word,” says Buber, is not *I* but “*I-Thou*,” the word of “natural combination” denoting a relation between *I* and *You* antedating the objectification of *You* into *It* and the isolation of *I* into a being “at times more ghostly than the dead and the moon.” (Coetzee 1992: 72)

Notwithstanding his use of Buber to describe the mutual dependence of the *I* and the *You*, Coetzee's treatment of the *You* denies the reciprocity implicit in Buber's use of the "primary word." For, in Coetzee's description,

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 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: 72-73)

Coetzee's *You* is defined by its relation to the *I* that narrates it into being. Referring to a *You*, concomitantly, cannot lead to a reciprocal relation between it and the referrer because their relative position as object and subject inhabits a discourse where power positions are not interchangeable: the speech of the *I* invariably fills and dominates the silence of the *You*.

Jean-François Lyotard identifies the *I-You* relation as similarly asymmetrical:<sup>4</sup>

By turning the I into its you, the other makes him- or herself master, and turns the I into his or her hostage... The I, placed in the position of *you*, is someone to whom a prescription is addressed, the simple prescription that there be prescriptions (and not only descriptions, not only cognitions). The I in this situation learns nothing, since there is nothing to learn (a command is not a bit of information). The I does not even know if the other is also an I, nor does the I know what the other wants from the I nor even if the other wants something from the I, but the I is immediately obligated to the other. This is what the I's displacement onto the *you* instance marks: You ought to. (Lyotard 1988: 111)

Lyotard transposes the ethical obligation on the I into linguistic terms: "An addressor appears whose addressee I am, and about whom I know nothing, except that he or she situates me upon the addressee instance." (Lyotard 1988: 110) The situation – that of mastering the I, prescribing for it an ethical obligation, placing it in the

instance of the addressee – is not one of symmetrical reciprocity. It replaces the ego with the other; but the other, in its ethical call on the ego, also dominates the ego. The I is replaced with a you, without relieving the asymmetric linguistic affect of the you: objectification and dependence. The relationship remains unreciprocated.

Either the relationship is dictated by psychological integrity, leading to the domination of the ego over the other, or it is a response to the ethical “call” of the other, which results in the other dominating the ego. Despite the two interpretations’ mutual exclusivity, both signal a failure of reciprocity in the *I-You* relationship.

It is a failure with which Coetzee’s novels engage. Insofar as Coetzee’s works function according to a poetics of reciprocity, they engage with the contexts where reciprocity succeeds, and where it fails. The poetics of reciprocity examines an aesthetic depiction of reciprocity influenced by the ethical concerns reciprocity raises.

David Attwell identifies *In the Heart of the Country* as an examination of “the ontological consequences of settler-colonialism’s lack of social reciprocity.”<sup>5</sup>

Without the cultural mechanisms whereby a stable identity can be formed through the reflections of self thrown back by others, Magda speaks an obsessive interior monologue that rarely resembles a language of social intercourse. The numbered units of her discourse reflect this lack of reciprocity... (Attwell 1993: 58)

Magda’s criticism of her father, that he destroys the few words that are “true, rock-hard enough to build a life on,” is a criticism of his attempt to dissociate the servant Klein-Anna and himself from his daughter and his cuckolded servant, Hendrik.<sup>6</sup> “He believes that he and she can choose their words and make a private language with an *I* and *you* and *here* and *now* of their own.” (Coetzee 2004: 38 Para 74) Contrary to the father’s opinion, “there can be no private language”,

Their intimate *you* is my *you* too. Whatever they may say to each other, even in the closest dead of night, they say in common words, unless they gibber like apes. How can I speak to Hendrik as before when they corrupt my speech? How do I speak to them? (Coetzee 2004: 38 Para 74)

The interaction between father and servant becomes, in Magda's description, a violation of several codes of behaviour: a transgression of the master-servant divide, an infringement of marital obligations, and a corruption of interpersonal relationships. She chooses to describe the interaction linguistically; the *I* and the *You* are figures representing the importunate behaviour in dissociated, abstract terms.

While Attwell is correct in identifying the narrative style as an "interior monologue that rarely resembles a language of social intercourse," Magda's realisation that she shares "common words" with her father and their servants indicates the tension between the desired reciprocity implicit in a common language and the dissociative function language may have when employed to either categorise or exclude its referents.

The dissociative function of language in this interlude is particularly clear in the South African edition:

He believes that he and she can choose their words and make a private language, with an *ek* and *jy* and *hier* and *nou* of their own. But there is no private language. Their *jy* is my *jy* too.<sup>7</sup>

The South African edition, published in 1978 by Ravan Press, differs from its United Kingdom forebear in the language of its dialogues. The Secker & Warburg edition (UK) features a few Afrikaans words, primarily to designate a South African context to the otherwise nebulous location of Magda's farm. All the characters in the Ravan Press edition speak in Afrikaans. The exception, as Derek Attridge notes in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*, is the father's bride who, in paragraph 11, speaks English.<sup>8</sup>

Coetzee translates the Afrikaans *jy* as the "intimate *you*" in the UK/US editions. By calling the servant an "intimate *you*" in the UK/US editions, Magda's father transgresses the taboo on master/servant relationships: he undermines the relationship that provides master and servant with the fixed sense of their position in the world. The infraction in the South African edition, however, is the father's decision to let the servant refer to him as *jy*. *Jy*, as opposed to the more reverential *u*, is traditionally the Afrikaans referent for either an equal or an inferior. It is the servant's use of *jy* that is particularly problematic: the father's break with social convention has consequential break in the limits on the servant's language.

The dialogue that entrenches the relationship of *baas* and servant in paragraph 41 leads Magda to comment: “Men’s talk is so unruffled, so serene, so full of common purpose.” (Coetzee 2004: 22 Para 42) With his linguistic infraction, however, Magda’s father undermines the “common purpose” that guides talk between master and servant. Moreover, he commits a far greater offense by failing to anticipate Magda’s inclusion within this collapse of linguistic divisions. The reciprocity between master and mistress, provided by their exclusive claim to a linguistic supremacy, is betrayed when both master and servant fail to realise the repercussions of their illicit use of reciprocal “*jy*’s.”

There is a poetics of reciprocity insofar as the reciprocal relations between father and daughter, and master and servant, are examined within the aesthetic confines of the text. “Their *jy* is my *jy* too” is a phrase that emphasises Magda’s plea for a common language. But it also shows the conditions of that plea: the repetition of the *jy* links the possessive “their” with the possessive “my.” The deictic “*jy*” that belongs to “them” is the same as the deictic “*jy*” that belongs to “me.” The reciprocal relations, undermined between master, mistress, and servant by the misuse of *jy*, are improved between the father, Magda, and Klein-Anna: it is, however, in Magda’s capacity as narrator of the text, rather than as mistress, that justifies her claim to the *jy*.

The poetics that lead to reciprocal linguistic relations in Magda’s narrative are undermined by the instability of their linguistic base. Magda’s *jy* may be different to the *jy* of her father and their servants; denied the English of her internal monologue when she engages in dialogue, she must claim the *jy* of her society despite her desire for an “intimate [English] you.” Attridge’s suggestion that Magda may be “an English speaker, for whom Afrikaans is a necessary instrument in practical matters” is an unresolved possibility of the text. (Attridge 2005: 22) In either instance (and *In the Heart of the Country* is a text where both “either” and “or” may be held to be the case) there is a reciprocal relation in Coetzee’s use of the “intimate *you*” and the “*jy*.”

“Their intimate *you* is my *you* too” suggests that with the intimacy in the *I-You* relationship between master and servant, the *I-You* relation of father and daughter has lost its intimacy. (Coetzee 2004: 38 Para 74) That point is consistent across the phrases from both editions. However, in her claim to the intimate *you*, Magda turns the “intimate *you*” into a “*you*.” The intimacy of the *you* is lost. Magda intrudes on the interplay from which she has been excluded by replacing the intimacy of the *you* with

the possibility of general, indiscriminate *you*. A sense of reciprocity is retained; there is still a common understanding of *you*. But the understanding of *you* is no longer intimate; it is prescribed by the circumstances of Magda's narration.

Magda's feelings of exclusion within the context of her father's interactions with Klein-Anna have their counterpart in the exclusion of the father and the servant from positions of agency in telling their story. In an interior monologue, the narrator's voice presides over the actions of her narrative objects. Magda's story, divided as it is into contradictory snapshots, exacerbates this function to a point where the only action the novel confirms is Magda's narrating it into existence. For the "narrative objects" – the marriages of the father and Hendrik, the murder of the father and his bride/mistress, Hendrik's rape of Magda – are told multiple times, as completely separate, often conflicting, incidents. The only link between the sections is a stylistic consistency of narratorial voice, labelled Magda. In this, at least, she realises her wish to be "the medium, the median... Neither master nor slave, neither parent nor child, but the bridge between." (Coetzee 2004: 145 Para 256) But in being "the medium", she is also the I in the asymmetrical relationship of *I* and *You*. No one will speak to her in the true language of the heart because she, as the authority of the work, is incapable of reciprocal relationships with her fellow characters: the characters over which she wields narratorial authority.

The discrepancy between attempting to demonstrate reciprocity in a work, and failing to do so, is a concern of Coetzee's writing on writing. In an interview with Thorold and Wickstead, quoted in Teresa Dovey's introduction to *J. M. Coetzee: A Bibliography*, Coetzee articulates a position on writing, and the response to writing, that leads the discussion of reciprocity and its failure to the problem of discourse:

It seems to me that what you're trying to do is absorb certain novels, my novels, into a political discourse... And it's perhaps a mark of all critical activity to try to swallow one kind of discourse into another kind of discourse. For example, in academic criticism, to swallow literature into a certain kind of academic discourse... And what I'm now resisting is the attempt to swallow my novels into a political discourse. Because I'm not prepared to concede that the one kind of discourse is larger or more primary than the other. So that attempts to swallow up the intention that lies in or behind a

book of mine – let’s assume for a moment there is an intention there – into some wider or more all-embracing, more swallowing, notion of social intention – I have to resist them because, frankly, my allegiances lie with the discourse of the novels and not with the discourse of politics.<sup>9</sup>

Any attempt to articulate meaning outside of context leads to the absorption of the text into an architext: an *I* that rejects the differences of the individual text, so as to create a generic *you*.<sup>10</sup> Reciprocity requires that the differences be acknowledged; that the *you* be granted an *I* status. However, categorising the differences would lead to a re-absorption of the text into a generic type. A space must rather be created in content, language, and genre to accommodate those differences that grant a literary text its uniqueness, despite content, language, and genre. To create the space in which the differences may be suggested without being articulated, I use Lyotard’s notion of the differend as a term with nominal correspondence to the issues I raise.

## II

Raising the notion of the differend creates an aporia in the fractured relation between the *I* and the *You* or *I-become-You*. “The differend,” writes Lyotard, “is the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be.” (Lyotard 1988: 13)

This state includes silence, which is a negative phrase, but it also calls upon phrases which are in principle possible. This state is signalled by what one ordinarily calls a feeling: “One cannot find the words,” etc. A lot of searching must be done to find new rules for forming and linking phrases that are able to express the differend disclosed by the feeling... What is at stake in a literature, in a philosophy, a politics perhaps, is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them. (Lyotard 1988: 13)

By naming the “feeling” a differend, one at least signals the elision in language when something is denied articulation. Calling the phrase that has not been articulated

a differend at least provides the hearer of the call an awareness of the gap that its absence forms, even as it identifies injustices of discourse that, for want of articulation, are not considered injustices: “I would like to call a differend the case where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim.” (Lyotard 1988: 9)

Identifying a reciprocal relationship between the *I* and the *You* seems only possible when the *I* and the *You* are interchangeable. But making the *I* interchangeable with the *You* – making the *I-become-You* - results in the *I* having an existence similar to the *You* as Coetzee describes it. In fact, within such parameters, any effort to elide the power of the *I* would merely replace the referent of the *I*: the inversion of subject and object would not affect the presence of a power imbalance. By referring to the relationship as an instance of the differend, however, the *I*'s domination of the *You*, or the Other's call for the obligation of the *I-become-You*, is upset by the cognisance that the *You* has a potential voice, albeit elided from the discourse of linguistic signification, whose silence forms a reciprocal response to the discourse of the *I*.

The potential reciprocity between the speaking *I* and the silent *You* is demonstrated in the relationship between a writer and his or her readers. If there is a responsibility to which the writer is answerable; it remains, however it is articulated, primarily a responsibility to write. “The only responsibility of artists, writers, or philosophers,” writes Jean-François Lyotard,

is a responsibility towards the question, What is painting, writing, thought?... Their addressee is not the public, and, I would say, not even the “community” of artists, writers, and so forth. To tell the truth, they do not know who their addressee is, and this is what it is to be an artist, a writer, and so forth: to throw a “message” out into the void.<sup>11</sup>

A message, if one returns to Roman Jakobson's model, requires an addressor, an address, and an addressee. It is only in retrospect, on examining the completed work and becoming addressee of his or her own address, that the author can claim authority over the complete “message.” Coetzee expresses some concern over claims to authority:

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.<sup>12</sup>

The writer communicates his or her understanding of “what is writing” in his or her fiction insofar that the written piece functions as a trace of the act of writing. Attempts at capturing the moment of writing after the fact through retrospective claims or analyses represent the trace of the writing action, not the act itself.

In “The Novel Today” Coetzee says,

A story is not a message with a covering, a rhetorical or aesthetic covering. It is not a message plus a residue, the residue, the art with which the message is coated with the residue, forming the subject matter of rhetoric or aesthetics or literary appreciation. There is no addition in stories. They are not made up of one thing plus another thing, message plus another thing, message plus vehicle, substructure plus superstructure... There is always a difference, and the difference is not a part... the difference is everything.<sup>13</sup>

Acknowledgment of the potential voice – a voice that exists only in the terms of its potentiality – occurs in the reciprocal implications carried by the differend. While the differend marks the instance where a voice has been elided from a discourse, it implicitly acknowledges the aporia or vacuum in the lack of voice – the existence of a voice that could exist but for its non-recognition within a particular discourse. This dissertation focuses on those poetics of reciprocity surrounding narratives of elided voices.

This is not the first study to anticipate the potential of the differend as an explanatory tool for understanding elided voices. Benita Parry, in her essay, “Speech and Silence in the Fictions of J. M. Coetzee”, suggests using the differend to explain the aporias that gesture toward elided voices,<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps, then, [Coetzee’s] narrative solutions stage the process of occluding contending enunciations, of disavowing other knowledges, of constructing and holding in place a hiatus, of construing a ‘differend’ between a narrator and its

other – Lyotard’s notion of a speech act in which the addressee is divested of the means to dispute this address.  
(Parry 1996: 40)

Parry’s reasoning for not pursuing the differend as a theoretical tool stems from her belief that Coetzee’s ironic use of the solipsistic discourses of “diary, journal, and letter” leads to his situating the “dominated” of his novels “as objects of representations and meditations which offer them no place from which to resist the modes that have constituted them as at the same time naked to the eye and occult.” (Parry 1996: 41) Addressing the “dominated” as allegories of Lyotard’s differend leads to her criticism that the writing itself divests them “of the means to dispute this address.” The distinction that needs to be made is between the content of the stories and their method of relation: the distinction between the events narrated within the narrative and the event of narrating the narrative. To demonstrate this distinction, this study examines the situations in which dominant voices in the event of narrating the narrative are marginalised in the events that take place in the narrative. Although it excludes, variously, the barbarian girl, Melanie Isaacs, and Vercueil, it does so in order to focus on the primary characters marginalised by their circumstances.

Tamlyn Monson’s article, “An Infinite Question: The Paradox of Representation in *Life & Times of Michael K*”, engages in a thorough examination of the significance of Lyotard’s work in reading Coetzee’s novel.<sup>15</sup> In a discussion that navigates the correlations between Lyotard, Emmanuel Levinas, and Maurice Blanchot, Monson identifies the problem that *Life & Times* raises: “In Coetzee’s own drive to represent, in his intentional staging of the writer’s encounter with the other, he exercises the very same powers of negation and self-constituting subjectivity engaged with thematically in the novel.” (Monson 2003: 87) Following Mike Marais’s article “Literature and the Labour of Negation: J. M. Coetzee’s *Life & Times of Michael K*”, Monson agrees that “the novel aims to portray the violence of subjectivity and the negation upon which representation is predicated.” (Monson 2003: 87) Monson extends Marais’ argument in examining the consequences resulting from the paradox of representing alterity. For, according to Monson, if the “theme” of alterity is taken to its logical conclusion, the success of the work is contingent on the failure of the writer:

As a work dedicated to resisting representation and revelation as reductive and violent subjective mechanisms, *Life & Times of Michael K* fails the ethical cause by its purposeful existence, which annihilates the Absolute aspect of ethics by cementing it in words, making of ethics an exploitable theme to be dissected and displayed in a work of fiction. However this failure signals a loss of agency that forces the writer into a passivity that bears witness to the opposite of his labour... [leading to] the escape of the Other. (Monson 2003: 103)

As soon as the writer acknowledges some success in communicating that which he wishes to communicate, he betrays the ethics of his novel and undermines its significance with the totalising force of reason. Though she does not specify it at this point, the substance of Monson's essays suggest this to be a differend involved in the act of writing.<sup>16</sup>

However, bearing witness to a differend and endorsing it should not be mistaken for being the same thing. By expressing the occasion of differend, the writer may, through the action of his or her writing, also instantiate a discourse that works to undermine the narrated power of the differend in the manner that it is narrated. The writer, though concerned by the ethical consequences of attempting to represent the Other, cannot be passive in describing either situation or protagonist. Passivity, and I mean passivity in a colloquial sense, leads to the denial of the existence of such conflicts.

The use of the differend as the means of describing the irresolvable conflicts that Coetzee writes into his fictions has a particularly allegorical function in this dissertation. But it is allegorical in a very specific sense. Derek Attridge, in resisting the urge to allegorise Coetzee's fiction, warns that,

Before relying too heavily on allegorization as a primary mode of interpretation, therefore, we need to ask how allegory is thematized in the fiction, and whether this staging of allegory as an *issue* provides any guidance in talking about Coetzee's *use* of allegory (and about allegory more generally).<sup>17</sup>

The issue Attridge has with allegory is its tendency to collapse what he has called the singularity of literature – the complete and unique qualities of a particular work read in a particular space and time – into the mere representation of other works or ideas. So he cites an explicit reference to allegory in the second section of *Life & Times of Michael K*, “Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory, if you know that word. It was an allegory – speaking at the highest level – of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it.”<sup>18</sup> Commentators, according to Attridge, have extrapolated upon this interpretation of K’s existence: though they have expressed hesitancy about relegating K to any position, often critics – Attridge (2005), Marais<sup>19</sup> *inter alia* – use K as a cipher for the subject that evades any subject position. Yet while Attridge may refer to the “otherness of K’s responses”, he acknowledges that K “is the product of a specific history... a history that is embedded in the discourses he employs and encounters, in the events of his life, in the social, economic, and political arrangements he resists.” (Attridge 2005: 50; 58) K, in his life, is representative of his times. Marais, for all the care in his correlation of Levinas with Coetzee’s work, associates *l’Autrui* (the wholly Other) with K in a manner that, if not directly allegorical, makes K the analogous manifestation of the Other. Thinking of his return to his farm, questioned about a source of water, K responds with a plan by which “one can live.” (Coetzee 1998: 184; my emphasis) The ambiguity inherent in his reference “one” undermines the attempt to lodge him in a system of either interiority or exteriority, for he is neither wholly subject nor wholly other.<sup>20</sup>

Lyotard describes the differend as “a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments.” (Lyotard 1988: xi) “Differend”, therefore, becomes a signifier of the disjuncture that exists between that which can be said and that which should be said. So, after demonstrating that a “wrong” is the incursion of damages without the means to prove it, Lyotard argues that the differend is a “case where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim.” (Lyotard 1988: 9) Existing phrases are inadequate to a common explanation of the damages; the damages therefore become wrongs – damages that transgress the bounds of current idiom and therefore the bounds of legal action or legal defence. Moreover, as silences are themselves phrases or at least phrase-gaps, the decision to remain silent, when it is a decision and not a necessity, may also be inadequate to the proportion of damages

suffered by the victim. So the differend may also be described as the situation where one cannot or may not bear witness to an offence suffered because there is lacking a common point of reference which would make it remandable to a singular tribunal.

The particular use of the differend, to reiterate, is in its bringing to light discrepancies between the event of narration and the event of narrative. Mikhail Bakhtin clarifies this distinction as follows:

Before us are two events – the event that is narrated in the work and the event of narration itself (we ourselves participate in the latter, as listeners or readers); these events take place in different times (which are marked by different durations as well) and in different places, but at the same time these two events are indissolubly united in a single but complex event that we might call the work in the totality of all its events, including the external material givenness of the work, and its text, and the world represented in the text, and the author-creator and the listener or reader; thus we perceive the fullness of the work in all its wholeness, and indivisibility, but at the same time we understand the diversity of the elements that constitute it.<sup>21</sup>

This thesis focuses particularly on narrated events that marginalise characters responsible for or involved in the event of narration. So in Chapter One the discussion of *Waiting for the Barbarians* focuses on the Magistrate, while the section on *Disgrace* examines David Lurie's trial. Similarly the focus of Chapter Two is on the responsibilities and realisations of Mrs Curren and Paul Rayment when it discusses an ethic of gratitude in *Age of Iron* and *Slow Man*. Finally the examination of *Youth* in Chapter Three excludes possible ancillary discussions about parodic genres and their correspondent settings when it establishes Coetzee's reticence about generic structures in his second autobiographical fiction. The concomitant effect is that the discussion elides those figures that have been identified in Coetzee criticism as Other or marginalised: the barbarian girl, Lucy, Melanie, and Vercueil.

### III

Coetzee denies writing to a preconceived end when he says in an interview with Attwell on “Autobiography and Confession,” “the *feel* of writing fiction is one of freedom, of irresponsibility, or better, of responsibility to something that has not yet emerged, that lies somewhere at the end of the road.”<sup>22</sup>

But identifying a poetics necessitates bringing a pattern of reading into existence. Coetzee observes, in referring to a poetics of failure, that a poetics is “a programme for constructing artifacts.” (Coetzee 1992: 87) The artifice of poetics lies in its retrospective construction of a rationale or protocol for the fiction. Poetics is the pattern imposed on an existing work, which is then credited as the preconceived “message” of the author.

Coetzee expresses his concern with this imposition when, in his interview on Kafka, he declines to take up a position of authority in relation to *Life & Times of Michael K*.

What *Michael K* says, if it says anything, about asserting the freedom of textuality, however meagre and marginal that freedom may be, against history (history... as a society’s collective self-interpretation of its coming-into-being) stands by itself against anything I might say about what it says. (Coetzee 1992: 206)

Attempts to interpret a work must simultaneously acknowledge their retrospective imposition of sense, and the necessity of this imposition to the critical enterprise. For if stories avoid the predetermined outcome, “criticism, on the other hand,” has for Coetzee, the “responsibility toward a goal... set for me not only by the argument, not only by the whole philosophical tradition into which I am implicitly inserting myself, but also by the rather tight discourse of criticism itself.” (Coetzee 1992: 246) The “tight discourse of criticism” requires a predetermined series of steps for its argument: a programme by which artefacts or ideas are constructed.

In examining the “poetics of reciprocity” in Coetzee’s works, the “tightness” of critical discourse obfuscates the care with which Coetzee creates reciprocal relationships between characters, discourses and genres. “Writing [fiction],” Coetzee says, is “a matter of awakening the countervoices in oneself and embarking upon

speech with them.” (Coetzee 1992: 64) Critical discourse is about centring those voices to a particular thematic end.

When a Samuel Beckett writes his books without caring whether they are understood, when a Jerome Lindon dares to publish them, and when the ministry passes a law that allows one to find them in bookstores, this is how a testimony to the differend in literature can find its addressees. (Lyotard 1993: 10)

In his “Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech”, Coetzee identifies the Colour Bar Act as the legal means of restricting intercourse between master and slave to giving and receiving orders.<sup>23</sup>

What was the meaning of this deeply symbolical law? Its origins, it seems to me, lie in fear and denial: denial of an unacknowledgeable desire to embrace Africa, embrace the body of Africa; and a fear of being embraced in return by Africa. (Coetzee 1992: 97)

Although it is the law that refuses to recognise either master or slave as anything but master or slave, the law stems from the fear or denial of love. Moreover it is “a failure of love” on the part of the masters that leads to their suffering the confinement of their own legal system.

The failure of love, the second chapter of this dissertation will argue, is a failure of care. The failure of care is not merely the failure to care; it is the failure to care while acknowledging the liberty and equality of those who are cared for. Care and love, in Coetzee’s writings, come together in their mutual requirement for reciprocity. The failure of love and care is a failure to allow the feeling to be reciprocated.

The three chapters of this dissertation interrogate the occurrence of three kinds of differends in selected novels by J. M. Coetzee, and the specific poetics that leads each to its own realisation of reciprocity.

The most obvious, and most consistent with the original concept of the differend, is the legal differend: presenting a just but illegal case before courts and tribunals. Voices are denied their right to articulate their response to the law; as a consequence, those voices are denied the means to question or undermine that law. By

way of example, I examine *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Disgrace*; both of which feature protagonists silenced by the legal discourses of their societies. The differend occurs between the testimony that is not accepted by the authorities within the text and the testimony that the description of the trial occasions for the reader. The reciprocity the legal differend enables is reciprocity between the narrated event and the event of narration: a symmetrical engagement between the marginality of the protagonists' social situations and their dominance over their textual locations.

The second differend occurs in an extra-legal setting, and forms the basis of reciprocal relations examined in Chapter Two. Chapter Two concerns itself principally with the recurrent use of the word "care" in Coetzee's work. By examining the use of the word, specifically in *Age of Iron* and *Slow Man*, and its concomitant conceptualisation in these two works, the chapter demonstrates the ambiguities existent in "taking care" and "care-taking". Mrs Curren, with her recourse to the etymologies of care and love, has been described by Coetzee himself as

bringing to bear against the voices of history and historical judgment... two kinds of authority: the authority of the dying and the authority of the classics. Both these authorities are denied and even derided in her world: the first because hers is a private death, the second because it speaks from long ago and far away. (Coetzee 1992: 250)

Not only is this denial of Mrs Curren's argument a further instance of the differend, it also provides a starting point for an examination of the differend as more than merely a legal situation. For the extra-legal consequences of the differend imply the need to examine the conflicts that occur, that the situations of victims may be expressed in a way that does not resolve itself with a final, unequivocal, judgment.

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

So: even in an age of iron, pity is not silenced. (Coetzee 1992: 250)

But there must also be some treatment of the response to the staging process. If pity is dealt with, one must also deal with the consequences of pity. By formulating the discussion around Coetzee's use of care and the significance of the need to stage the vicissitudes that surround the positive and the negative implications of care, this chapter examines how care becomes the ground of contest for the victims of the differend in an extra-legalistic sense.

The third differend occurs when the subject attempts to distance him- or herself from the situation in which he or she is involved. For, while the choice may be made to distance oneself from one's society, the "unfreedom" of that society may inculcate itself into the discourse of that self in such a way as to prohibit the clean break desired. The voice of the self, therefore, is itself in conflict with the wishes and desires of that self. The self, trying to flee the "irresistible" "crudity of life in South Africa", is unable to escape the linguistic trap that the discourse of the voice, infused by a "South African accent", creates. (Coetzee 1992: 99) Chapter Three examines the consequences of attempting to deny the reciprocal relations that necessarily exist in generic origins: textual and cultural. Focussing its discussion on *Youth*, Chapter Three examines the necessity of reciprocal relations between individual and culture, and between text and type.

As a postscript to this introduction, I would like to refer to a speech given by Coetzee at the opening of an art exhibition in Sydney entitled *Voicelless: I feel therefore I am* on the 21<sup>st</sup> of February 2007.<sup>24</sup> In an address unmediated by Elizabeth Costello, Coetzee presents a similar argument to that presented by his fictional counterpart in "The Lives of Animals: The Philosophers and the Animals." I am not concerned with the potential the piece has for proving Costello Coetzee's amanuensis. Rather, it makes two points of particular importance to my conception of the poetics of reciprocity.

Speaking of the Holocaust, and the adaptation in Nazi Germany of industrial stockyard methods to the "processing" of human beings, Coetzee said of the world's response:

Of course we cried out in horror when we found out  
what they had been up to. What a terrible crime to treat human

beings like cattle – if we had only known beforehand. But our cry should more accurately have been: what a terrible crime to treat human beings like units in an industrial process. And that cry should have had a postscript: what a terrible crime – come to think of it, a crime against nature – to treat any living being like a unit in an industrial process. (Coetzee 2007: 1)

Reciprocity requires, at least, that the participants of a relationship do not treat each other as units. A work of literature engaged with a poetics of reciprocity requires a concomitant engagement with the ethical consequences of treating living beings like units in an industrial process. For, insofar as a work of literature has any truth-value, bearing witness to differends in the work's internal workings has a corollary in the reciprocity that *ought to be* between living beings.

A final note. The campaign of human beings for animal rights is curious in one respect: the creatures on whose behalf human beings are acting are unaware of what their benefactors are up to and, if they succeed, are unlikely to thank them. There is even a sense in which animals do not know what is wrong – they certainly do not know what is wrong in the same way that humans do.

Thus, however close the well-meaning benefactor may feel to animals, the animal rights campaign remains a human project from beginning to end. (Coetzee 2007: 2)

The human project requires that the relationships between creatures are observed and documented. This dissertation is an attempt to indicate how Coetzee's fiction creates that space; how "a man-who-writes reacts," in fiction, "to the situation he finds himself in of being without authority, writing without authority," yet needing to show some reciprocity.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Attwell, David. "Interview: The Poetics of Reciprocity" in *Doubling the Point*. David Attwell (ed). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992. 57-68.

<sup>2</sup> I, You, and jy occur in a variety of fonts in this chapter. Discursive references to I and you are not italicised. More specific references follow the conventions of the quoted texts of which they form a part.

<sup>3</sup> Coetzee, J.M. "Achterberg's "Ballade van de gasfitter" in *Doubling the Point*. 69-90.

- <sup>4</sup> Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Differend: Phases in Dispute*. 1983. Georges van den Abbeele (trans). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.
- <sup>5</sup> Attwell, David. *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993. 5.
- <sup>6</sup> Coetzee, J.M. *In the Heart of the Country*. 1977. London: Vintage, 2004. 38. Paragraph 74.
- <sup>7</sup> Coetzee, J.M. *In the Heart of the Country*, 1978. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1979. 35. Paragraph 74.
- <sup>8</sup> Attridge, Derek. "Modernist Form and the Ethics of Otherness: *Dusklands* and *In the Heart of the Country*" in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2005. 1-31. 23.
- <sup>9</sup> Dovey, Teresa. *J.M. Coetzee: A Bibliography*. Kevin Goddard (ed). Teresa Dovey (intro). Grahamstown: NELM, 1990. 2-3.
- <sup>10</sup> 'Architext' is a term used by Gérard Genette to describe the orientation in poetics towards those characteristics that differentiate or assimilate texts into generic groups. In Chapter Three I explore more closely Coetzee's use of genre as a device and as an object of criticism.
- <sup>11</sup> Lyotard, Jean-François. "Tomb of the Intellectual" in *Political Writings*. Bill Readings and Kevin Paul Geiman (trans). London: UCL Press, 1993. 3-7. 4.
- <sup>12</sup> Coetzee, J.M. "Interview: Kafka" in *Doubling the Point*. 197-209. 206.
- <sup>13</sup> Coetzee, J.M. "The Novel Today" in *Upstream*. Vol 6 (1). Summer, 1988. 2-5. 4.
- <sup>14</sup> Parry, Benita. "Speech and Silence in the Fictions of J.M. Coetzee" in *Critical Perspectives on J.M. Coetzee*. Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson (eds). London: Macmillan, 1996. 37-65. 40.
- <sup>15</sup> Monson, Tamlyn. "An Infinite Question: The Paradox of Representation in *Life & Times of Michael K*" in *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*. Vol 38 (3). 2003: 87-103.
- <sup>16</sup> This echoes phrasing from Derek Attridge's *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*. The echo is intentional, as Attridge's arguments will form a significant counterpoint to those raised in this dissertation.
- <sup>17</sup> Attridge, Derek. "Against Allegory: *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life & Times of Michael K*" in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*. Attridge acknowledges the influence of Lyotard on his work in a footnote. (94) However, given that it also acknowledges Maurice Blanchot, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jacques Derrida, it seems doubtful that Lyotard's influence can be adequately disentangled.
- <sup>18</sup> Coetzee, J.M. *Life & Times of Michael K*. 1983. London: Vintage, 1998. 166.
- <sup>19</sup> Marais, Mike. "Literature and the Labour of Negation: J.M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* in *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*. Vol 36 (1), 2001. 107-125.
- <sup>20</sup> Lyotard notes, in the essay "Levinas's Logic", the similarity between Levinas's formulation, "The interior and the exterior must be exterior", and Hegel's, "The interior and the exterior must be interior." (Lyotard 1989: 280) "Propositionally, the two statements are contraries. But they have the same perlocutionary form: for the discourse of ethics to hold together, the claim for the exteriority of the interior relation is just as necessary as the claim for its interiority is for the discourse of phenomenology." Favouring one discourse over the other is precisely what brings about a differend. By favouring K's exteriority, the ethical discourse is prioritised over the phenomenon of K's actual experience. Witnessing the interplay of these positions leaves the text in a state of conflict, but avoids instantiating a differend between the discourses.
- <sup>21</sup> Bakhtin, M.M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Michael Holquist (ed). Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (trans). Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981. 255.
- <sup>22</sup> Coetzee, J.M. "Interview: Autobiography and Confession" in *Doubling the Point*. 243-250. 246.
- <sup>23</sup> Coetzee, J.M. "Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech" in *Doubling the Point*. 96-99.
- <sup>24</sup> Coetzee, J.M. "Exposing the Beast: Factory Farming Must be Called to the Slaughterhouse" in *Sydney Morning Herald*. Wednesday, February 21, 2007. Accessed at Common Dreams News Center. <http://www.commondreams.org/cgi-bin/print.cgi?file=/views07/0221-24.htm> on 06/03/2007. 1-2.
- <sup>25</sup> Coetzee, J.M. "Interview: Retrospect" in *Doubling the Point*. 391-395. 392.

## Chapter One: “Beyond the scope of the law”: The Differend in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Disgrace*, and “At the Gate”

Two traditions, it seems to me, converge and reinforce each other in the journalistic interview. The first is legal: the interview is a politer version of courtroom interrogation, or better, the interrogation the magistrate conducts prior to the public trial.

- J.M. Coetzee “Interview: The Poetics of Reciprocity”

This chapter seeks to establish parameters for assessing the reciprocal relationships that selected works set up between individual and authority. By using *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Disgrace*, and “At the Gate” as case examples, I examine the failure of reciprocal relations between individuals and legal authorities. It is specifically a failure within the narrative for, as I demonstrate, Coetzee’s poetics subverts the history of asymmetric relations in the mode of its production. While reciprocity fails in the *what* of Coetzee’s texts, he reinstates the symmetry of relationships in the *how* of their production. While Coetzee’s stories carry many injustices, the way in which Coetzee presents them grants certain marginalised characters the ability to respond to their persecutors.

Coetzee’s comparison of an interview to an interrogation, prior to public trial, is preceded by a description that critiques the unreciprocal nature of the genre:

An interview is not just, as you call it, an “exchange”: it is, nine times out of ten (this is the tenth case, thank God!), an exchange with a complete stranger, yet a stranger permitted by the conventions of the genre to cross the boundaries of what is proper in conversation between strangers... Interviewers want speech, a flow of speech. That speech they record, take away, edit, censor, cutting out all its waywardness, till what is left conforms to a monologic ideal.<sup>1</sup>

The monologic ideal of which Coetzee speaks is the authority assumed by the interviewer over the text of the interview: not only does the average interviewer adopt an untoward familiarity with his or her subject, he or she assumes precisely the position of “the subject supposed to know” that the serious writer steps down from in writing. (Coetzee 1992: 65) The interview functions like the trial rather than the text in its recourse to a final authority: the magistrate of a trial, like the interviewer, is “the

subject supposed to know.” The writer, if he or she is to be true to the countervoices evoked or to the task of bearing witness to differends, cannot be a subject who knows: he or she must be a subject willing to acknowledge that he or she might not know, that there may be others who may occupy the subject position.

Next to the prison of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, a rose tree withers and blooms with the passing of the seasons. Hawthorne allegorises in its blooming the possibility of finding some moral to his story, the rose “may serve, let us hope, to symbolize some sweet moral blossom, that may be found along the track, or relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow.”<sup>2</sup> Although the encounters with the law in, variously, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Disgrace*, and “At the Gate” might similarly be described as “tales of human frailty and sorrow”, Coetzee is careful not to represent sources of solace and relief with such impunity. Crucially Hawthorne’s use of allegory “may” serve as relief; he suggests that allegorical readings of his work, while possible, are not essential. Coetzee’s narratives though they retain an allegorical bent – albeit increasingly focused within an identifiable and contemporaneous time and space – do accord with an anti-allegorical impulse in resisting the relief that allegorical explanation *may* bring. Insofar as they resist a moral certitude, Derek Attridge makes an important point in arguing that Coetzee’s works “resist allegory.”<sup>3</sup> It must however be noted that this resistance to allegory should not negate the work’s potency in critiquing existent conditions of torture and brutality.<sup>4</sup> Despite resistance within the works to the “relief” of allegorisation, I apply the term “differend” allegorically to Coetzee’s texts so as to describe the concern they have with transgressing the bounds set by authority.

The Magistrate of *Waiting for the Barbarians* responds to his guard’s news that houses are being torn down in order to build cells with the wry comment, “time for the black flower of civilisation to bloom.” (Coetzee 2004: 86) The line recalls the first chapter of Hawthorne’s romance, *The Scarlet Letter*:

Before this ugly edifice... was a grass-plot, much overgrown with... unsightly vegetation, which evidently found something congenial in the soil that had so early borne the black flower of civilized society, a prison. (Hawthorne 1937: 112)

The edifice to which Hawthorne refers is specifically the prison of Salem<sup>5</sup>, but the tenor of the metaphor – “a prison” – critiques the prison as a general aspect of “civilized society”. So he begins his second paragraph,

The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison (Hawthorne 1937: 112)

The irony is telling: the sincerity of a society’s ideals may have little bearing on the practicalities of their enactment. Coetzee’s use of this second quotation to introduce his essay, “Into the Dark Chamber: The Writer and the South African State”, prompts an examination into the consequences of “practical necessities”, no matter the intentions, upon the marginalised and the disenfranchised when the writer uses them for his aesthetic purposes.<sup>6</sup> In the essay, Coetzee argues the case of the writer for whom,

The deeper problem is *not* to allow himself to be impaled on the dilemma proposed by the state, namely, either to ignore its obscenities or else to produce representations of them. The true challenge is: how not to play the game by the rules of the state, how to establish one’s own authority, how to imagine torture and death on one’s own terms. (Coetzee 1992: 364)

“Establishing one’s own authority” over the “game” of writing is an issue Coetzee feels to be of vital importance to a writer. Alan Penner quotes Coetzee as saying:

Whereas in the kind of game that I am talking about, you can change the rules if you are good enough. You can change the rules for everybody if you are good enough. You can change the game.<sup>7</sup>

Lyotard likens the occurrence of the differend to “playing a game” according to a set of rules decided upon by an authority who does not adhere to them. (Lyotard 1988: 19) The writer, writing fiction, identifies and describes differends through the “game-construction” of writing. By expressing them, the writer bears witness to their occurrence. Yet the authority that “changing the game” brings gives the writer the ability to create differends, or gaps in the discourse, of his characters. The subversive power of writing may also be used to trammel the voices of the oppressed.

To subvert the rules of writing, the writer must be aware of the rules he or she is subverting. The “practical necessities” require that a novel has a beginning, middle and an ending, despite its infringement on the “endless chain of self-consciousness.”<sup>8</sup> Coetzee’s response to questions of endless endings indicates their inadequacy to the novel. “Endings of this kind, endings that inform you that the text should be understood as going on endlessly, I find aesthetically inept.” (Coetzee 1992: 248)

However, the writer, as game player, must also resist writing conventions so as to subvert the prescriptive powers of genre on the text. This resistance to genre subverts the authority of the writer, but gains him or her textual autonomy in the devolution of the plot. Genre, like law, is as prescriptive and inescapable as a case of a differend.<sup>9</sup> It may only be subverted by bearing witness to its presence.

In the case of the differend, “where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim”, there arises on the part of the plaintiff the need to “establish one’s own authority” so as to eschew victimhood and regain agency.<sup>10</sup> (Lyotard 1988: 9) The writer responding to an oppressive regime must navigate the rules of the respective discourses by undermining them rather than by ignoring their obscurities or producing representations of them. Consistency in the application of the correct genre to the correct phrase enables the identification of a differend as a differend. But in the conflict that occurs between the “correct” interpretation of the phrases of the marginalized individual and that interpretation taken by the legal authorities, in the totalizing genre of “the law”, the importance of the writer is to observe the existence of a differend, of an equivocal manner of reading the phrase, and of the resistance in the marginalized perspective to the homogenous nature of the State.

*Waiting for the Barbarians*

The Magistrate's allusion to Hawthorne does not merely signify the depth of his reading.<sup>11</sup> Nor does it function simply to indicate the comparative ignorance of the Magistrate's guard, who "does not understand." (Coetzee 2004: 86) It creates a moment of meta-textual insight wherein the recourse to literary forbears provides the Magistrate with some means of explaining the situation in which he finds himself.

Nevertheless this moment is short-lived: the communiqué within the bounds of the text is unappreciated by its addressee. The guard fails to understand the overlap in contexts that makes the quote applicable. The consequence is a play on the notions of barbarism that inform the work's dealings with Other and Othering.

English criticism has used the barbarian as a trope for the ill-educated, the uninitiated, and the marginal. Yet the stability of the term, "barbarian," is questioned in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. For if barbarians are ill-educated then the guard is a "barbarian." If the barbarian is "uninitiated" or foreign then the culture of the Empire forces the Magistrate to become increasingly "barbaric." The noted example of the marginal barbarian, the barbarian girl, has an unlikely second in the Magistrate when he too becomes marginalised by the Empire.

The roots of the first instance of barbarism are to be found in the work of Matthew Arnold. Arnold, in *Culture and Anarchy*, identified in 19<sup>th</sup> century British aristocracy a cultural barbarism.<sup>12</sup> He labelled the aristocrats "the Barbarians," and decried the superficiality of their practices: "all this culture (to call it by that name) of the Barbarians was an exterior culture mainly: it consisted principally in outward gifts and graces, in looks, manners, accomplishments, prowess." (Arnold 1999: 107) Barbarism, for Arnold, was indicated by illiteracy rather than the complete absence of culture. According to Arnold, therefore, the guard's inability to catch the meaning of the Magistrate's words is tantamount to his being a barbarian.

The Magistrate uses lines from Hawthorne to make sense of his change in circumstances. By invoking Hawthorne, and more importantly the trace of Hawthorne's ironic treatment of "Utopias" built on cemeteries and prisons, the Magistrate distances himself from the discourse of his guards, who "do not understand." The content of his statement, therefore, is not directed as a communication with his guard, though his guard may be the apparent addressee. The guard's ignorance, which may be taken as a synecdoche for the general ignorance on the part of the state's officials, endorses the Magistrate's sense of elation: "my alliance with the guardians of the Empire is over, I have set myself in opposition, the

bond is broken, I am a free man.” (Coetzee 2004: 85) The Magistrate’s ironic use of the guard as a foil is a linguistic abuse of the man’s ignorance. The Magistrate regains a sense of power over his captors, but it relies on using a similar shift in discourse, a creation of a similar differend, to that used by the Third Bureau against him.

The Magistrate illustrates the barbarism of the Imperial forces in his description of the commanding officer, located behind the desk that once represented the Magistrate’s authority:

His insignia say that he is a warrant officer.<sup>13</sup> Warrant Officer in the Third Bureau: what does that mean? At a guess, five years of kicking and beating people; contempt for the regular police and for due process of law; a detestation of smooth patrician talk like mine. But *perhaps I do him an injustice* – I have been away from the capital for a long time. (Coetzee 2004a: 85 my emphasis)

Denied justice, the Magistrate realises that he has the potential, by virtue of the power granted by his command of discourse, to deny justice in turn. His “smooth patrician talk” provides him with the verbal acuity to perpetuate, at least on the level of language, the injustices exercised against him as a body. Though the Warrant Officer sits behind the desk, it is the Magistrate who invokes the authoritative convention of asking, “Is there anything I can help you with?” (Coetzee 2004: 84)

Moreover, his position as the first person narrator of his text provides the Magistrate with an added authority over the words used by others. So when the Warrant Officer accuses him of “treasonably consorting with the enemy”, the Magistrate is able to reinterpret its meaning by shifting its context. (Coetzee 2004: 85) The phrase “treasonably consorting” becomes “a phrase out of a book”, a parroting of rules and regulations. (Coetzee 2004: 85)

The irony of this lies in the meta-textual connotations of finding a phrase like “a phrase out of a book” within the confines of a first person narrative. For the casual dismissal of the Warrant Officer’s accusation implicitly undermines the authority to which the Magistrate himself makes a claim. For the “due process of law” that the Magistrate makes some appeal to, albeit in the negative, relies on “phrases out of books” like “treasonably consorting”. On the level of the meta-textual the authority of the text and the appeal to some sort of ironic distance that permits the assumption of

such authority are both dependent on assigning some significance to “phrases out of a book”. The authenticity of the Magistrate’s narrative, therefore, is called into question by his fractured treatment of authority. His dismissal of the accusation by undermining the discourse from whence it comes has the concomitant effect of undermining the discourse on which he bases his appeal to the “due process of law.”

Fractures in the narrative occur at a basic level of identification. The narrating “I” of *Waiting for the Barbarians* is identified as a Magistrate. The absence of a proper name in the text effects a placement of his position and title as “magistrate” in the position of direct referent or name: Magistrate. He interrogates the identity of the Warrant Officer, otherwise unnamed until later in the novel, on the level of nomenclature. By means of the insignia on the officer’s uniform, the Magistrate is able to deduce that he is a “Warrant Officer”. The title of “warrant officer” becomes synonymous with his identity as “Warrant Officer”. But, as the Magistrate puts it, “what does that mean?” The identity, the name, “Warrant Officer” may be described by a series of functions. A magistrate, however, must be treated differently: “the magistracy of a district is not a post that can be abandoned like a gatepost.” (Coetzee 2004, 85) Yet “the magistracy of a district” takes its authority from the state. It too may be described as a series of functions. When the Magistrate breaks his bond with the Empire, becomes a free man, the danger he worries about in salvation is the reality of his victimhood. For, by setting himself against the Empire, he identifies himself as the Empire’s negative while simultaneously losing the identity of his function. In the first instance he becomes a non-entity and in the second he loses all but the trace of the referent, “Magistrate.” His claim to identity is based on the same system that elides his speech; his questioning of the Empire undermines the claims to the magistracy that provide him with the closest thing he has to a proper noun.

Dialogues with the Imperial officials further weaken his subject position. When he declares “I will defend myself in a court of law”, the response is “will you?” This apparent reiteration is actually a shift in the power-relation of their discourse. For by changing the “I” into the “you” - turning the authoritative declaration into a question, from a determined “I will” to a “Will you?” - his questioners demonstrate how his voice, patrician or otherwise, has effectively been silenced by the dominant discourse.

While the Magistrate reclaims some authority from his recourse to the classics and to literature, the very integrity of that authority is displaced when he marginalises that authority by questioning the value of “phrases in a book”, and when his authority

is marginalised by the concomitant loss of identity that occurs when he loses his position within the Empire's power structure.

Later, during his humiliating mock hanging, the Magistrate hears "a rustling in the leaves near [him]" and hears "a child's voice." (Coetzee 2004: 130). The laughter that the Magistrate hears comes from a very different source; it responds to the interpretation that his bellows, roars, and shouts are "calls" to "his barbarian friends": "That is barbarian language you hear." (Coetzee 2004: 133) The passive signifies two possibilities: he speaks the language of the Barbarians or he responds to the barbarity of his situation with those sounds of the body that resist semantic meaning.<sup>14</sup>

Rebecca Saunders has made a compelling argument about barbarian languages in "The Agony and the Allegory: The Concept of the Foreign, the Language of Apartheid, and the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee."<sup>15</sup> In the piece, she argues for the connection between the barbarian, the foreigner, and language: "The paradigmatic foreigner in Western tradition – the barbarian – is one who speaks a different language." (Saunders 2001: 216) She quotes Julia Kristeva,

"It is precisely with respect to laws that foreigners *exist*." This legal definition, in which "foreigner" means one who is not a citizen, "allows one to settle by means of laws the prickly passions aroused by the intrusion of the *other* in the homogeneity of a family or a group"; it renders "natural" and thus indisputable the idea that others do not have the same rights that I do (or, conversely, that I am not entitled to the rights that others are). (Saunders 2001: 220)

Turning someone into a "barbarian" not only distances that person from the reciprocal relationships between equals, it also provides the legal justification to deny their right to claim reciprocal rights. Notwithstanding the differences between strangers, foreigners and barbarians, it is clear that Coetzee sets up the "barbarian" as the estranged of the Empire. The lack of "culture" beyond the borders of the empire relegates all peoples from outside the Empire to the position of the barbarian.

Applying the differend – the term used to describe an infraction of justice, which the law cannot identify as an infraction – as a label to the situation identifies in the Magistrate's plight the aporia existing between an intrinsic claim to humanity and humane treatment, and the refusal to recognise the claim that enables his tormentors

to treat him like an animal. He is narrated into the position of barbarian by the discourse of the Empire. However, the narrating authority permitted to him by the novel discloses to the reader the disjuncture between the Empire's discourse and his own.

Despite this, his torture is such that even his narrating voice becomes dissociated from the experiences of his body:

The noise comes out of a body that knows itself  
damaged perhaps beyond repair and roars its fright. Even if all  
the children of the town should hear me I cannot stop myself:  
let us only pray that they do not imitate their elders' games, or  
tomorrow there will be a plague of little bodies dangling from  
the trees. (Coetzee 2004: 133)

The Magistrate's bellows form speech without words, reaching into the silence of his marginality. Yet, because they communicate beneath the level of semantic function, his barbarian sounds cannot crack, strain, or break. Their vocative, wordless nature precludes their representation in the form of writing – Coetzee does not attempt to include them into his narrative – but it also frees them from the “decay” of articulation. As the response of this particular body, the sounds have a particularity of time and space. However, as the noise “of a body”, it becomes a universal response to a universal set of conditions. “In the differend, something “asks” to be put into phrases, and suffers from the wrong of not being able to be put into phrases right away.” (Lyotard 1988: 13) But the pain of the body cannot be put into phrases:

The human beings who thought they could use language  
as an instrument of communication learn through the feeling  
of pain which accompanies silence... that they are summoned  
by language, not to augment to their profit the quantity of  
information communicable through existing idioms, but to  
recognise that what remains to be phrased exceeds what they  
can presently phrase, and that they must be allowed to institute  
idioms which do not yet exist. (Lyotard 1988: 13)

The pain of the Magistrate is not accompanied by silence. It is accompanied by bellows and roars. Silence in this context, however, might be better understood as that

which exceeds the bounds of recognisable, rational, and linguistically apprehensible language. The Magistrate's comfortable recourse to existing idioms, albeit incomprehensible to his captors, gives him some defence against their invasion of his position, rights, and identity – albeit an extralegal defence. When they torture him, they destroy his ability to speak or to keep quiet. But it stages the circumstance of the differend – the description of which is the last recourse of the potential victim.

The difference between this “silence” and that of the barbarian girl – another victim of a differend – demonstrates Coetzee's interrogation of the differend. For the reader receives the description of the barbarian girl from the Magistrate's narrative. But the reader also receives the depiction of the Magistrate's legal marginality as a description within the Magistrate's narrative. By describing his differend, the Magistrate witnesses its undoing. His narrative voice empowers him at the very point that he is disempowered by his condition.

### *Disgrace*

In *Disgrace*, David Lurie treats the inquiry into his relations with Melanie Isaacs with less seriousness than the Magistrate shows in his engagement with the Warrant Officer.<sup>16</sup> Lurie responds to his inquisitors with the declaration: “I plead guilty to both charges. Pass sentence, and let us get on with our lives.” (Coetzee 2000: 48) The committee that presides over Lurie's case does not answer this plea directly; rather it disavows its power to take decisions and, concomitantly, to admit a plea of guilt or innocence. Lurie shows an awareness of his relative helplessness before the discourse of courts and the law: “‘I have no challenge in a legal sense,’ he replies. ‘I have reservations of a philosophical kind, but I suppose they are out of bounds.’” (Coetzee 2000: 47) Later he pleads a Socratic ignorance to the differences between “a trial” and “an inquiry”, of the differences between “stating his position” and “entering a plea”, in favour of distinguishing between “guilt” in the legal sense and “guilt” of “a philosophical kind”. While Manas Mathabane, the chairman of the inquiry, responds to Lurie's philosophical reservations by suggesting “we had better restrict ourselves to the legal sense”, the offense, Farodia Rassool observes, is moral rather than legal. “Professor Lurie pleads guilty, but I ask myself, does he accept his guilt or is he simply going through the motions in the hope that the case will be buried under paper and forgotten?” (Coetzee 2000: 51) Lurie identifies this shift in genre: “what you

want from me is not a response but a confession.” Lurie proves capable of identifying the misrelated genres of the inquiry’s narrative. Their designs are not legal, but moral. As their authority relies on legal standing, albeit in an advisory capacity, their recourse to accusations about the quality of Lurie’s guilt displays an inconsistency between their authority as they present it and the authority they assume in the course of their inquisition.

This inconsistency is most clearly observed in juxtaposing an early statement of the meeting, “This is a committee of inquiry... It has no power to take decisions”, with Rassool’s verbal slip,

‘If he is censured. We fail to perform our duty if we are not crystal clear in our minds, and if we do not make it crystal clear in our recommendations, what Professor Lurie is being censured for.’ (Coetzee 2000: 50)

Despite Mathabane’s correction, Rassool twice admits to censuring Lurie – the decision of a judge, rather than the recommendation of a committee. Lurie’s observation of the disjuncture between the claims made by the committee and their linguistic practice has little practical consequence. Rassool, after demanding something more than “the motions”, claims the committee should “take his plea at face value and recommend accordingly.” (Coetzee 2000: 53) She then goes on to insist that the statement he makes “should come from him, in his own words. Then we can see if it comes from his heart.” (Coetzee 2000: 54) The “should” implies something more is required than following the letter of the law. For if the law is prescriptive then its discourse is made of “musts.” “Shoulds”, however, are not prescriptive. They imply an “ethical imperative”, which indicates that they form part of a moral genre of discourse. (Coetzee 1992: 250) Lurie’s response is to explicate his previous observations about the inconsistencies in this discourse:

‘I have said the words for you, now you want more, you want me to demonstrate their sincerity. That is preposterous. That is beyond the scope of the law. I have had enough. Let us go back to playing it by the book.’ (Coetzee 2000: 55)

As Lurie tells Mathabane during a later telephone conversation, he will not repent because, “Repentance belongs to another world, to another universe of

discourse.” (Coetzee 2000: 58) Mathabane’s response to this is, “You are not being instructed to repent.” (Coetzee 2000: 58) Although the authorities desire “a spirit of repentance”, they claim that there need be no concomitant “feeling”. All that is required is a demonstration of sincerity.

Lurie’s confession, that he “became a servant of Eros”, becomes, in this light, an attempt to navigate the warped discourse of the committee. The committee conflates notions of legal “guilt” and moral or ethical irresponsiveness. Lurie, by confessing to be a servant of Eros, engages the issue of moral turpitude, while his admission of legal “guilt” answers to their legal accusations. However, the conflation of discourse precludes the answering each to each individually. When he attempts to answer to the legal accusations, he is required to endorse his answer spiritually. When he responds to the spiritual accusations, he finds himself a subject of legality. The Law, therefore, in *Disgrace* becomes a murky morass of conflated and contradictory discourses: requiring a defence that simultaneously answers to both the legal and the moral implications of his actions. By refusing to endorse the “game” played according to the ever-shifting rules of the committee, Lurie maintains his ability to choose the manner of his response. Like the Magistrate, Lurie’s recourse to a cultural milieu simultaneously makes him susceptible to legal statute and empowered beyond the scope of the law. His confession – “it is not a defence” – provides him with a moral escape from the matter, while retaining ethical responsibility. While they can institute a differend over his legal body by refusing to recognise his admissions and confessions, they fail to deprive him of his ability to choose the manner by which he admits and confesses. He, in this instance, retains his right to speak or to remain silent.

Faced by his daughter Lucy, however, and faced by his attack and her rape, his recourse to language to describe the events seems inadequate. “He speaks Italian, he speaks French, but Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa.” (Coetzee 2000: 95) The abuse of his body wrenches from him his ability to either speak or to remain silent. When his attackers cover him in methylated spirits, he undergoes a transformation that deprives him of the ability to articulate phrases beyond representations of his body’s reaction to the pain. “He strikes at his face like a madman; his hair crackles as it catches alight; he throws himself about, hurling out shapeless bellows that have no words behind them, only fear.” (Coetzee 2000: 96)

After the fact, there seems to be little recourse to the law for Lurie. Lucy's decision, that "you tell what happened to you, I tell what happened to me", effectively prevents him from reporting the rape and finding some solace in retributive justice. (Coetzee 2000: 99) "In a voice that is fast descending to a croak", he accuses his daughter of making a mistake – but she refuses to endorse his assumption of power over their situation.<sup>17</sup> His bellows mimic those of the Magistrate; both are denied their subject positions and both are disallowed the relief of their usual linguistic acuity to make sense of their situations.

Lurie's words in accusing his daughter are, "You are making a mistake." Lucy's response is, "You tell what happened to you..." Later, when Lurie is haranguing Bev Shaw about Lucy's intransigence, he says, "I know what Lucy has been through. I was there." To which Bev responds, "But you weren't there, David. She told me. You weren't." Lurie is "baffled."

Where, according to Bev Shaw, according to Lucy, was he not? In the room where the intruders were committing their outrages? Do they think he does not know what rape is? Do they think he has not suffered with his daughter? What more could he have witnessed than he is capable of imagining? Or do they think that where rape is concerned, no man can be where the woman is? Whatever the answer, he is outraged, outraged at being treated like an outsider. (Coetzee 2000: 140-141)

His questions, his distress, his feelings of marginality are indicative of a vain attempt to impose some sort of order on his situation and on his right to speak about his situation. Yet against this desire to regain his right to speak, to form in language the progression of events in the novel, stand those to whom his position as witness is compromised. By acting as witness to Lucy's rape, Lurie assumes an authority over the narrative of the situation. But, because his authority is undermined, because he "was not there", he is rendered impotent and speechless before the law. He cannot bear witness and so cannot be anything more than the victim – the plaintiff without any recourse to damages or phrases – of his circumstances.

In Lyotard's treatment of Levinas in *The Differend*, he writes, "By turning the I into its you, the other makes him- or herself master, and turns the I into his or her

hostage.” (Lyotard 1988a: 111) Notwithstanding the ethical consequences of this phrase, it represents an important linguistic manner of conducting power relations. Lurie’s conflict with Lucy stems from contrasting views as to who the I is in their relationship. “You” shifts from Lucy to Lurie during their interchange, just as the “I” of Lurie’s conversation with Bev becomes a “You” as his position is undermined. Although I and you function as “shifters”, without any fixed referent, their crucial difference occurs in their respective subject/object relation.

The “I” and the “you”, as linguistic referents, exist concurrently in the “here-now” of the phrase that refers to their existence. Yet, insofar as the phrase describes the situation, the “I” retains authority over that description and, by extension, the situation. As opposed to an I that hostages itself to the you, “the I effaces the you.” (Lyotard 1988a: 117) This echoes the linguistic significance Coetzee derives from Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*.<sup>18</sup> Coetzee, as a linguist, turns Buber’s spiritual writings into a linguistic strategy. So in response to Buber’s evocation of the primary combination words “*I-Thou*” and “*I-It*”, Coetzee makes the following observation,

Then, immediately, we encounter curious features of the *You*. 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 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)

While the “Achterberg” essay from which this is drawn was first published in 1977, twenty two years before *Disgrace*, Coetzee’s observation of the linguistic ramifications of using “*You*” still hold. By imposing a “*You*” on his daughter, Lurie makes her “dependent on [his] I”, which prevents reciprocity in “the relation of [his] I to [her] you.” His language turns her from a sufferer of a wrong, with the ability to either speak or keep silent about that wrong, into a victim whose voice he would assume if he were to champion her cause.

Bev Shaw implements a similar linguistic strategy when she reiterates his sentence using the second person. Admittedly Bev is not entirely fair in her refutation: Lurie was there, albeit unconscious in the bathroom. But she denies Lurie his univocal

position of authority in bearing witness to both his attack and Lucy's. He was not in the room; he cannot imagine the offence. Lurie brings to bear, in negotiating the trauma of his experience, the full weight of Romantic precedent, "the sympathetic imagination." "There is no limit to the extent to which we can think our way into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination."<sup>19</sup> So says Elizabeth Costello in "The Lives of Animals: The Philosophers and the Animals." However, as Sam Durrant has persuasively argued, in Lurie's case *inter alia* there exist "limits to his capacity to think his way into other lives."<sup>20</sup> Durrant cites Lurie's imaginative attempt at re-enacting Lucy's rape:

*You don't understand, you weren't there*, says Bev Shaw. Well, she is mistaken. Lucy's intuition is right after all: he does understand; he can, if he concentrates, if he loses himself, be there, be the men, inhabit them, fill them with the ghost of himself. The question is, does he have it in him to be the woman?" (Coetzee 2000: 160)

At best Lurie can assume the role of offender. Even as he is outraged by Bev's linguistic marginalisation of his subject position, he refuses to, or cannot, marginalise that subject position himself. However, in order to assume the role of victim, he must effectively elide his own voice.

The double-bind of the victim, as expressed by Lyotard, is such that,

Either you are a victim of a wrong, or you are not. If you are not, you are deceived (or lying) in testifying that you are. If you are, since you can bear witness to this wrong, it is not a wrong, and you are deceived (or lying) in testifying that you are the victim of a wrong. (Lyotard 1988a: 5)

In testifying to victimhood, there exists some recourse to a tribunal to whom one may testify. Victims, however, by definition, have no recourse to such a tribunal. Lurie, in attempting to bear witness to a situation at which only Lucy and her rapists were present, encounters the problem of claiming a position of authority, albeit narrative authority, over a situation at which he has not been present. Yet, rather than attempt to testify to the circumstances of his own attack, as Lucy suggests with her "you tell what happened to you...", Lurie fixes on her rape as a metaphor for his own

humiliation, his own disgrace. Lucy's eventual response, eschewing his claims at paternal authority in her letter to him, calls him "one of the three chimpanzees, the one with his paws over his eyes." (Coetzee 2000: 161) Before his daughter, Lurie stands blind to his own position as victim, subject to his own differend, the heterogeneity of his situation and his discursive attempts to make sense of it.

Again, however, it is the narrative positioning of the text, by which the situation is observed, that undermines the sufferance of a differend. Lurie, though unable to articulate it, is able to show the situation of his status as victim. Without collapsing into the prescriptive trap of genre, Lurie retains the status of both witness and victim, by virtue of the authorial presence.<sup>21</sup>

### *Elizabeth Costello*

"At the Gate", Elizabeth Costello's final Lesson, re-enacts a Kafka parable significantly called "Before the Law."<sup>22</sup> Kafka's tale concerns the repeated efforts of his narrator to enter "the gate" through which he must pass in order to reach "the Law." Like many of Kafka's tales, the parable restricts its reader to the incomprehension of its narrator. The purpose of passing through the gate remains shrouded in mystery for the narrator and the reader. The conclusion is unsatisfying: with the narrator's death, the gate ceases to have purpose and thus ceases to be. The law, or the Law, remains undefined and inaccessible. Although the man could enter, the doorkeeper recommends against it. And, while the man thinks "the Law... should surely be accessible at all times and to everyone", the doorkeeper is so threatening, the man "decides that it is better to wait until he gets permission to enter." (Kafka 200: 3) The prescriptive power of the law, though it remains undefined, denies its subjects the right to witness its identity or question its nature. The man at the gate, deprived of his right to question the Law to which he is subject, suffers as the victim of a differend.

When Elizabeth arrives "at the gate", she is required to make a statement of belief. This statement of belief and the inquiry that follows are all that is required to open the gate. Kafka's gate also requires a statement of belief: a belief as to that which lies beyond the gate. Giving that statement will open the gate for, in a manner of speaking, that which keeps the gate beyond the protagonist's reach are their limitations – in Kafka's case, the unnamed narrator, in Coetzee's, Costello –

conceptual structures. Yet, in both cases, the guardians who prevent the respective protagonists from accessing the gate also test whether they are deemed worthy of access. Against the tests, neither the narrator nor Costello is equipped to defend the subject position that they hold.

In this, both the Kafka piece and Coetzee's reworking of it, resonate with Kafka's *The Trial*.<sup>23</sup> Joseph K, the more articulate antecedent of Michael K, wakes up to the occasion of his arrest "one fine morning." (Kafka 2005: 7) When he attempts to give his identity documents to his warders, in a bid to make sense of an arrest for which he has apparently committed no crime to deserve, they respond, "What are your papers to us?"

'Our officials..., as the Law decrees, are drawn towards the guilty and must send out us warders. That is the Law. How can there be a mistake in that?' 'I don't know this Law,' said K. 'All the worse for you,' replied the warder. 'And it probably exists nowhere but in your own head,' said K. (Kafka 2005: 12)

The other warder, coincidentally named Franz, then observes a discrepancy between Josef's plea of innocence and his ignorance of "this Law." As the novel continues, for it cannot be said to progress, K loses the confidence of his initial outrage and gradually becomes immersed in the seriousness of his "trial", without ever understanding the reason for its occurrence. His early claim that the Law exists "nowhere but in your own head" is apposite to his situation. His growing worry about the trial stems from the insistence of the tribunal on the seriousness of the charge without ever explaining or revealing the actuality of the charge. As such, his worry is an endorsement of the tribunal's authority; he worries as a result of their call for him to worry.

Coetzee's characters resist the urge to endorse their respective tribunals in the way of Josef K. However, perhaps because of their historical circumstances – Apartheid, State of Emergency, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: extra-legal bodies that, by their legal endorsement, are subject to those problems with the law that this chapter raises – the tribunals they face have a power over the body that belies Kafka's loophole – that the tribunal exists "nowhere but your own head."

If one associates Costello's appeal to "embodiedness" in "The Lives of Animals" and "Realism" with Coetzee's position in "The Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech", there seems little possibility of relegating the effects of the law to the content of one's own head.

Realism has never been comfortable with ideas. It could not have been otherwise: realism is premised on the idea that ideas have no autonomous existence, can only exist in things... The notion of *embodying* turns out to be pivotal. In such debates ideas do not and indeed cannot float free: they are tied to the speakers by whom they are ensconced. (Coetzee 2004b: 9)

When the recourse to the abstract - for so may be interpreted both the Magistrate and Lurie's appeal to culture - fails for Coetzee's dominant characters, they also become "animal."

The animal, according to Lyotard, "is a paradigm of the victim."

Some feel more grief over damages inflicted upon an animal than over those inflicted upon a human. This is because the animal is deprived of the possibility of bearing witness according to the human rules for establishing damages, and as a consequence, every damage is like a wrong and turns it into a victim *ipso facto*. - But, if it does not at all have the means to bear witness then there are not even damages, or at least you cannot establish them. - What you are saying defines exactly what I mean by a wrong; you place the defender of the animal before a dilemma. (Lyotard 1988a: 28)

Given the victimhood of the animal, it is interesting to note that the most significant correspondence between David Lurie and the Magistrate is their mutual status as "dog-men." (Coetzee 2000: 146) The repeated simile of the Magistrate is "like a dog." "There is no way of dying allowed me, it seems, except like a dog in a corner." (Coetzee 2004: 128) "I bolted my food down like a dog", he says to Mai the cook of his time in prison. (Coetzee 2004a: 140) Lurie, to repeat, becomes a dog-man,

though he resents Lucy's decision to live "like a dog" in starting "from ground level." (Coetzee 2000: 205) Yet though, as Lurie observes, it is "legally... not workable" for Lucy to retain rights if she gives up her land, Lurie's own experience of the law has relegated him to a marginal position – a position where his marginal state precludes him from defence against even that which is ostensibly illegal – and the use of the simile, "like a dog", is merely Lucy's reiteration of Lurie's description of Lucy's proposed situation.

Durrant calls the simile in this instance a mark of "resemblance" but also the recognition of "a certain limit: one can imitate the life of a dog but never actually lead a dog's life." (Durrant 2006: 131) Lurie applies the simile, "like a dog", to the situation of starting "at ground level"; that which Lucy describes as, "With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity." (Coetzee 2000: 205) Yet, while she will have "no things", she will not have "nothing", absence, loss. For by surrendering herself to what the Magistrate calls "the irruption of history into the static time of the oasis", by becoming peasant, by becoming animal, Lucy hopes to survive beneath the event of history and historical narrative. (Coetzee 2004a: 157)

Elizabeth Costello, confronted by a literal gate representing the figurative boundaries of her sympathetic imagination, allows herself nonetheless a vision of what lies beyond "the gate, the side she is denied."

At the foot of the gate, blocking the way lies stretched out a dog, an old dog, his lion-coloured hide scarred from innumerable manglings. His eyes are closed, he is resting, snoozing. Beyond him is nothing but a desert of sand and stone, to infinity. It is her first vision in a long while, and she does not trust it, does not trust in particular the anagram GOD-DOG. *Too literary*, she thinks again. A curse on literature! (Coetzee 2004b: 224-225)

Costello's criticism of her own vision as "too literary" stems from its reliance on word associations: GOD inverted becomes an old DOG. Moreover the desert stretching to "infinity" is too reminiscent of Wheatley's nonsensical analogy of infinity to notions of the "best writer" in her first lesson, "Realism": "Without infinity we would have no mathematics... but that doesn't mean that infinity exists. Infinity is

just a construct, a human construct.” (Coetzee 2004b: 8) Yet the dog guarding the gate in some ways prevents her from imagining anything that is not, like infinity, a human construct. Its presence subverts her rule over the possibilities of her imagination. Moreover, like the doorkeeper of Kafka’s parable, it endorses the rule of law that prohibits her entry.

The limits of authority that Durrant invokes, therefore, become limits to the potential for a victim, who has “become animal”, to respond to his or her continual existence within history. For, although their recourse is to this primal state, Lurie, Lucy, the Magistrate, all face the inevitability of history and before that “Law” their animal states impose on them the status of victims – it is only their presence within their respective texts that vocalises their suffering and enables an escape from the differend.

The inversion of the tasks expected on one side and on the other may suffice to transform the accused into a victim, if he or she does not have the right to criticize the prosecution, as we see in political trials. Kafka warned us about this. It is impossible to establish one’s innocence, in and of itself. It is a nothingness. (Lyotard 1988a: 9)

The differend may occur in trials where the accused may not respond to his or her accusers. Literature, however, provides the means to describe the trial from the perspective of the accused. While it remains impossible to establish one’s innocence, in and of itself, the narrative in which innocence is described provides the means for subverting the differend that the impossibility represents. The differend does not restrict itself to situations; it also infringes the discourse of its victims and the genre this discourse takes.

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<sup>1</sup> Coetzee, J.M. “Interview: The Poetics of Reciprocity” in *Doubling the Point*. David Attwell (ed). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992. 57-68. 64-65.

<sup>2</sup> Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Complete Novels and Selected Tales of Nathaniel Hawthorne*. Norman Holmes Pearson (Ed). New York: The Modern Library, 1937. 112.

<sup>3</sup> Attridge, Derek. “Against Allegory: *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life & Times of Michael K*” in *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005. 32-64.

<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to the comments of Lucy Graham for the emendation.

<sup>5</sup> The irony that “Salem”, the place of peace, is also the location of Lucy’s rape should be noted. However, it does not form part of this argument.

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<sup>6</sup> Coetzee, J.M. "Into the Dark Chamber: The Writer and the South African State" in *Doubling the Point*. Although David Attwell, in *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, alludes to Coetzee's use of Hawthorne in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, he neither associates it with "Into the Dark Chamber" nor acknowledges it as more than a passing intertextual reference.

<sup>7</sup> Penner, Allan Richard. *Countries of the Mind: The Fiction of J.M Coetzee*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1989.

<sup>8</sup> Attwell, David. "Interview: Autobiography and Confession" in *Doubling the Point*. 243-250. 247.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida, in "The Law of Genre", argues that every utterance assumes a genre of some type or another. While the way the phrase is received is dependent on the context associated with that genre, genre is inevitably attached to every utterance. Chapter Three explores the consequences of genre on Coetzee's work.

<sup>10</sup> I examine the details of taking authority in Chapter Two's discussion on taking care.

<sup>11</sup> Coetzee, J.M. *Waiting for the Barbarians*. 1980. London: Vintage, 2004a.

<sup>12</sup> Arnold, Matthew. *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings*. 1993. Stefan Collini (ed). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

<sup>13</sup> The interest in the uniform corresponds to an account of "uniform" in Franz Kafka's "In the Penal Settlement." Kafka's officer says of his uniform, "they mean home to us; we don't want to forget about home." The Magistrate's eschewal of uniform is a silent protest against this construction of home. Kafka, Franz. "In the Penal Settlement" in *Metamorphosis and Other Stories*. Willa and Edwin Muir (trans). Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961. 169-199. 171.

<sup>14</sup> It also functions as a pun on the origin of the word "barbarian", which is originally a Greek onomatopoeic. "Bar bar" seemed to the Greeks the meaningless sounds made by the invading Doric tribesman, whose language was incomprehensible and whose culture, according to the Greeks at least, was "barbaric." (OED)

<sup>15</sup> Saunders, Rebecca. "The Agony and the Allegory: The Concept of the Foreign, the Language of Apartheid, and the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee" in *Cultural Critique*, No. 47. Winter, 2001. 215-264.

<sup>16</sup> Coetzee, J.M. *Disgrace*. 1999. London: Vintage, 2000.

<sup>17</sup> Though the link may only really be argued from a reader's response, Lurie's "croak" anticipates a connection with Elizabeth Costello's frogs in her trial "At the Gate". Costello believes in the frogs "because of their indifference to [her] belief. (Coetzee 2004b: 217) Lurie's croak is representative of converse effect; it transpires because of his daughter's, and his attackers', indifference to him.

<sup>18</sup> Coetzee, J.M. "Achterberg's "Ballade van de gasfitter": The Mystery of I and You" in *Doubling the Point*. 69-90.

<sup>19</sup> Coetzee, J.M. *Elizabeth Costello*. 2003. London: Vintage, 2004b. 80.

<sup>20</sup> Durrant, Sam. "J.M. Coetzee, Elizabeth Costello, and the Limits of the Sympathetic Imagination" in *J.M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual*. Jane Poyner (ed). Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2006. 119.

<sup>21</sup> The examination of David Lurie as a marginal character ignores the marginality of Lucy and Melanie as more obvious depictions of "Other" in *Disgrace*. Without ignoring the work done, particularly on the issue of rape, by Lucy Graham in "'Yes, I am giving him up': sacrificial responsibility and likeness in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*" and "Reading the Unspeakable: Rape in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*", I wish to stress that this study focuses on the depictions of marginality in Coetzee's dominant characters.

<sup>22</sup> Kafka, Franz. "Before the Law" in *The Complete Stories*. Nahum N. Glazer (ed). Willa and Edwin Muir (trans). 1971. New York: Schocken Books, 1988. 3-4.

<sup>23</sup> Kafka, Franz. *The Trial*. Willa and Edwin Muir (trans). London: Vintage, 2005.

## Chapter Two: Taking Care in *Age of Iron* and *Slow Man*

At the heart of the unfreedom of the hereditary masters of South Africa is a failure of Love.

- J. M. Coetzee “Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech”

This chapter examines reciprocity in acts of generosity and charity. *Age of Iron* and *Slow Man* concern themselves with the care for others and the consequences of caring for others. The term “take care”, as it occurs in Coetzee’s works, is ambivalent in its signification: it is as often indicative of violence as it is of comfort or solicitude. Examining the ambivalence of the term leads to the realization that even solicitous “care-taking” imposes a kind of violence on the cared-for. In establishing an “ethic of gratitude” in the act of care, the agency that care-taker takes from the cared-for is reinstated in another manifestation of Coetzee’s poetics of reciprocity. An “ethic of gratitude” is the phrase developed specifically to examine the ethic that involves the giver of a gift acknowledging the right of the recipient to respond to the gift. The gift is given with a corresponding acknowledgment that the recipient may accept or reject the gift, but most importantly that he or she may engage with the gift giving process as more than merely the passive “you” of the interaction.

An “ethic of gratitude” does not prescribe gratitude as the response to charity or gifts; it is the additional obligation on the gift-giver to allow the gift’s recipient to respond. It is the surrender of the “I” subject position to the “You” not in order for the addressor to become the hostage of the “You” but to create a reciprocal admission that an exchange has taken place.

The absence of an “ethic of gratitude”, when a gift is given “without the possibility of return”, creates a differend for the voiceless recipient of the gift. This chapter relates the linguistic discussions of the Introduction with the issues of speech rights raised in Chapter One by examining the consequences of this non-legal differend on those recipients whose right to speak is specifically undermined by obligations incurred from the gifts they are given.

## *Reciprocal Care*

When, in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, David Lurie returns to take care of his daughter on her farm he asks whether she will "take care" of her nascent foetus.<sup>1</sup> Lucy, Lurie's daughter, is the victim of a terrible rape, and is bearing a child "from that day." She responds to Lurie's accusation of failing to care,

I have taken care. I have taken every reasonable care short of what you are hinting at. But I am not having an abortion. That is something I am not prepared to go through again. (Coetzee 2000: 198)

Lucy objects to the "care" that will visit upon her the further violation of an abortion on her body. However, she acknowledges that she will take "care" of the child; she deliberately misinterprets David's euphemism to be a literal demand that she provide care: by nurturing it in her womb and protecting it in the manner that David would protect her. The word "care" becomes ambiguous, connoting a position simultaneously violent and comforting. Lurie's own desire to take care of Lucy, by having her abort her child, turns the comforting solicitude he wishes to show her into an act of violence.

To reiterate, Jean-François Lyotard calls the differend, "the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be."<sup>2</sup> "What is at stake," Lyotard writes, "in a literature, in a philosophy, in a politics perhaps, is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them." (Lyotard 1988: 13) Bearing witness to differends, as this example from *Disgrace* demonstrates, requires the clarification of terms. Lucy observes the differing uses of the word care in Lurie's discourse by bearing witness to its conflation. While she may "take care", she refuses to acknowledge an abortion as part of that process.

This ambivalence to the nature of "care" is a concern by no means exclusive to *Disgrace*. Coetzee's work, as oeuvre, concerns itself with the treatment of others, not simply as victims deprived of their voices, but as sufferers of the solicitude of others. This chapter examines the treatment of care in *Age of Iron*<sup>3</sup>, *Slow Man*<sup>4</sup>, his most recent novel, and the most recent appearance of Elizabeth Costello prior to *Slow Man*, "As a Woman Grows Older."<sup>5</sup>

Care, whether given or taken, is offered in Coetzee's novels as means of providing for another what they cannot or will not provide themselves. It may be a comforting gesture, a charitable action, or an act of violence. Yet, in each case, "taking care" empowers the care-taker and disempowers the cared-for. As the cared-for does not provide for him- or herself what the care-taker provides them, the cared-for becomes obliged to the care-taker. By articulating this obligation, one at least bears witness to its presence. In bearing witness to the presence of obligation, one acknowledges the need for an "ethic of gratitude" to take its place.

Mrs Curren, in *Age of Iron*, is shaken when the homeless man, Vercueil, spits on the ground in front of her. This follows Mrs Curren's offer of "a job of work" and her subsequent diatribe, "You are wasting your life", when he fails to respond. (Coetzee 1998: 18) Mrs Curren interprets this "word" "from a language before language" as "Here: take your coffee." (Coetzee 1998: 18) The implication is that the coffee and the job offer do not justify Mrs Curren's claim: "You are wasting your life." She assumes the right to make the claim because of her apparently charitable action, and is shocked when Vercueil refuses to acknowledge her power over him or his obligation to her.

Lyotard, in dealing with Levinas's views on obligation and the other, identifies the work of the latter as coming to the following, implicit, conclusion: "Obligation alienates the ego: it becomes the you of an absolutely unknowable other." (Lyotard 1988: 115) Lyotard's particularly linguistic approach in *The Differend* provides the means for explicating this phrase. For, rather than being the "I" or active subject position implicit in the ego, the ego in question, according to Levinas's obligatory surrender before and toward the other, must, in Lyotard's linguistic revision of Levinas, lose the power of their primary subject position, within the phrase, and assume the status of the you – the passive subject position of a sentence. Becoming a "you" limits the power of the person within the context of the phrase, as they are denied recourse to the enunciating power of the "I."

Lyotard extends his critique of Levinas and obligation in the essay, "Levinas' logic."<sup>6</sup>

The expression *Obey!* seems then to cover several of the properties that Levinas attributes to the ethical situation. It is an absolutely 'empty' proposition, since it is not provided

with an instruction to make it executable... It is not executable, but it is that which renders executory.

So it is not understood in the sense of being comprehended, but only in the sense of being received [as an obligation]. However it is never in fact received in its own right but merely hidden in the form of complete or 'full' prescriptive statements, that is, instructives... According to Levinas, 'it' is not obligatory because 'it' is universal; 'it' is simply obligatory. In this way, the Lord requires of Israel not obedience but rather obligation towards Him, before he instructs the people as to what they will be obliged to do. (Lyotard 1989: 307-308)

Lyotard articulates Levinas's principle of alterity as "*That / Thou / shalt never be / I / !*" (Lyotard 1989: 304) The statement is prescriptive: it requires that addressee to *Obey!* But, like the command *Obey*, the principle can only be understood "in the sense of received", not "in the sense of being comprehended." For, in order for the addressee to articulate comprehension, he or she must adopt the position of the enunciating *I*, disobeying the command "never [to] be I."

To find oneself placed in the pragmatic position of being obliged is incommensurable with the position of enunciation, even of enunciating prescriptives. The incommensurability is the same as that of freedom with the condition of being a hostage. (Lyotard 1989: 308)

The freedom that comes with enunciating prescriptives carries for the addressee the position of being obliged. Mrs Curren's unexplained shock at Vercueil's response is a shock at his refusal to be obliged. His spit is raised to the level of enunciation in its explicit rejection of his obligation. The shock demonstrates an expectation on Mrs Curren's part of gratitude in return for the gift. The problem lies in her refusal to acknowledge Vercueil's freedom to express his response to the gift. The unspoken prescriptive laid on Vercueil with the gift is that he makes "no fires" and "no mess", listens to her harangues about getting a job, and attends to her accusation that he wastes his life. (Coetzee 1998: 7; 8) Rather than provide him with the opportunity to

express a response to her charity, she takes his obligation for granted and assumes an authority over his life to which he can only respond with silence and spit.

Ironically, it is in her attempts to limit the “charity” of her actions, that she becomes more “caring.” After his half-hearted attempts at gardening she pays him, saying: “I know you are not a gardener... and I do not want to turn you into what you are not. But we can’t proceed on a basis of charity.” (Coetzee 1998: 21) When he asks why, she answers: “Because you don’t deserve it.” His response, “Deserve... Who deserves anything?” is met by anger: she thrusts her purse at him while demanding, “What do you believe in, then? Taking? Taking what you want? Go on: take!” (Coetzee 1998: 21) Charity is revealed as something that must be earned, for which one must be worthy. Vercueil, Mrs Curren decides, is not worthy. When he questions her decision, she responds irrationally, assuming that he conforms to another stereotype: the thieving indigent. However, by paying him for his service, Mrs Curren does acknowledge a problem inherent in charity: reciprocal relationships are impossible in situations where the economy of exchange, set up by an act of giving, does not provide the recipient the means to complete the exchange. Coetzee addresses the problem by setting up what I have called an “ethic of gratitude”: the part of a giver in acknowledging the right of a recipient to respond to a gift or gesture.

When Mrs Curren proposes sending her “letter” to her daughter after her death “as a gift without the possibility of return”, the daughter, the “you” of the letter, is denied the possibility to respond, is denied the right to enunciate her response by the chains that her semantic positioning as “you” within the text places upon her: despite the rhetoric of “you in me” Mrs Curren uses. By not allowing her daughter to respond to her, Mrs Curren precipitates an exchange to which the daughter will be indebted without recourse to a return. The relationship, such as it is, becomes, with the writing of the text, asymmetrical. The daughter is obligated without the means to reciprocate or to respond; the relationship between mother and daughter cannot function within an “ethic of gratitude” as the daughter is denied the right to respond to the gift with or without gratitude.

Obligation ties itself to the dilemma of the differend: the obligation one imposes through caring forces the cared-for into a state where any response constitutes a rebuttal of the obligation. If one attempts, as the cared-for, to “return the favour”, he or she assumes an enunciative freedom in articulating how the obligation may be resolved. This strips the secret of the obligation, that it should remain executory

without being executable, of its ambivalence. It also strips the care-taker of his or her enunciative power over the cared-for – the cared-for may discharge the obligation of being cared-for.

The act of care-taking, the irony of care-taking, lies first and foremost in its lexical constituents. For by “taking care”, one either means “being careful” or “being caring, solicitous, and helpful towards somebody else.” But, of course, one is “taking” care; the care-taker also obtains something without necessarily being given it. Unless it is self-solicitation, that which the caretaker receives is probably not “care.” Rather, as a hypothesis, it is the subject position “I” over the “you” of the cared-for, who is obligated by the care given to grant the care-giver the semantic power of the phrase: “I take care of you.”

Moreover the terms “give” and “take”, usually antonymic, become synonymous in references to either the “care-giver” or the “care-taker.” It seems appropriate at this point to examine the ambiguities set up by seeing “care” as a gift simultaneously “given” and “taken”.

When Mrs Curren, in *Age of Iron*, condescends to give Vercueil food, though he does not ask for it, she seeks to set up an emotional economy of exchange between them: she has an expectation that Vercueil will be obliged. The food ceases, therefore, to be something freely given; Mrs Curren expects to be able to “take” obligation in return. However, when Vercueil throws her sandwich away and spits out her coffee, he reveals the fallacy of calling such charity a gift; the reader is encouraged to be as shocked as Mrs Curren by the violence of his refusal, thereby exposing his or her own assumptions about obligation.

Charity, as Mrs Curren notes, comes from the Latin, *caritas*: care. However, her first claim is that *caritas* means heart. “A lie: charity, *caritas*, has nothing to do with the heart.” (Coetzee 1998: 20) While Mrs Curren tells Vercueil that charity comes from the Latin word for the heart, she confesses in the letter she writes to her daughter that she has lied about the etymology. While *caritas* does come from the root *carus* which means “dear”, similar to the heart, the actual etymology has little significance to her sermon to Vercueil. Carrol Clarkson, in “Responses to Spaces and Space of Response in J. M. Coetzee”, argues that the fictional etymology plays an important role in expressing the ethical principles behind her charitable action, and her “taking care.”<sup>7</sup>

*The fact that Mrs Curren's ethical view draws on a "poetic principle" (the fictive association of caritas and "heart") rather than on "the certainties of didactic discourse"... does not, in itself, make her view any less valid.*  
(Clarkson 2006: 10)

Using terminology borrowed from the artist, Robert Smithson, Clarkson stresses the contingencies brought about by the poetic construction because, as she quotes from Smithson, under scrutiny the word opens up into a series of faults: "the certainties of didactic discourse are hurled into the erosion of the poetic principle." (Smithson quoted in Clarkson 2006: 1) Mrs Curren's etymological discussions have no intrinsic significance. Rather, their relevance devolves from the associations, poetic or factual, she chooses to make. Of course, the difference between telling someone that charity comes from the heart and admitting privately that it is a false etymology, reveals more than an ethical desire to bring the heart into acts of charity and care. Vercueil's "obligation", should he accept Mrs Curren's charity, must acknowledge there is a feeling behind her gesture, akin to, if not synonymous with, love. With her "sermons of false etymologies", Mrs Curren creates associations between care, charity, and love. But, despite her confession, she resents Vercueil's refusal to accede to her etymological constructs. "No charity in him, no forgiveness. (*Charity? Says Vercueil. Forgiveness?*) Without his forgiveness I give without charity, serve without love." (Coetzee 1998: 131) Mrs Curren expects Vercueil to respond to her charity. He, however, refuses to acknowledge the obligation she sets upon him through her use of false etymologies and references to love.

When Elizabeth Costello fellates Mr Phillips in Coetzee's eponymous novel, she distinguishes *agape* from *caritas*, suggesting the latter is a specifically Christian conception of care while the former is closer to *eros*.<sup>8</sup> However, the ostensible opposition of *agape* to *caritas* that Costello suggests may be collapsed by considering *agape* a disinterested, unreciprocable, love-charity. Moreover, this explains the *caritas* involved in Mrs Curren writing a letter to an absent daughter who will be unable to respond<sup>9</sup>; it is a caring with a love that may not be reciprocated.

This *caritas*, care, stems from her desire not to inflict on her daughter the pain of her dying; she resists to "the craving to share [her] death." (Coetzee 1998: 5) But it seems inconsistent with her recent realization of reciprocity: "I begin to understand

the true meaning of the embrace. We embrace to be embraced.” (Coetzee 1998: 5) She refuses the absent daughter any embrace because she fears inflicting responsibility on that daughter. But she simultaneously denies her daughter the right herself to be embraced. The “care” in the letter becomes a violence of the letter; “care” itself becomes conflated with violence.

*Agape* may be defined as “gift-love”. But, as has already been demonstrated, this “gift-love” conflates with the idea of charity as a care given without thought of return. The “Gift”, a gerund associate of “giving”, therefore defines the event of care-giving; the cared-for receives the care, if it is given with *caritas* or charity, like a gift. A discussion of care in Coetzee – especially in *Age of Iron* – must take into account that the care Mrs. Curren takes of her daughter forms itself as a gift: the gift of the letter. Derek Attridge, in his chapter on *Age of Iron*, argues for precisely the significance of the letter as a gift in demonstrating the care with which Mrs. Curren relieves her daughter of the responsibility of responding.<sup>10</sup>

Attridge’s concept of the gift<sup>11</sup>, something that is given without thought of return, attempts to avoid the “discourse of knowledge as content and inheritable property.” (Attridge 2005: 92) Rather “understanding it” should remain “an always contextualized responsiveness, activity, and self-questioning.” The “gift” is empty of substance; it has meaning only in the obligation it carries to its recipient. That it is given without thought of return indicts the giver. For “without thought of return” carries with its altruistic idealism the ignorance of the inevitable obligation its function as a prescriptive command carries.

The gift in *Age of Iron* is *Age of Iron*; a letter “given” to its fictional “you” and to its readers. But, more than that, it is the act of giving that occurs in the event of reading that Attridge argues is the gift – more than the letter that merely “represents” the gift-as-act. (Attridge 2005: 92-93) Yet the irony of invoking absolute alterity, either of Vercueil as messenger or Mrs Curren’s unnamed daughter, denies the responsibility and responsiveness that Attridge’s “ethical understanding” requires. They are, each of them, denied the means to relieve the obligation that their status as recipients invokes.

That Mrs Curren chooses not to be a burden on her daughter, exile or migrant, is commendable; that she sends “a letter” as a “gift” “without thought of return” is questionable. For her decision to share her death with her daughter after the fact denies her daughter’s right to respond, while insisting that she “participate” through

the act of reading. Though the daughter will retain her authority over the text as its reader, Mrs Curren's demand on her, by invoking her in the position of the "you", pre-empts her ability to respond with the monologism of her own worries and cares. Her final act of solicitude figures itself as an assertion of parental authority over her departed daughter. Her "gift" takes the form of a prescriptive command that is never fully articulated – it is the implicit demand to bear witness to her experiences that is, to rewrite Attridge's phrase, "an obligation without thought of return."

The gift, as an act or event, takes the form of care-taking – for the feelings, emotions, and actions of the daughter. In this care-taking, however, it enacts precisely the ambiguity, "ambivalence" to use Elizabeth Costello's term, which is concomitant with the caring process. Mrs Curren denies her daughter the space to reciprocate; she denies her the possibility of gratitude.

Mrs Curren requests Vercueil take the package of her writings, the representation of her gift to her daughter, to the post office, a request "so little that it is almost nothing. Between taking the package and not taking it the difference is as light as a feather." She does not see the irony of her next line, that "if there is the slightest breath of trust, obligation, piety left behind when I am gone, he will surely take it." (Coetzee 1998: 130) Vercueil, a homeless man without responsibilities, must accord with the wishes of a dying woman, must constrain himself with the obligation she places on him by virtue of nothing less than her position as helpless and marginal. For if her acts of charity are to retain their worth it cannot be from the gratitude of these that he does her bidding; though it is this that probably engenders the word "obligation." Certainly the word "piety" resonates with her quasi-religious notion of *caritas*. The trace of herself implicit in the "breath of trust" – it is, after all, her trust in him that she believes should in part oblige him to act – functions as the cause for him to accede to her demands. For, despite the end of obligation that should accompany her death, she asks for the commission of the task when she is alive and can anticipate the occurrence of her death. But, because the reader is sympathetic to her situation, her call on Vercueil to accede to her demands, against her own diagnosis that he is without charity, seems groundless. The reader, precisely because of his or her sympathy, cannot sympathise with that basis of obligation.

Any gift actually given brings about an emotional exchange. So the true "gift" is not so much an object as an event that is always coming into being without ever becoming present. It is an *aporia* existing in the act of giving: the paradox of

simultaneous inception and negation. As soon as one gives a gift, creating the situation of giving, one automatically creates an economy of exchange that undermines any thinking of the gift as a gift.

Jacques Derrida considers the possibility of resolving the dilemma of giving by appealing to a secret in *The Gift of Death*. If I give the food without calling it a gift, it falls outside the emotional economy of exchange. It then becomes “the gift that is not a present... of something that remains inaccessible, unrepresentable, and as a consequence secret”, rather than “a gift that could be recognized as such... a gift destined for recognition”, which would “immediately annul itself.”<sup>12</sup> The only manner in which such a non-gift could be made without necessitating a more pecuniary economy of exchange would be through some act of giving that occurs from one who sees without being seen.<sup>13</sup> This religious conception of giving is, of course, charity. However recourse to “the secret” does not undermine the prescription, *Give!*, which the gift-as-act carries. Concomitantly, charity and care carry the obligations of the prescriptive command.

### *Age of Iron*

*Age of Iron* is ostensibly a letter, and “so long a letter” (Coetzee 1998: 118) written by a dying classics professor from her Mill Street home in Cape Town to her daughter living in the United States. As the novel progresses, however, it is increasingly clear that even as it provides a description of the woman, Mrs. Curren, and her final weeks of life, it also becomes an act of confession; an attempt by Mrs. Curren to achieve some sort of grace. Mrs. Curren’s response to the rhetorical question: “To whom this writing then? ... to you but not to you; to me: to you in me” (Coetzee 1998: 5) suggests though her writing is for her daughter, it is also for her own soul-searching and, concomitantly, soul-cleansing *vis-à-vis* the absolution brought about by confession.

The novel begins with the arrival of Vercueil, a homeless man accompanied by the ever significant Coetzeean dog. Vercueil arrives on the same day that Mrs. Curren is told she is dying of cancer, a day before she begins to write her letter.<sup>14</sup> Initially she resists ascribing significance to this coincidence of events: “[He is] not an angel, certainly.” (Coetzee 1998: 12) However, she becomes embroiled in the political situation through the personal relationships she forms with her domestic servant, the

convey her sense of charity to Vercueil, are taken from languages not only foreign to the land in which she lives, but incongruent with the times in which she must take a part. The care that she understands is a care “from long ago and far away” – the Christian care of Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and C.S. Lewis. It is a solipsistic care that acknowledges no return and hinges its authenticity on refusing return.

Unlike her treatment of her cats, her treatment of her daughter denies the daughter’s right to respond to her care and generosity. The genre of a letter presupposes a recipient. But Attridge has argued that *Age of Iron*, in its direction at an absent extra-textual other, makes this task of communication impossible. It “makes possible for Mrs Curren an exceptional fullness of giving... in that it enables the gift [of the letter] to be posthumous, without thought of return.” (Attridge 2005: 93) The solipsistic genre that characterises *Age of Iron* similarly characterises the selfish selflessness of denying the other voice in the cycle of care and (in)gratitude. This denial violates the ethic that exists between the giver and the receiver. By refusing her daughter the right to reply to her need, Mrs Curren expresses, through her love, a lack of care about her daughter’s right to choose or respond to the ‘gift’ she will be given.

### *Slow Man*

*Slow Man* also explores a further connotation of the word “care.” A retired photographer, Paul Rayment, is hit by a car while riding his bike. As a consequence, he loses his leg and must employ a nurse to take care of him. After Paul dismisses his first nurse, Sheena, she is replaced by a Croatian woman, Marijana Jokić. During the course of her care-giving, Paul falls in love with her. Her response is to become increasingly distant and lax in the fulfilment of her duties. Enter Elizabeth Costello who problematises both novel and situation with her metatextual commentary on the story and her insistence on Paul’s responsibility to the Jokić family. Paul, at this point, wishes to pay for the tuition of the Jokić’s son, Drago, at an expensive military academy as a response both to the care Marijana has given him and the love that he bears for her. The Jokićs, however, are particularly resistant to this return of care.

When Paul first loses his leg, a nurse tells him that “everything is taken care of.” (Coetzee 2005: 4) Again, this notion of care is ambiguous: although the leg has yet to be taken care of, by being removed, this may well be the nurse’s referent. But, as is suggested by his previous exclamation, “Clothes,” she is also referring to his

servant's son, Bheki, and Bheki's friend, John. As she approaches the private moment of her death she finds herself exposed to the loss of privacy correspondent with living during the South African State of Emergency. As a policeman says in response to her outrage at the invasion of her privacy: "Nothing is private anymore." (Coetzee 1998: 157) In the face of this intrusion, all Mrs. Curren can do is try to achieve some measure of grace, through her confession and through her actions. But because "the spirit of charity has perished in this country" (Coetzee 1998: 19), and because there already exists for her too great a debt to pay back,<sup>15</sup> it is only to the animals of *Age of Iron*, and to Vercueil, the man who is simultaneously both an "old tom" and a "dog" that she can give without entering into an "economy of exchange." (Coetzee 1998: 44; 42)

Last instructions, never enforceable. For the dead are not persons. That is the law: all contracts lapse. The dead cannot be cheated, cannot be betrayed, unless you carry them with you in your heart and do the crime there. (Coetzee 1998: 32)

Mrs. Curren claims she "must love, first of all, the unlovable" and the unloving. (Coetzee 1998: 136) But while she announces that principle about Bheki's friend, John, she cannot give him love that isn't affected by an economy of exchange. As the dogs, and even Vercueil in his capacity as a "dog-man" who protects and cares for her, cannot but respond to her love by protecting her and loving her, she seems denied the opportunity to find grace through charitable action; through loving the unlovable. Mrs. Curren in her charitable treatment of her cats gives them love without expectation of return. In a country where love seems dead, it is perhaps the most significant act someone can do. It is made more poignant by her complete ignorance that it is through the act of feeding her cats, that she achieves the grace that she so desires and that is denied to her conscious confessions, her overt charities. The irony that her cats do not respond to her "duty" with affection serves to exaggerate their right to respond freely to her treatment: in this, she enters into the obligation of feeding them with an "ethic of gratitude."

As Coetzee says in an interview with David Attwell, while "Elizabeth Curren brings to bear against the voices of history and historical judgment... the authority of the classics", this effort "is derided and denied because they speak from long ago and far away." (Coetzee 1992: 250) Her notion of charity, the etymology she relies on to

possessions, his integrity, and his personal safety: “everything is safe.” (Coetzee 2005: 4) This ambiguity exists throughout the use of “care” in the hospital discourse. For Dr Hansen<sup>16</sup> to take care of the leg (remove it), Paul must be doubly violated: “First the violation, then consent to the violation.” (Coetzee 2005: 8). Following the removal of the leg there is a discussion about “care of the leg” (nursing it). Paul realizes the inconsistencies in this use of the word “care”.

*Care of my leg?* He is smouldering with anger – can they not see it? *You anaesthetised me and hacked off my leg and dropped it in the refuse for someone to collect and toss into the fire. How can you stand there talking about care of my leg?* (Coetzee 2005: 10)

Paul’s problem, however, rests principally on the lack of heart involved in this care.

“The nurses are good... but beneath their brisk efficiency he can detect... a final indifference; from young Dr Hansen he feels, beneath the kindly concern, the same indifference.” (Coetzee 2005: 12)

“So young and yet so heartless!” is his plaintiff cry to himself in response to this lack of care. His first nurse, Sheena, similarly cares without heart, without regard for his dignity or his feelings. She calls his leg his stump – care for it is “stump care” – and his genitals, his “willie.” (Coetzee 2005: 23)

Although Marijana gives care with dignity – “she treats him not as a doddering old fool but as a man hampered in his movements by injury” – she too gives care without heart, without love: “Marijana, it would appear, could not care less whether he has women in the flat.” (Coetzee 2005: 28; 39) Medical care is constituted throughout the novel as care without heart; a *laissez faire* care of the wallet, found like the medical aid card in the wallet, rather than the “loving care” to which Elizabeth Costello expressly refers. That “kind of care” is “not found in any nursing home she is aware of.” (Coetzee 2005: 261)

When Paul states, “I would prefer to take care of myself,” he makes a plea for self-sufficiency. (Coetzee 2005: 10) Later, when he thinks of the preparations he has made for this eventuality, his statement is, “Even if the worst comes to the very worst,

I will be able to take care of myself.” (Coetzee 2005: 17) The words become a euphemism for his own willingness to commit suicide. Like the dog his father “takes care of” with a shotgun in the woods, he – a dog, with a dog’s life – expresses his commitment to violence against himself as manner of “taking care.” (Coetzee 2005: 44; 26) This commitment of care for the self, whether violent or otherwise, is at least commitment based, *contra* medical care, in feeling and the heart.

Significantly the care that comes from the heart is itself ambivalent; either harmful or helpful. Care from the heart, though preferable to care without heart, may also come without recognition or requiring response from whom it is directed. Care must be given with heart, but it must also be allowed to be acknowledged. Without acknowledgment, care remains an obligation whose return is not executable. A gift, in Attridge’s terms, without a means of return.

Though Marijana’s care acknowledges Paul’s dignity as an other, it still denies him the right to respond to that care and acknowledge its significance. While it is a dignified care-giving, it is not dignified care-taking. It does not allow for a return of care from the cared-for, robbing him of the dignity that the caring seems at such pains to protect.

In his collection of essays about censorship, *Giving Offense*<sup>17</sup>, JM Coetzee describes “innocence” and “dignity” as constructed fictions: “Innocence is a state in which we try to maintain our children; dignity is a state we claim for ourselves.” (Coetzee 1996: 14) Affronts to these are not therefore attacks “upon our essential being but upon constructs – constructs by which we live, but constructs nevertheless.” (Coetzee 1996: 14) While we may feel affronts to the constructs, and the feelings may be real, they are nevertheless based on

A foundational fiction to which we more or less wholeheartedly subscribe, a fiction that may well be indispensable for a just society, namely, that human beings have a dignity that sets them apart from animals and consequently protects them from being treated like animals. (Coetzee 1996:14)

As has already been suggested, one of Paul’s preeminent concerns forms itself around a protection of this “foundational fiction”. His ambivalence about the gift of the bicycle<sup>18</sup>, like his initial regard for Marijana, is based on his desire to maintain his

dignity. Dignity in this situation becomes ambiguous. Although respect for dignity becomes a manner of caring quite different to the indifferent “economic” caring of the medical fraternity, it also impedes the return of care. Paul cannot acknowledge the value of the bicycle as its reception would make him ridiculous: “a figure of fun... one of the quaint types who lend colour to the social fabric.” (Coetzee 2005: 256) Only after the “moral rout”, when he feels “ashamed of himself”, can Paul acknowledge the care given. The gift typifies the violent imposition of care – it renders Paul’s complaint morally questionable – but, more significantly, Paul’s response to it – “he will never put it to use” (Coetzee 2005: 256) – prevents him from acknowledging its benefits. He becomes obliged, by the violent imposition of the care, but refuses, because of his “foundational fiction”, the empowering acknowledgment of that care. Without acknowledging, or responding to, the care, it has the nuanced violence of imposition without a concomitant relief of gratitude.

Michel de Montaigne, at one point in his essay “On Affectionate Relationships”<sup>19</sup>, writes if “one... give[s] to the other it is the one who received the benefaction who would lay[s] an obligation on his companion.” (Montaigne 1991: 214) Since the act of giving empowers the giver, the recipient’s creation of the opportunity to give makes the giver beholden to the recipient for that power. It puts into the giver’s hands, “the means of doing him good.” (Montaigne 1991: 215) When Paul is allowed to acknowledge his debt to Marijana, by expressing his desire to “live in a shed in your back yard and watch over you... over all of you” (Coetzee 2005: 251), she completes her contract to care for him. Marijana recognises his desire to “watch over” her and her family as legitimate, and legitimates it further with a kiss on each cheek. She says,

‘But you not pretending, eh?’

‘No.’

‘Yeah, I know that.’ (Coetzee 2005: 250)

By authorising his care of her family, she empowers him to give care. The violence of care becomes mitigated in this event because it is a care that does not deny the cared-for’s right to respond.

Paul Rayment is the novel’s focaliser. As the central consciousness, he mediates the novel. Significantly as the recipient of care, he becomes a voice for the cared-for – the recipients of the violence of care. While care and charity are beneficial, they imply

violence against those people to be benefited. *Slow Man* demonstrates how problematic the solipsistic care, idealised in *Age of Iron*, may be in regarding its recipients.

For the difference in the treatment of care in *Slow Man* to its treatment in *Age of Iron* lies in shifting the focus from those who “take” care to those who receive it. Paul Rayment, forced to engage the services of a nurse, becomes subject to the ethic of gratitude in a way that Mrs. Curren, relatively self-sufficient despite her cancer, does not. In fact, seen in this light, Paul Rayment’s responses to his ethical predicament, his apparent ingratitude and his repeated attempts to maintain the sense of his own independence, might explain the responses of Vercueil to Curren’s attempts at imposing on him an “ethic of gratitude” through her charity or gift of care.

### *An Ethic of Gratitude*

In the Elizabeth Costello story, “As a Woman Grows Older”, Costello is faced by what she calls the ‘ambivalence’ of her children. She believes her son and her daughter have conspired to coincide visits in order to propose some means of taking care of her.

Whatever the proposal it is they have to put to her, it is sure to be full of ambivalence: love and solicitude on the one hand, brisk heartlessness on the other, and a wish to see the end of her. (Coetzee 2004c: 1)

She evinces an awareness of precisely the dynamics of Coetzee’s ambivalence in the use of the word, “care” and the phrase, “taking care”. Moreover, she admits that this is an authorial instinct.

She has made a living out of ambivalence. Where would the art of fiction be if there were no double meanings? What would life itself be if there were only heads or tails and nothing in between? (Coetzee 2004c: 1)

The dialogic content of these rhetorical questions reiterates the need to move beyond the simple binary opposites of is and is not, meaning this and not meaning that. In his “Note on Writing”, it is to avoid the binary oppositions of the verb “to

write” that Coetzee invokes the middle voice between the active and passive voices.<sup>20</sup> “To write (middle) is to carry out the action (or better, to do-writing) with reference to the self.” (Coetzee 1992: 94)

Jacques Derrida deals with the middle voice of the verb to love in the opening chapter of *The Politics of Friendship*.<sup>21</sup> The term he uses, derived from Abdelkebir Khatibi, is *aimance* – the middle voice between loving and being-loved. To extrapolate on Coetzee’s mediation of Barthes’s comment on writing, “to love” in the middle voice would leave the loving self within the function of the sentence. *Aimance* therefore involves a definition of the loving self in the sentence of its loving by virtue of its loving act. The “friend” who loves, becomes a “friend”, where “friend” is virtually synonymous with “lover”, because he or she loves.

The consequence, however, negatively affects the beloved, who does not derive the same benefit of identity in *aimance* as the lover. The beloved does not act in becoming beloved – it is the passive consequence of the being-loved. The situation of the lover, therefore, takes precedence over the potentiality of the beloved. This, Derrida suggests, may be derived from Aristotle: Aristotle’s “On Friendship” identifies the participation in loving to be “more worthwhile” than the being loved. “A singular preference destabilizes and renders dissymmetrical the equilibrium of all difference: an *it is more worthwhile* gives precedence to the act over potentiality.” (Derrida 2005: 7)

The care-taker and cared-for occupy the same positions as the lover/beloved. Care, in the middle voice, *carence*, instantiates the author of that care in the act of caretaking. But, again, in the position as author of the act, the care-taker has precedence over the passivity involved in being-cared-for. Moreover, though this passivity involves the surrender of the self to the other, the surrender takes the form of an inexpressible obligation to the author. The “unfreedom” of the cared-for occurs in the failure of Love to function as a command without the related effects of obligation and inequality.

The ambivalence of caring contains the implicit desire to see an end to the one for whom one cares. Not simply, as Costello expresses it, as the resolution of a problem, but because the knowledge that loving or care brings – the intention of loving or care that is necessary to the act of loving or caring – may pre-empt the death of the one who is loved or cared for by prefiguring the possibility of their death. As the beloved or cared for only has access to the tangible benefits of the loving or

caring, their access to the knowledge of loving or caring is limited to the consequences of either loving or caring. Nor is there imposed on them an obligation to which the lover or carer is not answerable: their care must end at the death of either their lover/carer or themselves.

Costello's resistance, therefore, though it seems limited to her children's "ambivalence", carries with it the resonance of worry about the loss of power to consider or care beyond the fact of death. Though she realises her children are "good, dutiful, as children go", later she thinks, as the three of them stay up talking and playing cards, "They are not children, none of them. For good or ill they are all together now in the same leaky boat called life... Can they learn to live together without eating one another?" (Coetzee 2004c: 1; 9-10) For the very basis of her children's worry for her relies on their relational identities as her children, and, though each identifies her- or himself as such, this bond is a paradox: "the first lesson of paradox... is not to rely on paradox. If you rely on paradox, paradox will let you down." (Coetzee 2004c: 12)

Costello resolves the apparent ingratitude of her refusal of her son's care with a compensatory offer of shelter in Melbourne. As the story ends with this offer, with Costello's inversion of her children's attempts at care-taking with an offer of care from herself, John's response to her offer remains outside the ambit of the fictional discourse. But the resolution, and it is a re-solution, restores the imbalance of the children's caring, the children's occupation of the positions of care-taking, with Costello occupying the position of care-taker too – whether they wish to come "as visitors... as refugees... to *réunir la famille*." Costello's reciprocal invitation is her means of re-empowerment, by assuming a role as party to the ethic of gratitude.

David Lurie realises, after his relationship with Lucy completely breaks down, that he cannot assume the rights of the father over her; that she, as an adult, may refuse his offers of care with relative impunity and he cannot impose on her an obligation without alienating her still further. After a time, therefore, when he comes to visit her, he clears his throat both to attract her attention and to distract himself from his turning her into a scene from rural life. She asks him to "come in and have some tea", to which he thinks, "She makes the offer as if he were a visitor. Good. Visitorship, visitation: a new footing, a new start." (Coetzee 2000: 218) The new footing, the new start, that positions him as supplicant, endorses Lucy's right to take care of him, to adopt the position of the addressor in the relationship. The position of

visitor, of the *visitant* as Attridge calls Vercueil, in an “ethic of obligation” takes an active role in and of itself. It too, however, relies on an “ethic of gratitude.”

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<sup>1</sup> Coetzee, J.M. *Disgrace*. 1999. London: Vintage, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Differend: Phases in Dispute*. 1983. Georges van den Abbeele (trans). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Coetzee, J.M. *Age of Iron*. London: Penguin, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Coetzee, J.M. *Slow Man*. London: Secker & Warburg, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Coetzee, J.M. “As a Woman Grows Older” in *The New York Review of Books*. Vol 51 No 1 January 15, 2004c. 1-12.

<sup>6</sup> Lyotard, Jean-François. “Levinas’ logic” in *The Lyotard Reader*. Andrew Benjamin (ed). Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1989. 275-313.

<sup>7</sup> Clarkson, Carrol. “Responses to Space and Spaces of Response in J.M. Coetzee.” Publication Forthcoming. Similarities between Clarkson’s argument and my own stem from extended discussions in supervisor meetings, I would hope to mutual benefit.

<sup>8</sup> Coetzee, J.M. *Elizabeth Costello*. 2003. London: Vintage, 2004. 154.

<sup>9</sup> She wishes the letter to be sent “after the event” of her death. (Coetzee 1998: 28)

<sup>10</sup> Attridge, Derek. “Trusting the Other: *Age of Iron*” in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2005. 91-112.

<sup>11</sup> Derived, Attridge writes in a footnote, from various works by Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-François Lyotard and Maurice Blanchot. (Attridge 2005: 93-94) The heterogeneity of the writings cited leads me to refer to the concept of “gift” Attridge uses as Attridge’s concept.

<sup>12</sup> Derrida, Jacques. *The Gift of Death*. Translated by David Willis. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995. 29.

<sup>13</sup> “A gift received from the other, from one who... sees me without my seeing, holds me in his hands while remaining inaccessible.” *Ibid.* 40.

<sup>14</sup> “Yesterday... I came upon... a man.” (Coetzee 1998: 3)

<sup>15</sup> As a white woman who has benefited through the Apartheid system, Mrs Curren realises anything that she gives to the marginalised in South Africa cannot be charity, for there exists already a debt and, by extension, an economy of exchange.

<sup>16</sup> Paul does experience an act of care from Dr Hansen not indifferent in its regard for him. “He [Dr Hansen] reaches out to touch his [Paul’s] cheek, then lets his hand rest there, cradling his old-man’s head.” (Coetzee 2005: 5) However, this gesture, like the more overtly violent care given to his leg, compels him to further indebtedness – “he cannot decently pull away” – without giving him the opportunity to reciprocate.

<sup>17</sup> Coetzee, J.M. *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

<sup>18</sup> Drago builds Paul a hand-pedaled bicycle. Paul discovers this after he confronts Marijana about Drago’s theft, and electronic manipulation, of a photograph. It becomes a “moral rout” as his complaint is rendered petty and insignificant against the generosity of the present. (Coetzee 2005: 261)

<sup>19</sup> Montaigne, Michel. *The Complete Essays*. M. A. Screech (trans). London: Penguin Books, 1991. 205 – 219.

<sup>20</sup> Coetzee, J.M. “A Note on Writing” in *Doubling the Point*. David Attwell (ed). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992. 94-95.

<sup>21</sup> Derrida, Jacques. *The Politics of Friendship*. George Collins (trans). London and New York: Verso, 2005. Derrida uses of Montaigne’s essay “On Affectionate Relationships”, otherwise translated as “On Friendship”, as the starting point for his discussion.

### Chapter Three: Reciprocal Poetics: Genre and Language in *Youth*

There are other ways too, it appears, in which prose is not like poetry. In poetry the action can take place everywhere and nowhere: it does not matter whether the lonely wives of the fisherman live in Kalk Bay or Portugal or Maine. Prose, on the other hand, seems naggingly to demand a specific setting.

- J. M. Coetzee, *Youth*

The discussions of Chapters One and Two concern themselves primarily with the poetics of reciprocity within the genre of the novel. Their critical approach to poetics is restricted to the confines of a particular truth-content (fiction) within a particular language (English). The purpose of this chapter is to examine Coetzee's poetics of reciprocity as it functions to critique genre and the contexts of language in his second autobiographical fiction: *Youth*.<sup>1</sup> The differend of *Youth* is its displacement of generic identity by virtue of its deconstruction of that identity. By examining the coincidence of the issues with genre brought up in the text and in the publication history around the text, this chapter shifts its attention from the thematic analyses that categorise Chapters One and Two to the interplay that exists between texts, their generic constructions, and their settings. In exploring the nuances of genre and mode, it draws on the work of Gérard Genette and Jacques Derrida to show the inescapable, reciprocal, connection between texts and genres. The chapter seeks to demonstrate a co-dependence between genre and setting: that the critique of genre implicit in *Youth* is inextricably linked to a critique of place.

John, the narrator of *Youth*, decides to move the mode of his writing from poetry to prose. The shift, however, has correspondent affect on the setting of his work. Despite John's desire to leave South Africa behind, he finds himself incapable of setting his stories anywhere else: "he does not as yet know England well enough to do England in prose." (Coetzee 2002a: 63) His anxiety about setting corresponds to an anxiety the work sets up between genre and mode. Although *Youth* is generically autobiographical, its narrative method or mode (third person, present tense) marks it as a fiction. The anxiety young John feels in locating his prose in South Africa corresponds with Coetzee's anxiety about locating prose within generic constraints. Yet "Prose... seems naggingly to demand a specific setting." (Coetzee 2002a 63) Similarly generic association is inevitable: "a text," writes Jacques Derrida, "cannot belong to no genre, it cannot be without or less a genre."<sup>2</sup>

This chapter examines the poetics involved in depicting the antagonism of a work to its generic confines and the analogous antagonism of the young colonial to the confines of locatability. By showing that Coetzee avoids a resolution of genre and setting, it also demonstrates the reciprocal natures of genre and setting in poetic works clarifying the notion of a poetics of reciprocity.

### *Poetics*

A poetics, when one returns to its Aristotelian origins, is the systematic examination of those parts that make up the essential quality of a literary work. Aristotle introduces his poetics:

I propose to treat of poetry in itself and of its various kinds, noting the essential quality of each, to inquire into the structure of the plot as requisite to a good poem; into the number and nature of the parts of which a poem is composed; and similarly into whatever else falls within the same inquiry. Following, then, the order of nature, let us begin with the principles which come first.<sup>3</sup>

Poetics, according to Aristotle, is a systematic process of categorisation: an examination of “number and nature of the parts” of a work from which a philosophy of poetry can be established.

Coetzee, speaking of storytelling in “The Novel Today” in resistance to the relegation of a work to history and genre, identifies it as “another, an other mode of thinking.”

A story is not a message with a covering, a rhetorical or aesthetic covering. It is not a message plus a residue, the residue, the art with which the message is coated with the residue, forming the subject matter of rhetoric or aesthetics or literary appreciation. There is no addition in stories. They are not made up of one thing plus another thing, message plus another thing, message plus vehicle, substructure plus superstructure... There is always a difference, and the difference is not a part... the difference is everything.<sup>4</sup>

The story has no “essential quality” which analysis can render down. Nor can it be divided into a number of parts to reveal the quality of its whole. The attempt to render the story explicable by analytical thinking reduces it either to a message or a sum of aesthetic devices. The story, for Coetzee, has a remainder that exists beyond either the message or the medium. Therefore remaining true to Coetzee’s mode of thinking requires a poetics that avoids its traditional Aristotelian categorisation by alluding to the difference existent beyond its own categories. *Youth*, as a work particularly noted for its transgression of genre, provides a basis for a discussion about the “difference” that generic instability contributes to poetics.

An examination of *Youth*’s publication reveals interesting disparities between the United States and United Kingdom editions.<sup>5</sup> The United States publisher’s addition of the subtitle, *Scenes from Provincial Life II*, identifies the novel as the sequel to *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life (I)* for the American reader. The United Kingdom edition, lacking the subtitle, has no such explicit connection to *Boyhood*. Examining the American edition of *Boyhood* discloses a generic significance to the American link that would be unappreciated by readers of the UK edition. For both *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* and *Youth* in their UK print are labelled “fiction” as the generic designation on their back covers.<sup>6</sup> While *Youth: Scenes from Provincial Life II* has no generic designation, the American edition of *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* has the additional subtitle “A Memoir” on the front cover.<sup>7</sup> Its back cover has the label, “Biography/Autobiography.” Notwithstanding the discrepancies between memoir and autobiography, the absence of genre for the American edition of *Youth* is filled by the implicit genre of its antecedent, *Boyhood*. The common subtitle, and the addendum to it, “*II*”, on the cover of *Youth*, places the American edition in the general precinct of autobiography.

The publication history of the novel demonstrates the difficulties the novel presents to general debate about poetics: issues in poetics relating to genre and classification. It also reminds the reader about questions raised by Coetzee in “Confessions and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky.”<sup>8</sup> Called “pivotal” by Coetzee, the essay retains sufficient relevance to Coetzee’s later work to warrant a title mention in James Ley’s review of *Inner Workings: Essays 2000-2005*, “True Confession.”<sup>9</sup> “Because of the nature of consciousness, Dostoevsky indicates, the self cannot tell the truth of itself to itself and come to rest without the possibility

of self-deception.” (Coetzee 1992: 291) Telling the truth of oneself to one’s self is Coetzee’s description of a confessional mode of writing: writing with “an underlying motive to tell an essential truth about the self.” (Coetzee 1992: 252) By indicating the rupture between the motive to tell an essential truth about the self and the inability to tell such a truth categorically, Coetzee demonstrates the disjuncture between the mode of confession and the confessional genre. For, while the style of writing (mode) is confessional, the genre or category of the work must be a fiction. The confessional mode (telling an essential truth) is at odds with the genre it inhabits (where truths told are self-delusions). As Coetzee makes a point of distinguishing confession from *memoir* and *apology* in his essay, it is not part of this argument to examine *Youth* as a confession. However, the essay’s concern with autobiography, and with the ruptures in genre and mode, makes it a useful starting point for a discussion of genre in *Youth*.<sup>10</sup>

### *Genres*

“Differends are born... from these encounters.”<sup>11</sup> (Lyotard 1988: 29) “The differend is the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be.” (Lyotard 1988: 13) As only one phrase universe can take precedence, the differend occurs in its dominance over the others. Genres of discourse, however, avoid the differends of phrases by fixing the rules by which the phrases are linked; “Genres of discourse determine stakes, they submit phrases from different regimens to a single finality: the question, the example, the argument, the narration, the exclamation are in forensic rhetoric the heterogeneous means of persuading.” (Lyotard 1988: 29) They avoid the differends between phrases by orientating different phrases toward a single end. However, the consequence is that the differend occurs between genres rather than between individual phrases.

In an effort to disentangle the issue of genre and mode, I turn to the work of another linguist, Gérard Genette. Genette, whose work is the basis for Derrida’s argument in “The Law of Genre”, examines the differences between mode and genre: differences that roughly correlate to the discrepancy Lyotard notices between phrases from different regimens and the genres that order them.

Genette, in examining the history of genres, returns to the process of categorisation used by Aristotle.<sup>12</sup> Aristotle’s *Poetics*, he argues, has been misread

into designating a tripartition by which works of literature may be divided. Three genres are evident: the lyric, the epic, and the dramatic. The distinction, as described by Austin Warren, follows:

Lyric poetry is the poet's own *persona*; in epic poetry (or the novel) the poet partly speaks in his own person, as narrator, and partly makes his characters speak in direct discourse (mixed narrative); in drama, the poet disappears behind his cast of characters. (Genette 1992: 4)

Genette observes that these distinctions do not illustrate a system of genres, as presented by genre theorists. Rather they are *modes*. (Genette 1992: 12) Genres incorporate modes insofar as the text requires a particular way of writing to correspond to certain thematic and aesthetic concerns. Genres are “properly aesthetic”, meaning “their defining criteria always involve a thematic element that eludes purely formal or linguistic description.” (Genette 1992: 64) However, modes are forms of utterance:

Modes are categories that belong to linguistics... They are “natural forms”... in his wholly relative sense... to the extent that language and its use appear as facts of nature vis-à-vis the conscious and deliberate elaboration of aesthetic forms. (Genette 1992: 64)

The history of genre, as mapped out by Genette, demonstrates a systemic conflation of mode with genre. The modes of writing mapped out by Aristotle's *Poetics* have become synonymous with the thematic concerns, leading to the genres into which writing may be categorised.

Lyrical, epic, and dramatic contrast with *Dichtarten* no longer as modes of verbal enunciation that precede and are external to any literary definition but, rather, as kinds of *archigenres*. *Archi-*, because each of them is supposed to overarch and include, ranked by degree of importance, a certain number of empirical genres that – whatever their amplitude, longevity, or potential for recurrence – are apparently phenomena of culture and history; but still (or

already) –*genres*, because... their defining criteria always involve a thematic element that eludes purely formal or linguistic description. (Genette 1992: 64-65)

Genette's effort is primarily to disentangle the "naturalness" of mode from the structure of genre. Although the mode may convey a particular point, its ethical and aesthetic force comes from its occurrence within a specific genre. Poetics, as the analysis of the aesthetic and ethical qualities of a work, or works, of literature, has become an examination of genre.

In Coetzee's case, where genre proves difficult to categorise, establishing a poetics for his work must involve a self-reflexive process wherein the works are demonstrated to critique the genres to which they appear to conform. Coincidental to the discussion of *Youth*, Genette uses autobiography as a case example for the separation of genre and mode: he invokes Philippe Lejeune's definition of autobiography as "a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular the development of his personality." (Genette 1992: 79) Genette calls the definition "typically Aristotelian and strictly atemporal", "combining features that are thematic (the growth of a genuine individual), modal (a retrospective autodiegetic narration), and formal (in prose)." (Genette 1992: 79)

*Youth* is extraordinary in that it is neither "retrospective" nor "autodiegetic" in the conventional sense. The mode is a present tense, third person narration. Given the ambiguity of its generic classification in publication, this mode has elicited a fair amount of critical attention. William Deresiewicz claims that, "aside from raising large questions about his relationship with himself, these bizarre choices mean that Coetzee has turned his back on the entire autobiographical tradition."<sup>13</sup> Derek Attridge adopts a contrary approach; from the assumption that it is a confessional autobiography, though not of an "orthodox sort", he examines *Boyhood* and *Youth* to ascertain its veracity.<sup>14</sup>

Genette's distinction between mode and genre renders the critical judgments about *Youth* and autobiography suspect: Genette, Lejeune, Deresiewicz, and Attridge all claim the autobiographical genre is dependent on a specific mode. Rather than conforming to the atemporal, Aristotelian definition of autobiography, the mode of *Youth*'s narration disturbs the comfort to be had in this uncritical perception of

autobiography. Presented in the present tense, it has no older, retrospective narrator identifying “pivotal” points in the development of his character. Told in the third person singular, *Youth* does not even acknowledge the author as a participant in the events that take place.

To be fair, Attridge’s examination of *Boyhood* and *Youth* locates, within the mode of third-person, present-tense diegesis, a place for the truth-seeking function of confession; his approach is critical insofar as he attributes to the mode a fictional status that allows the truth of autobiography to be staged: a staging that shows that the truth may never be told. Coetzee presents an aphorism for his position on autobiography; expressed in his “Retrospect Interview” with David Attwell in *Doubling the Point*, he says, “all autobiography is storytelling, all writing is autobiography.”<sup>15</sup> Attridge correlates the fictional mode of *Boyhood* and *Youth* to a theory akin to Coetzee’s: the constructed nature of autobiography calls into question the truth claims that autobiography makes. By decentring the narrating subject and upsetting the temporal sense of past and present, Coetzee makes explicit the fictionality of his autobiographical fictions. However, Attridge seems to position the texts as confessional autobiographies, despite their mode of representation. Genette’s distinction enables me to depart from this oppositional thinking.

For, while I am in agreement with Attridge in reading the works as subversive of the “system” of autobiographical writing, the argument may be extended beyond its occluding historical fact with a third person narration. After all, the applicability of historical fact, Coetzee argues, is contingent upon the thematic mediation of whoever narrates it. Coetzee notes that Thomas Pringle’s poem, ‘The Bechuana Boy’, “draws on a real-life person, an orphan named Hinza Marossi.”<sup>16</sup>

Hinza is an ‘actual person’... But we derive his actuality more from Pringle’s notes and letters than from the poem itself, which, aside from the frank liberties it takes with facts.... through its diction draws us away from the specificity of Africa towards a generalised landscape of the Romantic sublime dotted with the more celebrated African mammalian fauna. (Coetzee 2002b: 253)

The thematic concerns of Pringle’s poetry overcame his adherence to historical fact; Hinza became, by virtue of the poetry, “a figure already prepared in the

European imagination for discovery in Africa.” (Coetzee 2002b: 254) Historical fact is subverted by the thematic concerns of the artist, ethical or aesthetic. Genre may include modes as the means to further its literary project but a mode lacks an essentialist ideological function. It is only in the context of genre that the mode assumes a particular ideological stance.

In the case of *Youth*, the mode carries an autobiographical impetus from Coetzee’s “Retrospect Interview”, given as an end-piece to *Doubling the Point* some ten years before *Youth*’s publication. The “Retrospect” is simultaneously a reflection on the essays collected in *Doubling the Point* and an admission of the biographical impulse behind their production. In illustrating the second point, Coetzee uses the mode of third person, present tense to tell the story of his younger self. *Youth* is written in the same mode, is based on similar experiences, and has the already mentioned link to autobiography in its American publication. However, using the paratext of his Retrospect interview seems to repeat the error Coetzee observes in contemporary treatments of Thomas Pringle:

It is certainly possible, using all the textual sources available to us, to read back into the poem some of its historical fullness; but we must realise that to read Pringle thus is to some extent to read him against the grain, counter to his own poetic exertions. (Coetzee 2002b: 254)

It is only as a critique of autobiographical writing that the mode of *Youth*’s narration takes on the significance attributed to it by Deresiewicz and Attridge; its identity as a critique is contingent on its existence within the genre of autobiographical writing. The genre of the work must be pre-empted in order to acknowledge *Youth*’s criticisms of the genre. Positing *Youth* as either fiction or autobiography shows the truth in Derrida’s aforementioned observation: a text may be read in a variety of contexts; what is certain is that it will be read in *a* context.

Derek Attridge, searching for intertexts, identifies two other *Youths* as precedents; the first is Tolstoy’s fictionalised memoir *Youth: Scenes from a Provincial Life* and the second is Conrad’s fictional sea-story *Youth*. (Attridge 2005: 156) Hermione Lee’s review of *Youth* identifies it as a *Künstlerroman* in the tradition of James Joyce’s *The Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*.<sup>17</sup> Both critics seek some

precedent by which the work's uniqueness may be tempered with its architype: the generic of which it may be demonstrated as a type.

The elimination of mode and publication label as the means for assigning genre disrupts the traditional means for realising the work is about a "real person." In part, Coetzee's suspicion of "real people" in literary texts - as evinced in his treatment of Hinza - complicates *Youth* as a generic type. In part, its own deconstruction of generic types undermines its reception as a critique of autobiography. For the means for instantiating it within the autobiographical genre, I return to the genre of *Künstlerroman*: the literary self-portrait of the artist.

On his rejection of Marie, the New Zealand woman who stays with him for a period in his professor's house in Gardens, John reflects on his reading of Henry Miller. "Were Henry Miller merely a satyr, a monster of indiscriminate appetite, he could be ignored. But Henry Miller is an artist, and his stories, outrageous though they may be and probably full of lies, are stories of an artist's life." (Coetzee 2002: 29) A repeated concern of the youth's rhetoric is "the artist's life." It seems his anxiety stems from his failure to live "the artist's life." When Jacqueline, the nurse he lives with in his one roomed flat, leaves him, he reflects on the tension between his personal proclivities and his adherence to the notion of "the artist's life."

He must return to living by himself, and there will be no little relief in that. Yet he cannot live alone for ever. Having mistresses is part of an artist's life: even if he steers clear of the trap of marriage, as he will certainly do, he is going to have to find a way of living with women. Art cannot be fed on deprivation alone, on longing, loneliness. There must be intimacy, passion, love as well. (Coetzee 2002a: 10)

The genre of the artist's life - the *Künstlerroman* - is one that has been mapped out by John in his reading of Miller and Lawrence, albeit presented by Coetzee in a parodical fashion. But, while he admits that Miller's work is "outrageous" and "probably full of lies," he still wishes to emulate the generic Miller embodies. Miller's narrator, in *Tropic of Cancer*, sets himself the compact that he will, "not change a line of what [he] writes."<sup>18</sup>

I am not interested in perfecting my thoughts, nor my actions. Beside the perfection of Turgenev I put the perfection

of Dostoevski... Here, then, in one and the same medium, we have two kinds of perfection. But in Van Gogh's letters there is a perfection beyond either of these. It is the triumph of the individual over art. (Miller 1965: 19)

He continues that the only thing that interests him is "the recording of all that is omitted in books." (Miller 1965: 19) John, therefore, desires to live a life inspired by books whose primary object is to overcome the constraints of literary devices and the constructed nature of art. In aspiring to live a life of ideals, John provides a critique of Miller's attempt to render his experience as truthfully (and therefore as perfectly) as he can: "Even Henry Miller, who presents himself as such a straightforward fellow, ready to make love to any woman no matter her shape or size, probably has a dark side which he is prudent enough to conceal." (Coetzee 2002a: 30) By turning Miller's life into a constructed ideal against which he sets his own experience, John reveals the pretence involved in claiming an authenticity or truth in autobiographical experience; even that mediated by a claim of fictionality.

The genre of the artist's life develops during the course of the novel. But it retains the sense that it is through artistic constructedness that truth is possible:

On the basis of the poems he has heard on the radio and nothing else, he knows Brodsky knows him through and through. That is what poetry is capable of. Poetry is truth. But of him in London Brodsky can know nothing. (Coetzee 2002a: 91)

John believes Brodsky "knows" him, without any knowledge of the specificity of his condition. Moreover, he can know Brodsky knows because of Brodsky's poems "and nothing else." The "nothing else" is a point in the narration where the invisible narrator's criticism of John is evident; John, in his knowledge, would not need to emphasise the singularity of his source material, given its pre-eminence as evidence of "truth." Poetry is a reciprocal truth mechanism: from it John can know what Brodsky knows, even as it conveys Brodsky's knowledge of what John knows. The intercession of a narrating consciousness behind John's "he" upsets the poetic reciprocity by pointing out its lack of paratextual evidence. Brodsky lives in a gulag in the Archangel Peninsula, while John lives in London. They neither of them have

the means to contact the other, even if Brodsky knew of the existence of the South African exile. The lack of evidence makes John's feelings of camaraderie appear facile; the irony, of course, is that the only evidence the reader has to make such an observation is the artwork in front of him or her. John's life of the artist, as a genre, relies on messages that transcend the mundanities of contextual existence. The "realities" of John's experiences, themselves evoked by "the life of the artist" genre, coincide to undermine his transcendental escape from context.

The exception to these two examples comes in his encounter with Beckett's *Watt*. From the serif font "that evokes for him intimacy, solidity" to the pace, "fitted exactly to the pace of his own mind," *Watt* provides an exception to both the "life of the artist" that John tries to live and the "life of the artist" he is living. (Coetzee 2002a: 155) Comparing Beckett (eventually the focus of his Doctoral dissertation) to Ford (the then current focus of his Master's dissertation), John realises an affection for the Irishman's writings lacking in his examination of the works of the English German.

How could he have imagined he wanted to write in the manner of Ford when Beckett was around all the time? In Ford there has always been an element of the stuffed shirt that he has disliked but has been hesitant to acknowledge, something to do with the value Ford placed in knowing where in West End to buy the best motoring gloves or how to tell a Médoc from a Beaune; whereas Beckett is classless, or outside class, as he himself would prefer to be. (Coetzee 2002a: 155)

His affinity is with a writer who is outside class, in the socio-economic sense. But it is also with a writer who is outside the classifications of the "life of the artist." The comparison is evident in the differences between Coetzee's Master's dissertation on Ford Madox Ford<sup>19</sup> and his Doctoral dissertation on Samuel Beckett.<sup>20</sup> The Master's dissertation states that it "is not biographical. It does, however, attempt to suggest the main lines of Ford's life and their immediate effect on his writing." (Coetzee 1963: x) The difference in linguistic precision is obvious in the following passage from his Doctoral dissertation:

Unless the focus of a study is biographical, the translation of "there is a determinate relation between thought

and syntax” into “a writer’s syntactic habits reveal his habits of thought” is tautologous, since the habits of a writer’s mind can only be a metaphor for habits (or patterns) of the text. The question is of course thrown open again if instead of the writer we speak of a fictionalised intelligence in the text. (Coetzee 1969: 158-159)

The extract is from his argument against Richard Ohmann’s theory on the deep structure of sentences. Ohmann, Coetzee summarises, sees syntax as revealing “in a direct way the writer’s way of ordering experience: the form of the deep structure of a sentence is the form of the thought that the sentence expresses.” (Coetzee 1969: 157) Coetzee’s criticism of Ohmann is that he conceives of a “real person”, whose thoughts are trapped in the process of writing. But the text only conveys a trace of the writing process having taken place. The affect of Ford’s life on his work, in these terms, becomes a fruitless quest. The paratexts through which Ford’s “life” is established cannot be compared to the “life” derived from his mode of writing. The shift in Coetzee’s critical work, from examining the coincidence of life and art to a realisation of the fallacy of such an examination, resonates with a correspondent shift in *Youth*: “the life of the artist”, after his encounter with Beckett, ceases to be the mould into which John aspires to fit himself.

Rather “the life of the artist”, as a generic construct, ceases to be a class to which he feels himself bound. From the binary of his artist ideal and his inadequacy before that ideal, the possibility emerges that he need not feel the European “*angst*” he craves – that he too may exist outside of class or genre. Following his reading of *Watt* John studies the history of logic. He attempts to find “the moment in history when *either-or* is chosen and *and/or* discarded.” (Coetzee 2002a: 160) The moment of its reversal is, for John, his reading of Beckett. From that point on, John ceases to pursue “the life of the artist”, and begins to live his life as an individual. Coetzee’s essay on Beckett in *Inner Workings: Essays 2000-2005* identifies Beckett as “an artist possessed by a vision of life without consolation or dignity or promise of grace, in the face of which our only duty – inexplicable and futile of attainment, but a duty nonetheless – is not to lie to ourselves.”<sup>21</sup> The contiguities between the young narrator and the Nobel-laureate essay writer are perhaps closest in their appreciation of

Beckett, for it is soon after his reading of *Watt* that John captures his realisation of the futility of living a generic life with the following passage:

*Experience*: that is the word he would like to fall back on to justify himself to himself. The artist must taste all experience, from the noblest to the most degraded. Just as it is the artist's destiny to experience the most supreme creative joy, so he must be prepared to take upon himself all in life that is miserable, squalid, ignominious. It was in the name of experience that he underwent London.... Stages in the poet's life, all of them, in the testing of his soul... It is a justification that does not for a moment convince him...

It is sophistry, that is all, contemptible sophistry. And if he is further going to claim that, just as sleeping with Astrid and her teddy bear was getting to know moral squalor, so telling self-justifying lies to oneself is getting to know intellectual squalor first hand, then sophistry will only become more contemptible. There is nothing to be said for it; nor, to be ruthlessly honest, is there anything to be said for its having nothing to be said for it. As for ruthless honesty, ruthless honesty is not a hard trick to learn. (Coetzee 2002a: 164)

The realisation is coupled with a deconstruction of the mode of its realisation; with each term used to express the realisation of the generic quality of his life, there is a corresponding dismissal of the adequacy of that term to express it. His attempts to justify himself to himself fail because they do not convince him. They do not convince him because they are based on sophistry, on the mode of their expression. Moreover, the mode of their failure to convince him – in an autobiographical interrogation – itself says nothing worth being said. The introspective “life of the artist” – “one eye has always to be turned inward” – is a fallacy, brought about by John's conflation of his mode, “self-interrogation,” with the genre, of “life experience.” The passage deconstructs the conflation. In systematically demonstrating the sophistry of his assumptions, John establishes a mode of questioning that takes apart its own thematic concerns as they arise. Rather than express “the life of the artist” according to the thematic principles of the genre, John attempts to

circumnavigate the internal justification that genre causes in mode by undermining the mode in its moment of expression.

The mode of the passage is interrogative. But it is also presented in a “third person, present tense narration.” In the latter sense, the mode of the work does interact with genre in the way argued for by Attridge and Deresiewicz. It distances the work from “autobiography”, creating the sense of fiction rather than historical account. This aspect is important, given the corresponding distance John must adopt to the “facts” of his life in order to criticise them: a position enabled by Coetzee’s distance from the “facts” of his autobiography. John’s distinction of mode from genre, therefore, requires an interaction between mode and genre. Under scrutiny, Genette’s distinction between mode and genre imagines a division impossible in its application. It nevertheless provides the means for articulating the reciprocity within *Youth* between its reliance on genre and mode, and its critique of genre and mode.

When the mode of *Youth* is distinguished from its genre, the politics of the mode are shown to be the politics of the genre. But, with the interrogation of mode in John’s self-analytical moment, there is also a critique of genre. The suggestion is that while genre and mode are engaged in different activities within a text, their interaction makes it impossible to disentangle the one from the other effectively without disrupting the sense of each.

The differend, insofar as it has come to have connotations of articulating a lacuna in speech between the marginalized and their authorities, also has a place in this dilemma. For, while genre and mode are too closely associated to disentangle, *Youth*, as a text that deconstructs the presumptions of genre, is engaged in staging a differend. Coetzee effectively engages with the conditions of his younger self. But, in doing so, he realises he must assume a distance from that self – in order to create a functioning character within a necessarily aesthetic text. He cannot articulate the distance within the text – it requires paratextual materials to confirm the genre before the mode’s obvious discrepancy with that genre begins to make sense. But the reliance on paratextual data runs contrary to his own poetic exertions. *Youth* systematically thematizes “autobiography” within the story, only to render its devices – self-justification, honesty and transcendental experience – suspect. The publication history merely indicates the instability of generic identity that runs through the novel. The instability of its generic identity reciprocates the novel’s self-critique of genre.

John's issue with writing prose rather than poetry relates directly to his desire to avoid South Africa. His antagonism to South Africa aside, it also represents a generic regression from the universality of poetry to the specificity of prose. The result is an interrogation of place in the novel that attempts to undercut the importance of setting, while realising its inevitable importance to the structure of a prose work.

### *Place and Emplacement*

That *Scenes from Provincial Life II* was not incorporated into the United Kingdom edition is understandable when one considers that most of the book takes place in London: British audiences might not have appreciated the intimation that the book, three quarters of which is set in their capital, describes scenes from a "provincial life." However, as William Deresiewicz defends it, "the subtitle is apt... for his move to England only makes more visible the psychic wounds of the young colonial." (Deresiewicz 2002: 1) London is mediated by John's introspective consciousness; the novel describes scenes from a provincial life, not from either a province or the life of a provincial. The novel demonstrates that the importance of place, a concern for John prior to and on his arrival at Southampton, is misplaced – the experiences in a place pre-empt the conscious decision to ascribe an idealised importance to a particular place.

Joseph Brodsky in his essay "A Place as Good as Any" writes of his tendency to remember not places but their picture-postcard representations.<sup>22</sup> "There is perhaps nothing wrong," he says, "with this sort of reduction or swapping, for had a human mind indeed been able to cohere and retain the reality of this world, the life of its owner would become a non-stop nightmare of logic and justice." (Brodsky 1995: 37-38) Moreover, those "memories" are pre-empted by a collage of travel agents' posters. "Say "London" and your mind most likely will flash the view of the National Gallery or Tower Bridge with the Union Jack logo discreetly printed in a corner or on the opposite side." (Brodsky 1995: 37)

The simplifying tendency that Brodsky describes has more onerous consequences than freeing the mind from a "non-stop nightmare of logic and justice." By translating his lived experience into picture-postcard representation, Brodsky shifts the context of his phrase "London" from the specific streets he has walked upon

to the gaudy monuments that have become the depersonalised representation of the city.

The context of Brodsky's experience shifts with the generic models that come to replace his "actual" experience as an individual with those dictated to him by travel brochures. Brodsky's example associates "London" with the genre of personal account; it is his personal experience, after all, of London that incorporates the collage of travel agents' posters. However, it also associates "London" with the genre of those travel posters. Consequentially the genre of personal account becomes conflated with the genre of travel magazines. In the conflation, travel posters and post-cards replace the personal account with one manufactured by package tour operators.

Coetzee criticises national identity in his essay on "The 1995 World Cup", during which the representation of the host country (South Africa) "stepped a fine line between ethnic stereotyping and service of the Rainbow concept."<sup>23</sup> The team became the embodiment of the nation, while rugby was used "to promote the idea that a nation and a national-consciousness are to all intents and purposes the same thing, and therefore that sounds and images, if numerous and powerful enough, can create a nation." (Coetzee 2002b: 353)

John lists the "two, perhaps three places in the world where life can be lived at its fullest intensity: London, Paris, perhaps Vienna." (Coetzee 2002a: 41) He chooses to live his life at its fullest intensity in London for the pragmatic reasons that people speak English and he will not have to carry papers. But his insistence on the primacy of European capitals stems from a postcard of the intellect: "London may be stony, labyrinthine, and cold, but behind its forbidding walls men and women are at work writing books, painting paintings, composing music." (Coetzee 2002a: 41) Though he does not prioritise the standard images of London – the National Gallery and Tower Bridge – attached to "London" as a referent is the emotional locale of culture and the artiste.

Though broadly based on events from Coetzee's early adulthood (first as a student at the University of Cape Town, later as a computer programmer working in London), the third person, present tense narration acknowledges the distance from the events and the fictional presence of their "memories". Yet both narrative form and autobiographical content relate the novel back to the "Retrospect" of *Doubling the Point* – where a younger John Coetzee uses a similar form to tell a similar story. Part of that story, the summarised version of *Boyhood* and *Youth*, reflects on his departing

South Africa, “very much in the spirit of shaking the dust of the country from his feet.” (Coetzee 1992: 393) The phrase is Biblical: it occurs in the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark and Luke.<sup>24</sup> It forms part of the commandments Jesus gives to his disciples on sending them out to preach. From Mark: “And whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear you, when ye depart thence, shake off the dust under your feet for a testimony against them.” (Mark 6:11) The allusion, also made in a speech accepting the Jerusalem Prize, heralds Coetzee’s attempts to resign from the caste preference he enjoyed (a term employed with due irony) as a white male in Apartheid South Africa.<sup>25</sup> But, given its Biblical antecedents, there is a measure of condemnation implicit in the act: “shaking the dust” is a testimony against those who neither receive you, nor hear you. The speech (though also in the novel and the retrospect), becomes an examination of the failure of Coetzee’s resignation and the failure of his condemnation. The speech, about the manifest bondage of South Africa and the South African writer, becomes a response to Milan Kundera’s tribute to Miguel Cervantes presented on his reception of the same prize two years before. While Cervantes may have his mad knight leave behind “hot, dusty, tedious La Mancha and enter the world of faery”, the South African novelist is prevented from similar flights by

the *crudity* of life in South Africa, the naked force of its appeals, not only at the physical level but at the moral level too, its callousness and its brutalities, its hungers and its rages, its greed and its lies, [which] make it as irresistible as it is unlovable. (Coetzee 1992: 98-99)

The link between this talk and Coetzee’s autobiographical “Retrospect”, itself intimately connected to *Youth*, suggests the failure of John to “transcend” his South African identity – to become a Londoner as he explicitly wishes – lies as much in the inability to sever himself from his past as in the feelings of alienness, rather than alienation, that accompany his experience of the metropole.

As a brief vignette John’s response to Foyles summarises his response to the London experience. “Foyles, the bookshop whose name is known as far away as Cape Town, has proved a disappointment.” (Coetzee 2002a: 57) The bookstore, like London, proves disappointing compared with the idealised image John had of it, while living in “far away” Cape Town. “The boast that Foyles stocks every book in print” is

clearly just that, a boast. Yet the boast, the lie, is exactly what has brought John to one of the “three places where life can be lived at its fullest intensity.” Or so a superficial reading of the text would suggest.

John, on his arrival, excuses his discomfort and his icy feet with, “No matter: he is in London.” John constructs a London very different to the parochial Cape Town of his origins – a place from which he wishes “to flee”, alternately escaping the political situation and going “abroad [to] devote himself to art.” (Coetzee 2002a: 22) In fact, these constructions seem predominantly retrospective musings occurring only once he has arrived in the metropole. His time in Cape Town, characterised as it is with a desire to be “gone”, has only a brief reference to the destination of his “going”, and that is “England” rather than “London”. His desire to leave Cape Town, whilst in Cape Town, translates not as the movement of the artist towards a centre, but rather as the desire of a young man to escape, to flee, the emotional hold of his family, country, and parochial existence. Coetzee writes, “He is in England, in London; he has a job, a proper job, better than mere teaching. He has escaped South Africa.” (Coetzee 2002a: 47) The conclusion is that, though London is the place of artists and opportunities, his success – attaining his first goal – lies not in the place of arrival, but in leaving the place that he has left.

London becomes valorised not for qualities endemic to his experience of it but in its representation of a life different to that he lived in “the colonies.” His refusal to appreciate London as London becomes explicit in his interchanges with Caroline, a South African girl with whom an affair from his Cape Town days is resumed. She questions the sedentary life he leads:

How can he come all the way to London, she says, and then spend his days adding up numbers on a machine? Look around, she says: London is a gallery of novelties and pleasures and amusements. Why does he not come out of himself, have some fun?

‘Some of us are not built for fun,’ he replies. (Coetzee 2002a: 77)

His refusal to “have some fun” is indicative of his inability to acknowledge the London of his experience and, concomitantly, to discard the London constructed from the negation of his home city and its idealised contrary. The latent irony of a computer

scientist whose attitude to place seems so manifestly binary merely reinforces the already well-worn stereotype of splitting margin and centre, province and metropole, colony and capital. However, insofar as this split provides insight into John's treatment of place, it becomes worthwhile to carry it to its logical conclusion.

His distinction rests on the assumption of some *genius loci* or intrinsic spirit endemic to each place. This manifests itself in objectifying the women of London, identifying them not by physical characteristics – apart from calling them “girls” – but by national identity. Caroline, a South African, is not as desirable as a Swedish or Italian “girl”, even as these could not compare to a French “girl.” Nationality, therefore, becomes a fetish for John where fetishism may be understood as an obsession representative, but not ultimately the embodiment, of a desire for some whole of which the obsession forms an associative part. When his cousin comes to London, and he accedes to the familial obligations, he reconciles her South African identity by recasting her as an “Aryan huntress.” The cousin of his imagination becomes an object of desire, for she represents a union of London and Cape Town – destination and origin. Only in London, so he would believe, can he meet his so-called “Destined one” because only in London can his destiny manifest itself. Yet his cousin also represents “the promise of ease, of easiness: two people with a history in common, a country, a family.” (Coetzee 2002a: 126) Even as he fetishises these qualities of his cousin, he begins a process of fetishising South Africa as a land of origin.

In *White Writing*, Coetzee describes a converse response on the part of European visitors to Africa. Rather than fetishise Africa as Africa, English writers sought to impose European conceptions of place on Africa:

A self-defeating process of naming Africa by defining it as non-Europe – self-defeating because in each particular in which Africa is identified to be non-European, it remains Europe, not Africa, that is named. (Coetzee 1988b: 164)

John implies a similar sentiment when he claims he could respond to 1820's Africa with a greater sense of its life than the contemporaneous William Burchell, “despite his energy and intelligence and curiosity and sang-froid”, “because he was an Englishman in a foreign country, his mind half occupied with Pembrokeshire and the sisters he had left behind.” (Coetzee 2002a: 138) Of course, within this critique of

Burchell lies the irony of John's decision to write about South Africa – a decision intimately connected with the second part of *Dusklands*. John cannot describe the city he inhabits – he is no Londoner – for the same reasons. He nevertheless tries to make sense of his internal turmoil by imposing it upon his location. Moreover, as an English speaking South African, his language is alien, not only to London but to South Africa as well: his ideal of describing South Africa can only reiterate the path of other attempts to describe the country in English: a description of Africa “as not-Europe, dramatizing it by antithesis, makes Africa into a mere negative reflection or shadow of Europe, insubstantial.” (Coetzee 1988b: 170) In John's case, however, the description of Europe also becomes insubstantial – a not-Africa. Inevitably he, like his author, realises his inability to write stems from his language's historical dislocation from its concrete space of reference: a dislocation that prevents a concrete implication to his signifiers of place (London or Cape Town).

Because of its dislocation from a fixed emotional referent, and because it is the only place where he can “explore the artistic depths”, London itself is tied to his self-location within a *Künstlerroman*. So he makes the metatextual identification of himself with a character in a novel:

Novels are full of chance meetings that lead to romance – romance or tragedy. He is ready for romance, ready even for tragedy, ready for anything, in fact, so long as he will be consumed by it and remade. That is why he is in London, after all: to be rid of his old self and revealed in his new, true, passionate self; and now there is no impediment to his quest. (Coetzee 2002a: 111)

Even as London has become the stage for the novelisation of his life, the realities of living in “a city of winter where one plods through each day with nothing to look forward to but nightfall and bedtime and oblivion” lead him to idealise exactly that place he was so eager to leave. (Coetzee 2002a: 113) So Cape Town and South Africa become increasingly the situations of solace and relief, culminating with his declaration that it is “his country, the country of his heart.” (Coetzee 2002a: 137)

Indeed, while London loses its overt mystery as a cultural icon, John construes it as a ground of contestation – a place of testing, for a young man who finds himself “better at tests, quizzes, examinations than at real life.” (Coetzee 2002a: 45) The

illusion of London as a location of desire becomes mediated by the perception of London as a place of artistic testing –

Through these balmy, summer days, which seem made for ease and pleasure, the testing continues: what part is being tested he is no longer sure. Sometimes it seems he is being tested simply for testing's sake, to see whether he will endure the test. (Coetzee 2002a: 113)

Not only does this passage evince Coetzee's debt to Beckett, with its play on the different grammatical permutations of test, it suggests the obsessive insistence on the part of John in seeing London as a "testing ground." For "he cannot accept that the life he is leading here in London is without plan or meaning." (Coetzee 2002a: 59) Though "South Africa is a wound within him", "an albatross round his neck" (Coetzee 2002a: 116; 101), it provides the counterpoint of ease and mediocrity that paradoxically reinforces his desire to remain in London and "be tested."

Across these shifting perceptions of London and Cape Town remains the imposition of binary identities – each represents only what the other is not. So he justifies his ill-treatment of another South African girl, Marianne, by affecting detachment about the potential ramifications "back home":

He belongs to two worlds tightly sealed from each other. In the world of South Africa he is no more than a ghost, a wisp of smoke fast dwindling away, soon to have vanished for good. As for London, he is good as unknown here. (Coetzee 2002a: 130-131)

In fact, located as the text predominantly is, in the realm of the self-interrogatory, the physical locations of Cape Town and London, become sites of intra-personal contestation, rather than places external to these shifting emotional referents John imposes on them. London and Cape Town correspond to the generic markers that John sets up for them: London, as the place of the artist, and Cape Town, as the place from which the artist must escape. Setting and place in *Youth* are markers for generic structures: they point more to the generic assumptions of their focaliser than to the locatability of Coetzee's text. So Margaret Lenta notes that "surface is almost absent, since this reflecting mind, as Coetzee has said of himself, lacks interest in his

environment, is “turned inward.””<sup>26</sup> Although its links to biographical fact necessitate some external referent – i.e. the cities – they are conflated, in the manner of T.S. Eliot and Charles Baudelaire before, with the subjective mind that observes them. They become “Unreal” as their “ideal identity” conflicts with the lived experience of their realities.

While John interrogates the lived experience of his current moment when he lives in London, his fetishising of South Africa compounds the growing realisation on the part of the reader that the distance from any actual situation will always have the capacity to overwhelm the lived experience with the ideal, and idealised.

In his rewriting of T.S. Eliot’s famous “What is a Classic?” lecture, J.M. Coetzee examines the biographical significances behind the lecture in coming to some answer for this problem.<sup>27</sup> His response is to draw two possible ways of understanding Eliot’s own attempts to turn his experiences into poetic material whilst in London:

One, broadly sympathetic, is to treat these transcendental experiences as the subject’s point of origin and read the entirety of the rest of the enterprise in their light [according to Eliot’s own principle of “entelechy”]... That is, it would read Eliot very much in his own framework, the framework he elected for himself when he defined tradition as an order you cannot escape, in which you may try to locate yourself, but in which your place gets to be defined, and continually redefined, by succeeding generations – an entirely transpersonal order, in fact. (Coetzee 2002b: 7)

This way, the self-defined position within a poetic order, parallels John’s self-imposed situation as an artist, and as an artist whose meaning-for-life is found in the high culture of the metropolis, rather than in the humdrum of everyday life.

The other (and broadly unsympathetic) way of understanding Eliot is the sociocultural one I outlined a moment ago: of treating his efforts as the essentially magical enterprise of a man trying to redefine the world around himself – America, Europe – rather than confronting the reality of his not-so-grand position as a man whose narrowly

academic, Eurocentric education had prepared him for little else but life as a mandarin in one of the New England ivory towers. (Coetzee 2002b: 7)

The irony with which John is depicted – the excessive seriousness, the denial of possible mediocrity – simultaneously sets up a parodic double-voice in the narrative and demonstrates an authorial sympathy for his acute feelings of alienness as a provincial in the metropole.<sup>28</sup> John, as a character, conforms to the sociocultural type of the colonial or provincial, who, in defining themselves with the metropole in antithesis to the province or colony, evidence the gap between “their inherited culture” and “their daily experience.” (Coetzee 2002b: 6)

Yet, critically, even as circumstances act to disprove this separation, the treatment of each location seems particularly similar as idealised concepts, rather than actual locations. But while the central consciousness John fixes on London and Cape Town as tropes in the literary shaping of his life, Coetzee distances himself from his youthful incarnation by using the third person and the principle of *autrebiography*, or younger self as other, suggested by Lenta. In this way, London (and Cape Town/South Africa) becomes important as the setting of a dialogic conflict between author and hero.

In counterpoising the interview with the act of writing, Coetzee noted that “writing is not free expression.” To reiterate:

There is a true sense in which writing is dialogic: a matter of awakening the countervoices in oneself and embarking upon speech with them. It is some measure of a writer’s seriousness whether he does evoke/invoke those countervoices in himself. (Coetzee 1992: 65)

Dialogism, of course, occurs on the threshold between the voices of the characters (“countervoices”) and the implicit judgment of the author in depicting them. Our opinions on the characters are inextricably linked to the manner in which they are presented. So when John responds to a disapproving letter from his cousin, “*I am hard enough on myself, he tells himself; I do not need the help of others.* It is a sophistry he falls back on time and again to block his ears to criticism” (Coetzee 2002a: 132), our response, as readers, is not to simply allow him his inauthentic

reflection without forming an opinion about his age, his maturity, his regard for others. Although the term “sophistry” suggests a degree of self-awareness, the difference in this occurrence and the later occurrence in the aforementioned “Experience” passage identifies John as a young man, who, in perceiving himself so manifestly different, proves he conforms to type. Moreover, to accuse the self of sophistry implies sophistry in one’s self perception, as one may not be aware of one’s sophistry without simultaneously adopting some ironic distance to both the self and the opinions expressed by the self. Therefore, whether the judgment is John’s (as “hero” of the narrative) or Coetzee’s as author, the very term creates a space or distance between the meaning of the phrase and its implication.

John, on days when the test of tiredness overwhelms him, “allows himself the luxury of dipping into books about the South Africa of the old days.” (Coetzee 2002a: 136-137) In his fascinated reading of the accounts written by travellers to his homeland, while he lives in the heart of their homeland, he finds himself questioning whether he is afflicted by patriotism. “Is he proving himself unable to live without a country?” he asks himself. However, he realises there exists a more profound, ontological reason to this fascination. While London is “by now wrapped in centuries of words”, Cape Town and the South African hinterland – the Karoo – have no such textual identity. Without “this handful of books, he could not be sure he not dreamed up the Karoo yesterday.” (Coetzee 2002a: 137) His identity, already explicitly if begrudgingly connected with the Karoo and South Africa, requires the authentication the travel books provide. The authenticity of their depictions, however, only occurs in their capacity as travel books of course. The reassurance they provide is restricted to the aesthetics of the genre they inhabit.

Coetzee suggests something similar in the negative, when he worries about the “easy” biographical explanations that an overly familiar setting may engender:

What is left of Kafka after the alienation of Josef K has been explained in terms of Kafka’s marginality? What is left of Michael K after he has been explained in terms of my marginality in Africa? (Coetzee 1992: 199)

There is a crucial elision in Coetzee’s doubling of Kafka’s situation with his own.<sup>29</sup> If, as it seems, Coetzee is repeating the form of the sentence to make a rhetorical juxtaposition of himself with Kafka, then the substitution of Michael K not

only takes the place of Kafka, as a rhetorical position in the question, but the place of Coetzee as the author of the piece. What is left, Coetzee asks, of Michael K? Not, what is left of John Coetzee? This example of the elision of the writer acts to replace the writer with his literary creations, a theme Coetzee explores more specifically in his dealings with Robinson Crusoe and Daniel Defoe.

Not only is Coetzee's novel, *Foe*, an explicit retelling of the Crusoe story, mapping the story's migrancy from the situation of its happening to the site of its writing, but it is Coetzee who introduces the 1999 Oxford University Press edition of *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, in a statement that resonates with Coetzee's on Michael K, Edgar Allan Poe is quoted by Coetzee as writing,

Not one person in ten, nay, not one person in five hundred, has, during the perusal of "Robinson Crusoe," the most remote conception that any particle of genius, or even of common talent, has been employed in its creation! Men do not look upon it in the light of a literary performance. Defoe has none of their thoughts – Robinson all. (Coetzee 1999: vi)

Coetzee's gloss is to call it "a tribute" albeit a backhanded one "that [an author] should be eclipsed by one of his creations." (Coetzee 1999: vi) While he recognises Defoe's adherence to the general tenets of realism, Coetzee explains this as the result of Defoe's empiricism. "Defoe is in fact something simpler: an impersonator, a ventriloquist, even a forger (his *Journal of the Plague Year* is as close to a forgery of a historical document as one can get without beginning to play with ink and old paper)." (Coetzee 1999: vii) Of course, the close-to-forgery of the historical document has appeared in Coetzee's oeuvre, first with the publication of *Dusklands*, later with John's expressed desire to write a book like *Dusklands* – that will of course, in the future anterior, become *Dusklands* – although:

It is not a forgery he is contemplating. People have tried that route before: pretended to find, in a chest in the attic in a country-house, a journal, yellow with age... The challenge he faces is a purely literary one: to write a book whose horizon of knowledge will be that of Burchell's time, the 1820's... (Coetzee 2002a: 138)

In “The Novel Today”, Coetzee sets up the novel as the antagonist of history. But he also expresses his awareness that his speech “will be recuperated by next week into the discourse of history.” (Coetzee 1988a: 3) His address is on an occasion where the charge “is to address what are called problems and issues.” As such the metalanguage of his speech remains “one that is liable, at any moment, to find itself flattened and translated back and down into the discourse of politics.” (Coetzee 1988a: 3) His solution on this occasion was to tell a parable, “a mode favoured by marginal groups – groups that don’t have a place in the mainstream, in the main plot of history – because it is hard to pin down unequivocally what the point is.” (Coetzee 1988a: 4) Later, with the framing narrative of Elizabeth Costello, he managed to encapsulate his historical statements in the language of fiction: what one assumes is the speaking of his own language. (Coetzee 1988a: 3)

While the novel seeks to evade the locality of history, it is inevitably tied to a history – the history it creates. Within the abstruseness of textual discourse, there remains a necessary adherence to context. However, by bringing that context into question, the history remains open to question. The differend is the settlement on a discourse. But identifying the differend is the subversion of that settlement: it brings what has been considered fact into the position of assertion and claim. The mere questioning of fact opens up the possibility for a counter-discourse. That possibility brings with it the recognition, if not the emplacement, of a poetics of reciprocity: a poetics that acknowledges, ethically and aesthetically, the place of reciprocity.

At one point the Introduction of this dissertation refers to Coetzee’s discussion of the Colour Bar Act in his “Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech.” The focus, at that stage in the argument, was to address the “failure of love” as a reciprocal engagement with an abstract Other. However, Coetzee’s words have a locality that is particularly significant when reread in relation to the issues of genre and setting:

What was the meaning of this deeply symbolical law?  
Its origins, it seems to me, lie in fear and denial: denial of an  
unacknowledgable desire to embrace Africa, embrace the  
body of Africa; and a fear of being embraced in return by  
Africa. (Coetzee 1992: 97)

For, if the *crudity* of life in South Africa dictates the genres to which the South African writer has recourse, then it is to the situation of living in Africa that Coetzee’s

earlier fictions bring to bear the marginalised voices of their dominant characters. For it is when the dominant characters of Coetzee's fictions transgress the laws of their particular lands that their social standing is shown to be secondary to their marginality before that law. The law, as Coetzee presents it, remains above regard because it relies on an unacknowledged fallacy: its supremacy as law is recognised primarily because it fits into the genre of the law. It is by virtue of the inability of the law to examine interrogate its own presumptions of rightness that characters such as the Magistrate and David Lurie find themselves occupying the gaps between the generality of the law's application and the specificity of their particular cases.

The fear of being embraced in return by Africa is a fear of reciprocal indebtedness to Africa. When Mrs Curren finally allows herself to be embraced at the end of *Age of Iron*, there is still no warmth in the encounter: that the embrace is the final description in the novel suggests that it leads Mrs Curren to lose power over the process of her narrative. For all the insistence on the benefits of an "ethic of gratitude" in Chapter Two, its generic consequence in the Africa of Coetzee's novels is a renunciation of narrative dominance playing directly into a fear of semantic marginality.

Coetzee's move from South Africa to Australia marks a particularly important transition. For, if the works up until *Disgrace* have some measure of South African specificity, and if *Youth* functions as a critical account of Coetzee's early establishment of the novel genre and the setting of the novel as co-dependent factors of a work, then Coetzee's departure from South Africa correlates with the setting-less nature of *Elizabeth Costello* and the Adelaide-based *Slow Man*.

*Slow Man*'s more sympathetic approach to receiving care demonstrates a progression from the agonistic situation of Mrs Curren in *Age of Iron*. Attempting to argue this on the basis of setting is particularly questionable. Before the genre of the differend, however, it seems particularly important to note the setting in locating that genre – either as a legal dilemma, an ethical problem, or an aesthetic choice. It is the engagement with each of these issues as an aesthetic project that mark Coetzee's use of a poetics of reciprocity.

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<sup>1</sup> Coetzee, J.M. *Youth*. London: Secker & Warburg, 2002a.

<sup>2</sup> Derrida, Jacques. "The Law of Genre" in *Critical Inquiry*. Avital Ronell (trans). Vol 7 (1). Autumn, 1980. 55-81. 65.

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle. *Poetics*. S.H. Butcher (trans). Adapted by Malcolm Heath for his website. <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/classics/resources/poetics/poettran.htm>. Accessed 22/02/2007. 1.

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- <sup>4</sup> Coetzee, J.M. "The Novel Today" in *Upstream*. Vol 6 (1). Summer, 1988a. 2-5. 4.
- <sup>5</sup> Coetzee, J.M. *Youth*. London: Secker & Warburg, 2002a. Coetzee, J.M. *Youth: Scenes from Provincial Life II*. New York: Viking Penguin, 2002.
- <sup>6</sup> Coetzee, J.M. *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1997.
- <sup>7</sup> Coetzee, J.M. *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1997.
- <sup>8</sup> Coetzee, J.M. "Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky" in *Doubling the Point*. David Attwell (ed). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992. 251-293.
- <sup>9</sup> Ley, James. "True Confession" in *Australian Book Review*. May 7, 2007.
- <sup>10</sup> The essay originated as a lecture on "Truth in Autobiography" presented as Coetzee's Inaugural Lecture at the University of Cape Town in 1984. Although the lecture survives substantially in Coetzee's discussion of Rousseau, it attempts to deal with the genre of autobiography as a whole.
- <sup>11</sup> Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Differend: Phases in Dispute*. 1983. Georges van den Abbeele (trans). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988. 50.
- <sup>12</sup> Genette, Gérard. *The Architext: An Introduction*. Jane E. Lewin (trans). Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.
- <sup>13</sup> Deresiewicz, William. "Third Person Singular" in *The New York Times*. July 7, 2002.
- <sup>14</sup> Attridge, Derek. "Confessing in the Third Person: *Boyhood* and *Youth*" in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2005. 138-161. 141.
- <sup>15</sup> Coetzee, J.M. "Interview: Retrospect" in *Doubling the Point*. David Attwell (ed). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992. 391-395. 391.
- <sup>16</sup> Coetzee, J.M. "The Poems of Thomas Pringle" in *Stranger Shores*. 2001. London: Vintage, 2002b. 250-254. 253.
- <sup>17</sup> Lee, Hermione. "Uneasy Guest" in *London Review of Books*. July 11, 2002.
- <sup>18</sup> Miller, Henry. *Tropic of Cancer*. 1934. London: Granada Publishing Ltd, 1965. 10.
- <sup>19</sup> Coetzee, John M. *The Works of Ford Madox Ford with Particular Reference to the Novels*. Unpublished Thesis at University of Cape Town, 1963.
- <sup>20</sup> Coetzee, John Maxwell. *The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett: An Essay in Stylistic Analysis*. Unpublished Thesis at The University of Texas at Austin, 1969.
- <sup>21</sup> Coetzee, J.M. "Samuel Beckett" in *Inner Workings: Essays 2000-2005*. London: Harvill Secker, 2007. 169-173. 172. This essay, in its original context, was the introduction to the fourth volume in the collected prose and poetry of Samuel Beckett.
- <sup>22</sup> Brodsky, Joseph. "A Place as Good as Any" in *On Grief and Reason: Essays*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1995.
- <sup>23</sup> Coetzee, J.M. "The 1995 World Cup" in *Stranger Shores*. 351-356. 354.
- <sup>24</sup> Matthew 10:16; Mark 6:11; Luke 9:5 in *The Holy Bible: Authorized King James Version*. London and New York: Collins' Clear Type Text, 1957.
- <sup>25</sup> Coetzee, J.M. "Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech" in *Doubling the Point*. 96-99.
- <sup>26</sup> Lenta, Margaret. "Aurebiography: J. M. Coetzee's *Boyhood* and *Youth*" in *English in Africa*. Vol 30 (1), May 2003. 157-169. 163.
- <sup>27</sup> Coetzee, J.M. "What is a Classic?: A Lecture" in *Stranger Shores*. 1-16.
- <sup>28</sup> The reference to Mikhail Bakhtin's work on double-voiced discourse in facilitating a parodical commentary to an apparently serious work is intentional. Mention of parody in *Youth* have been specifically omitted to constrain the length of this response. It is, however, obviously another mode that Coetzee employs in upsetting the generic specificity of the novel. Coetzee's mention of countervoices evidences the influence of Bakhtin's work on his thinking.
- <sup>29</sup> For this point, I am indebted to Chris Thurman who made it in response to a paper I presented at the aforementioned UCT Coetzee Collective, 5<sup>th</sup> October 2006: "Textual Migrancy: Is *Slow Man* a South African Novel?"
- <sup>30</sup> Coetzee, J.M. *Foe*. 1986. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987. Defoe, Daniel. *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe...* J.M. Coetzee (intro). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

## Conclusion: A Letter from Lady Chandos

Where words give way beneath your feet like rotting boards  
- J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*

Justin Cartwright's review of Coetzee's *Inner Workings: Essays 2000-2005* attempts a reading of *Slow Man* based on an essay from the collection entitled "Philip Roth, *The Plot against America*."<sup>1</sup> Cartwright quotes from the Roth piece,

A novelist as seasoned as Roth knows that the stories we set about writing sometimes begin to write themselves, after which their truth or falsehood is out of our hands and declarations of authorial intent carry no weight. Furthermore, once a book is launched into the world, it becomes the property of its readers, who, given half a chance, will twist its meaning in accord with their own preconceptions and desires. Roth... reminds us that, though Franz Kafka did not write his novels as political allegories, East Europeans under Communist rule read them as such and put them to work for political ends.<sup>2</sup>

Cartwright interprets *Slow Man* as an "invitation" for readers to "make their own meanings." Moreover, according to Cartwright, the novel becomes "a justification" for "the idea that poetry is truer than history." (Cartwright 2007: 2) Given that Coetzee's essay on Paul Celan in the same volume questions Hans-Georg Gadamer's more rigorous argument for a similar principle, I must disagree with his reading.<sup>3</sup> Of interest, however, is the manner by which he arrives at this reading. Cartwright observes that the phrase *roman à clef* occurs with particular frequency in this collection. In response to the notion of the 'novel with a key', Cartwright uses the Roth essay as a key to 'unlocking' the meaning of *Slow Man*.

The irony of using the quote he used lies in the sad reflection that a work will be examined as a *roman à clef* despite all efforts on the part of the author to suggest the contrary: that a story may have a remainder beyond the message and the covering of that message. Stories may indeed have messages. But if they are to be more than merely aesthetic imperatives, their analysis requires some reciprocal engagement. By

way of a concluding example for this study, I turn to the “Letter of Elizabeth, Lady Chandos, to Francis Bacon.”<sup>4</sup>

The letter that concludes *Elizabeth Costello* is a disturbing postscript to the novel for two reasons. The first is its discrepancy from the rest of the novel. Each “lesson” has involved an Australian novelist, Elizabeth Costello, presenting her thoughts on particular issues to some audience. Each lesson has been clearly labelled as pertinent to a specific issue and each audience has been specifically delineated.<sup>5</sup> The letter, however, has no neat label to designate its ‘issue’ and its audience is a man who has been dead for almost four hundred years. The second reason is its desperate plea for salvation that, ‘revealed’ almost four hundred years after its articulation, must come, if it is possible, far too late to be of any help.

Elizabeth C’s letter, like *Foe*, is a fiction based on the paratextual relationship it forms with another fiction. *Foe*’s paratext is Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*; Elizabeth’s letter is Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s “Letter of Lord Chandos to Lord Bacon.” Hofmannsthal’s letter posits a relationship between a fictional Philip, Lord Chandos, and the rationalist Francis Bacon. It details the collapse of Philip’s recourse to rationalism, reason and language before “the condition of [his] inner self.”<sup>6</sup> He describes his position of certainty about his rational understanding of nature:

[At] times I divined that all was allegory and that each creature was a key to all the others; and I felt myself the one capable of seizing each by the handle and unlocking as many of the others as were ready to yield. (Hofmannsthal 2007)

As his condition progresses, however, he ceases to see nature as a rationally accessible series of interlinking keys. “For me everything disintegrated into parts, those parts again into parts; no longer would anything let itself be encompassed by one idea.” (Hofmannsthal 2007) Elizabeth, in commenting on her ‘husband’s’ letter, changes the tense of Philip’s divination to “all *is* allegory.” (Coetzee 2004b: 229) Given the vicissitudes of translation, it is possible that Hofmannsthal’s words are better translated in the present tense or that Coetzee misread the original. The impact of the shift, however, shows the insoluble nature of the problem that Hofmannsthal and Coetzee both face: that of articulating the remainder or the something-else of a story in a language

neither Latin nor English, neither Italian nor Spanish,  
but a language none of whose words is known to me, a lan-  
guage in which inanimate things speak to me and wherein I  
may one day have to justify myself before an unknown judge.  
(Hofmannsthal 2007)

Hofmannsthal is careful to show the inadequacy of his approach through the self-reflexive writings of a fictional character. Coetzee increases the distance between the manner and the matter: he creates the fictional paratext of an elided victim of Philip's condition. But Coetzee also observes that it remains allegorical. At best it is by gesturing "not [to] what I say but something else" that something may be salvaged (Coetzee 2004b: 228)

The consequence of this deferral to "something else" is both symptomatic of the curse Philip and Elizabeth (and, in some deferred manner, possibly Hofmannsthal and Coetzee) suffer and indicative of the name by which this curse may be comprehended (though not, ultimately, either cured or fully understood). Their relationship with other things is not one that can be fully rationalised or understood, because the rationality or understanding denies those elements with which the other things reciprocate the relationship. Incapable of finding an idiom for feelings that want to be articulated but cannot be, Philip and Elizabeth are befuddled by their inability to make sense of their stories as *roman à clefs* waiting to be unlocked.

It is a similar befuddlement to that suffered by the Magistrate and David Lurie when they are denied the voice on which so much of their identity hinges. Neither the Magistrate nor Lurie can articulate a response to their situation because their situation precipitates their collapse into positions similar to those of Philip and Elizabeth – a position inadequate to articulating the acceptance of the presence of an other.

In this there is a strong resonance with the problems faced in setting up an "ethic of gratitude." For the acknowledgement of the other's right to respond stems from the ability to accept the other's presence outside the parameters of one's own discourse. While Paul Rayment seems to find some solace in accepting his situation as Marijana's friend rather than lover, Mrs Curren's inability to contact her daughter is the inability to acknowledge the reciprocal right of her daughter to respond to the news of her cancer.

Lurie, the Magistrate, Rayment and Mrs Curren demonstrate some possible responses to the vicissitudes of life. However, those lives remain thematic vehicles for Coetzee's writing. Although their efforts at reciprocity are finely depicted, it is the artistic construction of their interactions that ultimately brings about a poetics of reciprocity in the novels they inhabit. In that respect, it is precisely their fictionality – their positions as objects of fiction – that enables their depiction to be aesthetically functional. It is their generic identity – fictional character – as it relates to the ethical dimensions of their intratextual actions, that the aesthetic and the ethical come together to form the poetics of reciprocity.

There is a differend in this: for as objects of fiction, none of Coetzee's characters can "speak" for themselves. But it is a differend that has been identified. For Coetzee's self-referential manner of writing ensures that the lack of freedom felt by the characters as fictional objects is understood by the characters in their intratextual interactions. The correspondences between genre, content, setting and aesthetic erupt the bounds of the text – an irruption that parodies the inability of characters to move, as Elizabeth Costello does, from one text to another.

Couching the exchange between Philip and Elizabeth in the genre of letters directed to an absent third party, Coetzee shows his ability to play with genre and with setting to offset attempts at an "easy" reading. Yet playing on the limits and advantages of genre shows the reciprocal benefits involved in writing with full consciousness of writing's inadequacies. *Elizabeth Costello* avoids the generic structures of both lecture hall and reading room: the need to be either a well-argued truth or a well-articulated fiction. By presenting itself as both, and as neither, *Elizabeth Costello* offsets its own heterogeneity of setting with heterogeneity of genre. Costello both is and is not Coetzee's amanuensis. The chapters are and are not "lessons." They are and are no longer lectures presented by Coetzee, by Costello, by the framing narrative. It is, however, in this capacity as being both and neither at the same time, that *Elizabeth Costello* represents a transition away from the South African setting in Coetzee's prose to a prose that divorces itself from the necessary ties both to setting and to genre. *Slow Man*'s setting in Adelaide is curiously devoid of Australian-specific detail, suggesting the turn of Coetzee's prose, despite his attempt to inscribe himself into Australian history, away from a reciprocal aesthetic between genre and place to a reciprocal engagement of fiction with its setting as fiction.

Coetzee's forthcoming novel, *Diary of a Bad Year*, will no doubt revise and recondition this notion of the ethical-aesthetic poetics of reciprocity.

The complications of reciprocal relationships are problematic precisely because they are irresolvable. But Coetzee's fictions show that the complications are only problematic if one approaches reciprocal relationships as an issue that needs to be resolved. While one "cannot live thus", it is perhaps the role of Coetzee's fictions to ask the question: why not?

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<sup>1</sup> Cartwright, Justin. "Catching up with Slow Man" in *The Independent*. May 12, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Coetzee, J.M. "Philip Roth, *The Plot against America*" in *Inner Workings: Essays 2000-2005*. London: Harvill Secker, 2007. 228-243. 229.

<sup>3</sup> Coetzee, J.M. "Paul Celan and his translators" in *Inner Workings: Essays 2000-2005*. 114-131. 117.

<sup>4</sup> Coetzee, J.M. *Elizabeth Costello*. 2003. London: Vintage, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> An exception is "Eros" which seems not to have an audience. However, her internal monologue, punctuated with rhetorical questions, suggests that she is her own audience for this particular reverie.

<sup>6</sup> von Hofmannsthal, Hugo. "The Letter of Lord Chandos." Russell Stockman (trans). Published on *Vienna 1900*. <http://depts.washington.edu/vienna/> Accessed 22/05/2007.

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