

Emigration, Literary Celebrity, and the Autobiographical Turn  
in J.M. Coetzee's Later Fiction

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## ABSTRACT

### Emigration, Literary Celebrity, and the Autobiographical Turn in J.M. Coetzee's Later Fiction

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Whereas commentary on autobiography in Coetzee tends to focus on the dynamics of secular confession and the idea of self-writing as *'autre-biography,'* this thesis, taking the experience of emigration and literary celebrity as thematic pivots, argues that the protagonists of Coetzee's later fiction (*Youth* through *Summertime*) occasion a form of authorial self-disclosure that is not an end in itself but, with a nominal anchorage on Coetzee himself, a means of focalising questions about literary genre, political complicity, the relation between author and character, the intersection of personal and collective history, and the social responsibility of the acclaimed writer. It is argued that the slippage of focus from the authorial personas in these fictions to the questions and critical voices they provoke nonetheless conspires to reaffirm the authority of the name and literary oeuvre *'Coetzee.'*

The thesis begins by examining the link in *Youth* between the protagonist's crisis of ethnic and literary identity and Coetzee's narrative strategy of subjective displacement (Chapter 1). It is shown that the refractive zone of questions in that fiction constitutes the self-qualifying reflex that becomes increasingly pronounced in the authorial surrogates and fictions that follow. Coetzee's representation of the acclaimed writer as a doubting, fallible, unheroic figure becomes in the case of Elizabeth Costello a rejection of the idea of the writer as a spokesperson for a group or cause and instead an opening for the pressures and responsibilities of living among others to be embodied and negotiated (Chapter 2). It is argued that Coetzee's Nobel Lecture provides a further example of this reserve about the reach of the writer's authority in the public realm: the deferral of authority in this text highlights by indirection an inconsistency in the Swedish Academy's invitation to Coetzee to speak for his work on the occasion of an award that celebrates its universal interpretability, its resistance to authorial meta-interpretation (Chapter 3). It is shown that in *Slow Man*, where the familiar metafictional interplay between the one who writes and the one who is written is framed on an emigrant history that is implicitly Coetzee's, the characters' contest of interpretation over photographs highlights the instability of the historical record – a point that holds for the text of Coetzee's personal history (Chapter 4). Emphasis on the *nominal* alignment of the author Coetzee and his authorial surrogate in *Diary of a Bad Year* governs a consideration of how the author's name – his proper name and reputation – focuses the condition of complicity with others as a reader and citizen; the question of whether the character JC *speaks for* Coetzee is revealed to be secondary to what it means to be held accountable for actions committed in the name of a group to which one belongs or set of interests to which one subscribes (Chapter 5). The thesis tracks the qualified textualisation of Coetzee's authorial personas and history to *Summertime*, where *'John Coetzee'* is written out of an entanglement of acts of emigration and recollection in voices inflected with other histories than his own (Chapter 6).

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## Introduction

J.M. Coetzee's later fiction is marked by refractions of the author, whose qualified self-image circulates in these narratives in the service of revisionist forays in autobiography. The works I call Coetzee's later fiction are his six most recent: *Youth* (2002), *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), 'He and His Man' (2003), *Slow Man* (2005), *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), and *Summertime* (2009). While there is a pronounced degree of continuity between Coetzee and the protagonists of these fictions, in each case the term 'autobiography' is complicated and qualified by the fictional frames in which the authorial figures and their utterances are set. I argue that Coetzee's representation in writing of aspects of his self and episodes from his life is intimately bound up with negotiating his relationship to the politics and culture of the country of his birth, South Africa, and the pressure of public accountability he has experienced as a successful novelist.

Coetzee's emigration from South Africa to Australia in 2002 and the Nobel Prize for Literature he was awarded in 2003 seem to provide neat grounds for demarcating the post-2002 fiction from his other novels, but there are problems with a demarcation of this kind. Coetzee's 2002 emigration to Australia was not his first emigration from the country of his birth: in 1962 he left South Africa to establish a life in England; in 1965 he relocated from England to the United States but was forced to return to South Africa in 1971 after failing to have his visa renewed. This precedent in Coetzee's life is one reason it is misleading to refer to the post-2002 fiction as his 'post-emigration' work or to cleanly divide his fictional oeuvre into the 'South African' and the 'Australian' novels, as some critics have done.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Coetzee's reputation as an internationally respected and canonised novelist was established long before he received the Nobel Prize in 2003. The Nobel Prize merely consecrated this reputation, ceremoniously confirming his status as a 'world' writer. My priority in this thesis, then, is not to argue for 2002 and 2003 as watershed years in Coetzee's life, nor are emigration and literary celebrity the terminal focus of my discussion (each of these topics could quite easily sustain a dissertation of its own). Instead, I am interested in examining how Coetzee's treatment of the experience of emigration and literary celebrity conditions the autobiographical turn in his later fiction.

By 'condition' I primarily mean 'occasion' and 'provide the terms for;' the definitions of the word provided by the *OED* that are closest to my purpose are 'exert a strong influence on' and 'determine.' 'Condition' is a word that registers the important entailment of a *provision*, a

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Michael Chapman is at first semi-cautious in speaking of 'the "Australian" novels' but relaxes later in the same article when he refers to 'the two Australian novels' ('Coetzee, Gordimer and the Nobel Prize' 61, 62); Mike Marais in *Secretary of the Invisible* and Patrick Hayes in *J.M. Coetzee and the Novel* flatly refer to Coetzee's 'Australian fiction.'

*qualification*. In analysing Coetzee's strategies of self-projection in these fictions I attend to the ways in which an apparently stable authorial self-image is unsettled and qualified, its voice undercut or deflected by other voices. I argue that in these works the event of emigration and the experience of literary celebrity crystallise questions that recur in discussions of Coetzee's work about how as a writer he situates himself in relation to the nation state, his reading publics, his personal past, his protagonists, and his body of work. In this late phase of his career they are given fresh emphasis in the context of the project of narrating and reflecting on a coherent Life of the writer.

In speaking of an 'autobiographical turn' I mean to signal more than the meditative backward look over the events of a life that is habitually taken as the basic brief of the genre of autobiography. In using this phrase I want to move away from the idea of autobiography as a genre distinct from fiction and consider it rather as a repertoire of gestures that persistently pose the question of Coetzee's implication in his authorial personas while focusing broader questions *through* those personas. Coetzee's avoidance of the first person pronoun in speaking or writing about himself as a writer<sup>2</sup> has led to a shift in understanding such autobiographical fictions as *Boyhood* and *Youth* as instances not of autobiography but *autre*-biography. 'Autre-biography' is a term Coetzee uses in the 'Retrospect' of *Doubling the Point* (1992) in the course of surveying the broad outlines of his life leading up to and away from the essay on confession<sup>3</sup> that he identifies as marking a crucial moment in his career and life, 'the beginning of a more broadly philosophical engagement with a situation in the world, his situation and perhaps still mine' (395). 'Autre-biography' conveys a measure of distance and strangeness that necessarily enters into the relationship between the one who writes and the self that emerges in the writing, whether or not the writer intends to represent a faithful image of him- or herself in the process.<sup>4</sup> In the case of articles and book chapters where the term 'autrebiography' is not given prominent emphasis,<sup>5</sup> discussion of Coetzee's autobiographical practice in his fiction often situates itself in relation to his essay on confession and the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. For example, Derek Attridge works closely with the terms of Coetzee's discussion in his confession

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<sup>2</sup> Carrol Clarkson has noted how Coetzee's avoidance of the first-person pronoun 'I' in speaking about himself as a writer extends to his interviews and essays. She argues that this 'predilection for not saying "I"' is in keeping with Coetzee's scrupulous attention in his essays and fiction to the question of the authority of the one who writes (*J.M. Coetzee* 21).

<sup>3</sup> 'Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky' (1985) in *Doubling the Point* 251-93.

<sup>4</sup> See Coetzee's exchange with Attwell in Coetzee, 'All Autobiography Is *Autre*-biography.'

<sup>5</sup> Examples of essays that take the term as their point of focus include Shiela Collingwood-Whittick, 'Autobiography as *Autre*biography: the Fictionalisation of the Self in J.M. Coetzee's *Boyhood* and *Youth*' (2001) and Margaret Lenta, 'Autrebiography: J.M. Coetzee's *Boyhood* and *Youth*' (2003). Clarkson, in her chapter 'Not I' in *J.M. Coetzee: Countervoices* (2009), goes considerably further than most writers on the topic in detailing what is at stake in Coetzee's preference for the third over the first person in writing or speaking about himself.

essay in his chapter on *Boyhood* and *Youth* in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (2005), as does Michiel Heyns in considering Coetzee's *Boyhood* alongside Antjie Krog's *A Country of My Skull* and other examples of 'confessional fiction' in 'The Whole Country's Truth: Confession and Narrative in Recent White South African Writing' (2000).<sup>6</sup>

This thesis differs from these and similar discussions of Coetzee's autobiographical practice by emphasising the increasingly prominent role given in the later fiction to the critical voices that deflect attention away from the authorial personas. 'Autre-biography,' in this light, describes not so much the writer's incarnation as a stranger to himself in such characters as John in *Youth*, Elizabeth Costello in *Elizabeth Costello*, Robinson Crusoe in 'He and His Man,' Paul Rayment in *Slow Man*, JC in *Diary of a Bad Year*, and John in *Summertime*, as the reader's incarnation as a character whose voice challenges that of the authorial persona, contests their authority, and answers, if not overwrites, the text of the author's spoken and written utterances with his or her own interpretation. In these fictions the elements of privilege and self-interest usually associated with the practice of autobiography<sup>7</sup> are qualified and undermined by the narrative structure as much as by other characters' voices raised against the protagonist's voice. The authorial figures named above are nominally at the centre of these fictions, but their authority is not properly their own: it is divided against them as the subject of others' critical opinions or narrative construction. In *Youth* this decentering occurs tacitly in the ironic edge of the narration; in 'He and His Man' Crusoe finds his authority split between himself as the writer and the subject of his writing; the decentering or deflection of the protagonist's word becomes more overt in the intercharacter confrontations in *Elizabeth Costello*, *Slow Man*, and *Diary of a Bad Year*; while in *Summertime* the authorial persona John is squarely subtended as a textual subject in his surviving notebooks and the interviewees' transcribed accounts.

Yet the question remains: why is Coetzee's later work so self-involved? This question underlies James Meek's 2009 review of *Summertime*, 'All about John,' though he does not himself raise or address it. It is a question that has likely posed itself in the minds of many who have read the fictions Coetzee has published since *Boyhood* (1997) and who struggle to separate their irritation with or distaste for the protagonist or the work they've just read, from Coetzee himself. The fictions under discussion here are more or less discreetly 'all about John,' but in ways that open

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<sup>6</sup> Further examples of critics who focus on the confessional element in Coetzee's fiction are Gilbert Yeoh, 'J.M. Coetzee and Samuel Beckett: Ethics, Truth-telling, and Self-Deception' (2003), and Sarah Brouillette's chapter 'Locating Coetzee,' in *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (2007).

<sup>7</sup> In the 'Retrospect' of *Doubling the Point* Coetzee writes: 'What sets autobiography apart from other biography is, on the one hand, that the writer has privileged access to information and, on the other, that because tracing the line from past to present is such a self-interested enterprise (self-interested in every sense), selective vision, even a degree of blindness, becomes inevitable – blindness to what may be obvious to any passing observer' (391).

onto larger questions about affiliation and complicity that complicate the reader's impulse to judge the fictional characters who broach them. One of my leading priorities is to explore how Coetzee's authorial personas are primed as subjects of criticism in these fictions, presented as openings for other voices to be raised against them. In *Youth* this opening is implied by the numerous questions in the narrative that highlight the distance between the author of *Youth*, Coetzee, and the version of himself he draws in John, who emerges as a fallible, unheroic figure awkwardly caught between his ethnic and literary affiliations. In *Elizabeth Costello*, a similarly fallible, unheroic figure, the physically and mentally fragile Costello, hinges debates and disputes between herself and her interlocutors, which are left for the reader to stake a position in. Whereas in *Youth* the element of critical self-scrutiny emerges from the distance between the author Coetzee and his protagonist John, in *Elizabeth Costello* the eponymous character's credibility is punctured both in the public exchange of opinions with other characters in the fiction and by the narrator's asides that interrupt the realist illusion. 'He and His Man' invites interpretation at the same moment it cautions against the reductions of interpretation. Costello's obtrusive presence in *Slow Man* gives a metafictional tuck to the narrative of Paul Rayment's concerns about affiliating himself to Marijana's family and, more broadly, the Australian nation, setting it within the context of Coetzee's history as a writer recently emigrated to Australia. JC in *Diary of a Bad Year* takes up the knotty question of the entailments of affiliation: one's complicity as a citizen of a state whose government acts in the name of a social collective to which one nominally belongs or principles to which one subscribes. As in *Elizabeth Costello*, complicity in *Diary of a Bad Year* is given formal and thematic expression by being addressed as an ethical issue by characters in whom Coetzee carefully, if equivocally identifies himself. The effect of this ambiguous gesture is to make of the fiction more than an exercise in self-disclosure: instead it becomes a site of contestation. By embedding the authorial personas' opinions in the interpersonal contexts from which they emerge and in which they play out, Coetzee restores the existential immediacy and emotional weight to questions about the relation between literature and social responsibility; but it is equally true that what Boyd Tonkin, in a review of *Summertime*, calls the 'sheer tricksiness of the narrative ruses' ('Portrait of the Artist as Loser') in Coetzee's later fiction, inclines one to read these as narratives of *ideas*, written not without an element of intellectual narcissism. In this light, the authorial personas Costello and JC are less steady self-projections of Coetzee than a versatile means of posing and exploring such questions as the interplay and strategic value of sympathy and critical distance in the act of writing and reading. In consequence, the fictions I discuss here have a paradoxical status as Coetzee's self-focalised response to literary acclaim that devolves upon other characters the priority of judging the authorial figure and his or her utterances. This dual emphasis on the established authority of the writer,

modelled on Coetzee, and the priority of other characters' interpretive points of view is clearest in *Summertime*, where 'John Coetzee' is the absent subject of the biographer Vincent's and his interviewees' assessments. That four of the five interviewees are emigrants to or from South Africa, and Vincent an Englishman, complicates the accounts they offer on John while reminding one of Coetzee's ambivalent relationship to South Africa – a relationship compounded of intimacy and detachment<sup>8</sup> – instanced in his two emigrations from that country.

There is a discernible shift in these fictions away from the figure of the author as a live and present animating source of ideas to be questioned (*Elizabeth Costello*, *Slow Man*, *Diary of a Bad Year*) to an absent subject whose life and ideas are animated, vouched for, challenged – in short, *written* – by others (*Summertime*). This shift, which highlights the question of the interpenetration of the author's life and work, is evident in the folds that are created where the text or performance of an author-figure's utterances (Costello's lectures, JC's opinions, the notebooks in *Summertime*) are enclosed in the narrative. Without depleting these utterances of their rhetorical force, the framing fictional narrative exhibits them alongside the author-figure who produces them as objects of scrutiny and argument. Coetzee's person and life are interfolded with, and in the process given a tuck in, the characters who are at the centre of these fictional narratives. But, as I have already noted, this centrality does not give rise to a privileged voice: on the contrary, the voices of others – from the narrator to other characters – destabilise the opinions of the authorial personas. Surreptitiously, such author-figures as Costello in *Elizabeth Costello*, JC in *Diary of a Bad Year*, and John in *Summertime* assume the status of a primary text hemmed in by the commentary of others. In Coetzee's earlier novels there are a host of characters who are either writers or academics or possess a literary sensibility,<sup>9</sup> and in those texts too there is a recurrent emphasis on the event of writing. But the later fiction differs in that the continuity between Coetzee and the protagonists' person and experience is more clearly signalled, and belies a tension between Coetzee's explicit projection of aspects of his personality and life and the strategies of qualification he employs to underwrite this self-exposure. The net effect of this procedure, I argue, is to heighten the literary currency of the name and oeuvre 'Coetzee,' in the face of the manoeuvres that render it subject to criticism.

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<sup>8</sup> Attwell describes Coetzee's relationship to South Africa in these terms in 'Coetzee's Estrangements' (229).

<sup>9</sup> The writers include Eugene Dawn in *Dusklands*, Susan Barton and Foe in *Foe*, and Dostoevsky in *The Master of Petersburg*. S.J. Coetzee in *Dusklands*, Mrs Curren in *Age of Iron*, David Lurie in *Disgrace* are or were university academics. The Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and Medical Officer in *Life & Times of Michael K*, as their designations indicate, are civil servants but keep private journals. Jacobus Coetzee and Magda are consummate fictioneers absorbed by the texts they purport to write.

A selection of Coetzee's remarks from *Doubling the Point* on how he sees his role as a writer in relation to the public sphere provides a useful starting point for a discussion of Coetzee's literary responses to the idea of the writer as public intellectual.<sup>10</sup> In the interview on Kafka, in the course of explaining his reservations about the power dynamics of interviews, Coetzee remarks that he does not regard himself as a public figure (*Doubling the Point* 65). In the interview on popular culture he observes ruefully that in the mid-1980s he 'slipped a little too easily into the role of commentator on South African affairs' (*Doubling the Point* 104), while in the interview on South African writers he rejects the idea that he is 'a herald of community or anything else,' preferring to describe himself as 'someone who has intimations of freedom (as every chained prisoner has) and constructs representations – which are shadows themselves – of people slipping their chains and turning their faces to the light' (*Doubling the Point* 341). This last self-characterisation, which echoes Plato's allegory of the cave,<sup>11</sup> casts Coetzee as a fabulist whose power lies not in pronouncing prescriptions, answers, or 'ways out,' but in bodying (or shadowing) forth the plights of imagined human subjects.

Coetzee's protagonists in his earlier novels typically display an acute consciousness of the pressure of history in threatening to stake their lives on political imperatives or subsume their marginal voices into collective narratives of struggle and resistance. In this respect Michael K is an exemplary figure, as is the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, who makes the following remark that bears on his own situation as much as on Michael K's: 'I wanted to live outside history. I wanted to live outside the history that Empire imposes on its subjects' (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 154). In contrast to Coetzee's earlier novels, where history has a near-tangible presence as a coercive discursive force, the later fiction is dominated by the figure of the acclaimed author, implicitly 'Coetzee,' who emerges as the subject of criticism and subversion.

A considerable portion of Coetzee's fiction is taken up with exploring matters of authorship and authority – who speaks, from what position, on what qualification, on behalf of which group or set of interests. In his 1993 monograph on Coetzee, Attwell examines Coetzee's 'politics of agency' or what he refers to as the questions of '*legitimacy, authority, and position*' that affect white South African writers working under apartheid (*J.M. Coetzee* 26; Attwell's italics). More recently, Attridge has shown how Coetzee's novels, particularly *Foe*, revisit and qualify the authority of canonical European literary works (Attridge 65-90). From his first novel *Dusklands*, Coetzee has been preoccupied with issues of authorship and authority in a postcolonial context, but in the later fiction these questions find a new inflection in the context of the successful writer whose work and

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<sup>10</sup> This last phrase is the title of a collection of essays, edited by Jane Poyner (2006).

<sup>11</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, book VII.

personal celebrity has gained transnational currency. In *Elizabeth Costello* Coetzee treats directly the experience of literary celebrity through the indirect means of the eponymous character, whose identity as an acclaimed writer from Australia obliquely registers Coetzee's literary status and 2002 emigration to Australia.

The coincidence in 2002 of Coetzee's emigration to Australia and the publication of *Youth*, a fictionalised account of his earlier attempted emigration from South Africa in the early 1960s, raises afresh the question of Coetzee's relationship to the country in which he was born and has spent most of his life. More specifically, given Coetzee's preference for narrating the story of episodes in his life in the third person, Coetzee's emigrations prompt a consideration of the relationship between emigration and the motions of distanced self-regard that mark the fictions from *Youth* onward. *Youth* is Coetzee's second formally retrospective fiction: *Boyhood*, an account of his childhood in Worcester and early teenage years in Cape Town, was his first. I begin with *Youth* rather than *Boyhood* because it is in *Youth* that John tries to realise his ideal of making his escape, physically and through a career in writing, from the matrix of influences and affiliations South Africa represents to him: the narrative hinges on the period of John's life during which he attempts to qualify his attachments to South Africa from the distance of England by making a name for himself as a writer in the metropolis of London. John's project of estrangement is mirrored in the mode of narration Coetzee employs in that fiction to tell the story of the individual who bears his name but is not yet a writer. *Summertime* is a logical further step in the direction of telling the story of the writer's life as if from the point of view of someone else. I bracket the field of my discussion with *Youth* and *Summertime* because in these two works, set at threshold periods in Coetzee's life, the experience of emigration and literary celebrity mesh in striking ways. *Summertime* focuses on the period immediately following John's return from the United States to South Africa during which he tries to find his footing again in South Africa as a failed emigrant. In both books the determining feature of John's experience is his relationship to South Africa and how his ethnicity implicates him in apartheid, whether he is in the country or out of it. Both works emphasise John's failure to escape the claims he feels his country of origin makes on him. Coetzee's strategy in *Youth* of narrating John's experience in the third person and present tense, which underlines the temporal distance between the person he was and the person he has become, in *Summertime* is dated to John's notebook entries in the 1970s, which identifies it as a compromise solution to his desire – already expressed in his emigration to England (and the author's to Australia) – to distance himself from South Africa.

The question of historical complicity is a rich one to ask of any of Coetzee's works, perhaps

most notably *Dusklands*.<sup>12</sup> Indeed *Dusklands* can be viewed as the textual hinge between *Youth* and *Summertime*, for the ideas that blossom into his first novel dawn on John towards the end of *Youth*, while in the focal period of *Summertime*, the early 1970s, *Dusklands* has been published, but John is no less at ease in South Africa than he was in London. In the fictions under discussion here, the question of the individual's complicity with others, whether these others are fellow citizens or a writer's fictional characters, becomes increasingly pronounced as Coetzee destabilises the distinction between author and character, implying a varying degree of interfolding and distance between them. Principally he does this by leaving traces of his names in his narratives, but this practice is counterpointed by the distancing effects of framing devices, such as the narrator's voice or narrative layout. Narrative structure is a decisive feature of these fictions – *Diary of a Bad Year* most dramatically illustrating how the layout of a narrative can produce divergent readings. While respecting the *discontinuities* between the person and experience of Coetzee and his protagonists in these fictions, I argue that the later fiction is unmistakably marked by refractions of 'Coetzee:' the literary corpus and the individual from which it derives, to the extent that these two entities can be held apart.

In different ways the experience of emigration can be said to underpin the autobiographical turn in *Youth*, *Elizabeth Costello*, *Slow Man*, *Diary of a Bad Year*, and *Summertime*. In *Summertime* there is a clear entanglement of physical acts of flight from and return to South Africa, and imaginative acts of recollection. This entanglement is as true of John and the other characters in the book as it is of the author of *Summertime*, Coetzee. In *Diary of a Bad Year* the suggestive congruence between the author Coetzee and his character JC focuses the question of how far and for how long the individual is accountable for crimes performed by others in his name. Similar questions about affiliation, belonging, and the public record of history are at issue in *Slow Man*, where they are given a metafictional inflection by the surrogate author-figure Costello. In *Slow Man* and *Elizabeth Costello* 'the Costello woman' serves less as an image of Coetzee himself than a serviceable figure of the author as a reluctant literary celebrity. Coetzee's self-positioning as author in relation to those characters in the later fiction who resemble him compels a reconsideration of the easy term 'autobiography.' Instead of thinking of 'autobiography' as a narrowly self-interested genre and life-writing as an end in itself, I suggest that increasingly in this later fiction Coetzee treats his authorial persona as a catalyst for working through questions concerning the relationship among the writer, his works, and public life. One reason autobiography is an inadequate

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<sup>12</sup> In the interview on South African writers in *Doubling the Point* Coetzee remarks: 'I would regard it as morally questionable to write something like the second part of *Dusklands* – a fiction, note – from a position that is not historically complicit' (343).

description of Coetzee's practice in his later narratives is that his protagonists do not enjoy unchallenged first person priority: their voices are countered and undercut by the voices of other characters or ironised by the narrator. Nor, as I have already indicated, is the *person* 'Coetzee' entirely the subliminal subject of these fictions: autotextuality, or the echoes and borrowings from Coetzee's earlier fictions, draw attention to the interface between the writer's life and work. Thus these fictions are not autobiographical in any straightforward sense. In the chapters that follow I emphasise how this body of work insistently puts in question categorical labels such as 'fiction,' 'lecture,' 'autobiography,' and 'novel,' by mixing genres to produce fresh effects.

In Coetzee's later fiction, in tandem with the emphasis on the figure of the acclaimed author there arises a strong essayistic or academic strain. In *Elizabeth Costello* and *Diary of a Bad Year* this element manifests as Costello's lectures and JC's 'opinions.' In *Slow Man* Costello is the agent of the rather stilted metafictional turn of the narrative, while in *Summertime* the narrative takes shape from the collated materials – notebook extracts, interview transcripts – of the English academic Mr Vincent's research towards a biography of the late Coetzee. In each case the acclaimed writer-figure is either the subject of or responsible for introducing the narrative's discursive vein. This element is not new to Coetzee's fiction: it is ostentatiously present in the form of the fraudulent scholarly apparatus in *Dusklands*; more generally, his other novels are academic in their studied intertextual dialogue with precursor texts and authors – most prominently, Beckett, Kafka, Defoe, and Dostoevsky.<sup>13</sup> What is new about the academic elements in the later fiction is that they form part of an extended enquiry on Coetzee's part, significantly conducted in the medium of fiction, into the acclaimed writer's social role and the relationship between his or her life and work. As such, the later fiction constitutes not autobiography so much as an extended meditation on the inner workings<sup>14</sup> of literary autobiography: what assumptions underpin the process of producing a Life of the writer.

A clear symptom of Coetzee's deconstructive treatment of the genre of autobiography are the traces in the late work of *textualising in progress*. Hence in *Elizabeth Costello* the assimilation of Costello's lectures in Coetzee's 'lessons;' in *Slow Man* the metafictional key of Costello's interactions with 'her' character Paul Rayment; in *Diary of a Bad Year* the juxtaposition of JC's

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<sup>13</sup> In an essay published in 1996, Stephen Watson describes Coetzee as 'the most bookish of all authors in South Africa' ('Colonialism in the Novels of J.M. Coetzee' 24). This description holds for Coetzee's later fiction.

<sup>14</sup> 'Inner Workings' is the title of a book of Coetzee's essays, published in 2007. The essays, in earlier form, first saw light as literary introductions or reviews in the *New York Review of Books*. In each essay Coetzee interweaves his discussion of aspects of the literary work in question with passages on the writer's other works and comments on the circumstances of the writer's life. Seven of the 21 writers Coetzee devotes an essay to in the book were recipients of the Nobel Prize for literature: Günter Grass, Samuel Beckett, William Faulkner, Saul Bellow, Nadine Gordimer, Gabriel García Márquez, and V.S. Naipaul. The collection provides a valuable resource for examining the overt autobiographical turn Coetzee's own fictional work has lately taken.

soon-to-be-published ‘strong’ opinions with his revised opinions of those opinions; in *Summertime* the yet-to-be-synthesised research materials towards a biography of John Coetzee. In each case, the story is generated at the seam between the finished public work and the creative process that gives rise to it, replete with with the authorial subject’s reservations and revisions. Again, this formal feature is not entirely new in Coetzee’s oeuvre: such novels as *Dusklands*, *Foe*, *Age of Iron*, and *The Master of Petersburg* are also situated at the creative interface between a character’s turbulent personal experience and the narrative form they seek to give it. What distinguishes this feature of the later work is the consistent, if equivocal reference to the figure and work of Coetzee himself.

In his essay ‘What is a Classic?’, Coetzee argues with extended reference to Eliot and Bach that in the realm of literature and music the classic is that which survives – indeed is defined by – the criticism mounted against it. Coetzee writes:

So we arrive at a certain paradox. The classic defines itself by surviving. Therefore the interrogation of the classic, no matter how hostile, is part of the history of the classic, inevitable and even to be welcomed. For as long as the classic needs to be protected from attack, it can never prove itself classic. One might even venture further along this road to say that the function of criticism is defined by the classic: criticism is that which is duty-bound to interrogate the classic. Thus the fear that the classic will not survive the de-centring acts of criticism may be turned on its head: rather than being the foe of the classic, criticism, and indeed criticism of the most sceptical kind, may be what the classic uses to define itself and ensure its survival. (*Stranger Shores* 19)

I argue that in his later fiction Coetzee enacts the principle he identifies here, splitting his energy between, on the one hand, projecting in fictional narrative an authorial self-image and an associated set of public utterances (lectures, opinions), and on the other hand, exposing this self-image and public text, or text-in-progress, to scrutiny and critique. Coetzee thus partially immunises his work against readers’ criticism by incorporating an autocritical element within the folds of his fictional texts.

Here it is worth noting a point about the widespread critical practice of reading Coetzee’s fiction in the light of some of his pronouncements in interviews and critical essays. Should we not approach cautiously Coetzee’s comments in *Doubling the Point* on autobiography when speaking about the fiction he has published a decade and more later? In working on a writer like Coetzee, who is as subtle and adept a literary critic as he is a novelist, it is tempting but sometimes risky to seize too readily on certain captious formulations that appear in his criticism and assume that these

explain the procedures of his fiction, as if in his fiction he were merely seeing through, in a programmatic way, the implications of a predetermined theory. I agree with Clarkson that it is reductive to view his novels as ‘allegories of of an extraneous and *given* theoretical or philosophical frame’ (*J.M. Coetzee* 3; Clarkson’s italics): they are more original and complex than that. Clarkson goes on to suggest that the idea of the ‘experiment’ underpins Coetzee’s fictional practice, linking his academic interest in linguistics and philosophy with his investment in the novel as a form or field of ethical engagement: ‘Just as philosophers develop thought-experiments, Coetzee develops formal and literary ones, setting up various conditions of possibility within language for aesthetic play and therefore, contingently, for historical and ethical awareness’ (*J.M. Coetzee* 13). In an often-quoted passage from the interview on autobiography and confession in *Doubling the Point*,<sup>15</sup> Coetzee reflects on how he perceives the relationship between fiction and criticism, implicitly with reference to his own practice.

Stories are defined by their irresponsibility: they are, in the judgment of Swift’s Houynnhms, ‘that which is not.’ The *feel* of writing fiction is one of freedom, of irresponsibility, or better, of responsibility toward something that has not yet emerged, that lies somewhere at the end of the road. When I write criticism, on the other hand, I am always aware of a responsibility toward a goal that has been 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. If I were a truly creative critic I would work toward liberating that discourse – making it less monological, for instance. But the candid truth is I don’t have enough of an investment in criticism to try. Where I do my liberating, my playing with possibilities, is in my fiction. To put it in another way: I am concerned to write the kind of novel – to work in the kind of novel form – in which one is not unduly handicapped (compared with the philosopher) when one plays (or works) with ideas. (246)

From this passage it is evident that Coetzee prizes the discursive flexibility of fiction over the constraints (argument, citation, conclusion) of criticism: that is, the ability of fiction to absorb and reconfigure other discourses by framing them in narrative. Yet it remains the case that since 1992, when *Doubling the Point* was published, there has been a striking development in Coetzee’s fiction,

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<sup>15</sup> Clarkson quotes this passage in the course of developing her argument about the ‘experiment’ as a ‘conceptual hinge between Coetzee’s preoccupation with linguistics (especially structural linguistics, and transformational-generative grammar) on the one hand, and his attentiveness to the potential – but not entirely predictable – ethical impact of a literary art work on the other’ (*J.M. Coetzee* 12).

or what we might more accurately call his *critical aesthetic*, insofar as he has found creative ways of incorporating a critical register – indeed, more than a register: a free-standing critical intervention – in fictional discourse. One hesitates to call *Elizabeth Costello* or *Diary of a Bad Year* a novel, precisely because each contains such a pronounced academic or critical element. For Coetzee in the above passage, one of the characteristic limitations of criticism is its linearity and monologism. In the later fiction he overcomes this limitation by generating dialogue among the characters on and structurally around the author-figure’s public interventions. As James Wood notes, Bakhtin’s notion of ‘dialogism’ informs the design of works like *Elizabeth Costello* and *Diary of a Bad Year*, where ‘ideas, like the characters themselves, are in constant circulation and mutual qualification’ (Wood, ‘Squall Lines’). The passage I quoted above from *Doubling the Point* is sufficiently generalised to continue to serve, in a discussion of his later work, as a useful touchstone of Coetzee’s ideas about the relation between the two discourses he has spent most of his professional life working in: fiction and criticism. But in the case of some of his more specific critical observations, such as those on autobiography, it is problematic to apply these glibly across his oeuvre. If we take seriously the view of Coetzee’s fiction as an experimental space where insights crystallise in interpersonal situations rather than in logical argument alone, then we must accommodate the possibility that the insights Coetzee’s fiction issues in might force us to revise previously instructive terms and ideas – for instance, what constitutes the process and genre of autobiography.

The ‘Coetzee in Australia’ conference, which took place at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, in January 2009, stimulated extensive discussion about the significance of Coetzee’s 2002 emigration to Australia and the questions it raises about the work he has published since then.<sup>16</sup> In her opening keynote address Elleke Boehmer situated Coetzee’s post-2002 novels in the context of prominent Australian literary themes, while in the closing keynote address David Attwell focused on what he called the element of ‘posthistoricity’ in Coetzee’s post-2002 fiction. For Attwell, ‘post-historicity’ characterises the position of the migrant settler-colonial after decolonisation; in the case of Coetzee, Attwell suggested, South Africa remains the site of his formative experience and crucible of his art, while his move to Australia constitutes a progression into an after-life of sorts, a space in which Australia comes into view as an instance of a global condition marked chiefly by United States economic imperialism. Attwell’s compelling account of Coetzee’s post-2002 work inspires aspects of my discussion here; indeed, my attendance at that ‘Coetzee in Australia’ conference quickened my interest in writing about Coetzee’s recent fiction at

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<sup>16</sup> See the conference’s advertisement for the range of perspectives on Coetzee’s recent work it invited: <http://www.h-net.org/announce/show.cgi?ID=163645>.

all.<sup>17</sup>

As I have already indicated, I do not set the limit to my discussion with emigration and literary celebrity, nor do I suggest that 2002 or 2003 are especially vital years in Coetzee's life informing this reading of his later work. For a start, the composition history of *Elizabeth Costello* would complicate an attempt to stake too much on its publication in 2003. By sectioning off these six fictions for consideration and hinging my discussion on emigration and literary celebrity, I aim to bring into relief the autobiographical turn in this recent body of work while emphasising how in these fictions Coetzee *revisits* prominent questions raised in his earlier novels. The idea of revisiting is important because it implies a fresh perspective gained through returning, after distance and absence, to a once-familiar topic or terrain. It is an idea clearly germane to the art of retrospection, but it gains further significance in the context of Coetzee's emigrations, which in his own hands, particularly in *Youth* and *Summertime*, become rich occasions for an account of his vexed relationship to South Africa.

To my knowledge there exists no sustained account of the autobiographical strategies Coetzee employs in his later fiction. Given that two official biographies of Coetzee are in progress,<sup>18</sup> I feel this is an opportune moment to offer an assessment of these strategies in his recent fiction, where the autobiographical turn is particularly pronounced. While it is arguable that all of Coetzee's fictions contain some degree of self-disclosure, my interest lies in examining the ways in which the experiences of emigration and literary celebrity provide a pivot for Coetzee's recent self-focalised narratives. My leading argument is that self-disclosure in these narratives is not an end in itself but an opening for raising questions about affiliation and complicity, the social responsibility of the acclaimed writer, the autobiographical nature of all writing, the limitations of genre, and the entanglements of reading. Yet, seemingly athwart this argument, I suggest that the net effect of the critical voices that challenge and undermine the authorial personas in these fictions, fragmenting the surface of narrative, is to reinforce 'Coetzee' as a powerfully integrated subject of criticism.

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Coetzee's fiction has generated a formidable and rapidly expanding body of critical commentary, but to my knowledge no study concentrates on Coetzee's strategies of self-disclosure in his later work with specific reference to the experience of emigration and literary celebrity. His most

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<sup>17</sup> The paper I delivered there, 'J.M. Coetzee and the Performance of Authority,' was a first draft of my thoughts on 'He and His Man' and *Elizabeth Costello* that I develop more carefully in Chapter 2 and 3 of this thesis.

<sup>18</sup> One by J.C. Kannemeyer, the other by David Attwell.

controversial novel, *Disgrace* (1999), along with its film version released in 2009 (also titled *Disgrace*), continues to be a focal text in recent publications: four of the twelve essays collected in *J.M. Coetzee's Austerities* (2009)<sup>19</sup> are devoted to it; Bill McDonald's edited collection of essays, *Encountering Disgrace: Reading and Teaching Coetzee's Novel* (2009), addresses the challenges of teaching it in colleges and universities as a setwork; while Andrew van der Vlies's readers' guide to *Disgrace* (2010) cements the status of this novel as a core text in Coetzee's oeuvre.

David Attwell's *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (1993) and Derek Attridge's *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (2005) remain landmarks in the field of Coetzee criticism. This field has recently been cross-fertilised with debates in other disciplines, notably philosophy. Coetzee's lecture-fictions of *The Lives of Animals* (1999) and *Elizabeth Costello* have chiefly been responsible for this development. Such works as *Philosophy and Animal Life* (2008), Stephen Mulhall's *The Wounded Animal: J.M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy* (2009), and the recent collection of essays edited by Anton Leist and Peter Singer, *J.M. Coetzee and Ethics: Philosophical Perspectives on Literature* (2010), recognise and explore the original contribution that Coetzee's fiction makes to debates about ethics and philosophical modes of inquiry. Importantly, it is not just the ideas themselves but the dialogic form of Coetzee's treatment of them that is of interest to some philosophers: this is a point borne out by the structure of a book like *Philosophy and Animal Life* (2008), which explicitly frames the essays it contains as in conversation with each other.

While there is a growing body of work on Coetzee's fiction of the last decade, most of this work, in the form of essays, focuses on single texts or, in the form of monographs, traces an argument across Coetzee's entire oeuvre. Examples of the latter include Laura Wright's *Writing 'Out of All the Camps': J.M. Coetzee's Narratives of Displacement* (2006), Hania A.M. Nashef's *The Politics of Humiliation in the Novels of J.M. Coetzee* (2009), Gillian Dooley's *J.M. Coetzee and the Power of Narrative* (2010), and Mike Marais's *Secretary of the Invisible: The Idea of Hospitality in the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee* (2010). This thesis differs from these and most other monographs by focusing on what is less a selection than a discrete section of Coetzee's fictional output - what I call his later fiction.

In terms of critical approach, of the recent monographs on Coetzee, Carrol Clarkson's *J.M. Coetzee: Countervoices* (2009) offers an original interpretation of how Coetzee in his fiction and essays responds to the work of a diverse range of thinkers (novelists, linguists, literary theorists, philosophers) whose interest for Coetzee lies in their status as *writers*: that is, in how their ideas

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<sup>19</sup> This book has an incongruous aesthetics: one would not expect a book about a writer's 'austerities' to be wrapped in a blood-red dustjacket inset with a photograph of an unusually affable-looking Coetzee.

materialise in the *process* of writing. Following Coetzee, writing in his tracks, as it were,<sup>20</sup> Clarkson examines how ethical questions emerge from the simplest beginnings of choices in linguistic expression. Clarkson is a refreshing exception among critics who read the novels for a single idea (for instance, humiliation or hospitality) or feature (for instance, narrative form) or from established theoretical positions (as do Attridge and Marais).<sup>21</sup> Laura Wright's account of displacement would appear to cover the formal and thematic angle, but it is precisely the over-flexibility of the term 'displacement' that brings looseness to her argument. The 'narrative displacements' Wright discusses have little to do with relationships in space (such as emigration); instead she is concerned to detail how Coetzee imagines and performs subject positions (such as those of women and dogs) not his own.

Gillian Dooley, writing under the influence of Attridge's *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, feels compelled to avoid, as far as possible, a contextual interpretive line in favour of getting to grips with the form of his narratives, which in her view constitute the source of their power. Her reluctance in engaging with 'the "what" or even the "why" of Coetzee's work in any detail' unsurprisingly compromises the acuity of her discussion.<sup>22</sup> To give one example of this, her third chapter, titled 'Point of View: Complicity, Realism, Isolation,' which offers a light survey of Coetzee's narrative techniques across his oeuvre, treats complicity simply as a question of the degree of alignment between Coetzee and his protagonists, without recognising how Coetzee's abiding sense of political and historical complicity might underpin this formal predilection.

In *J.M. Coetzee and the Novel: Writing and Politics After Beckett* (2010), Patrick Hayes offers a penetrating account of Coetzee's attempt to move beyond the rivalrous opposition between 'politics' and 'culture' by having his characters speak from positions 'beside the point' in prose that

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<sup>20</sup> 'Following' and 'writing in the tracks' are two of the ways Coetzee has described writing in the wake of or in response to the work of another writer. He ends his essay 'Apartheid Thinking' (previously published as 'The Mind of Apartheid: Geoffrey Cronjé,' *Social Dynamics* 17.1 (1991): 1-35) with a note on literary interpretation, observing that 'a reading position is not a position at all: it is only what I can call a *following*' (*Giving Offense* 184; Coetzee's italics); and in an interview with Attwell on Kafka he speaks of criticism as a form of 'writing-in-the-tracks' (*Doubling the Point* 199). The idea of the countervoice, which underpins Clarkson's study, emerges from Coetzee's understanding of writing as a dialogical act, 'a matter of awakening the countervoices in oneself and embarking upon speech with them' (*Doubling the Point* 65).

<sup>21</sup> Paradoxically, Attridge draws heavily on poststructuralist theory to justify his argument that Coetzee's novels invite and yield 'richly' to 'literal readings' (*J.M. Coetzee* 60-62). (By a 'literal reading' Attridge means a 'reading that occurs as an event, a living-through or performing of the text that responds simultaneously to what is said, the way in which it is said, and the inventiveness and singularity (if there is any) of the saying' (*J.M. Coetzee* 60).) This may not be wholly apparent from the argument he develops about Coetzee's work in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, but the roots and extensions of Attridge's argument are more carefully elaborated in the companion volume to the Coetzee book, *The Singularity of Literature* (2004). For a more detailed account of this particular criticism of Attridge, see Clarkson's essay, 'Derek Attridge in the Event.'

<sup>22</sup> Dooley's approach is not so much naive as disingenuous. Two pages after stating that she is not interested in scrutinising in any detail the 'what' of Coetzee's work, 'although such questions inevitably arise from time to time in the following pages' (2), she announces that she will be taking a thematic approach in Chapters 6 ('Sex and Desire') and Chapter 7 ('Parents and Children').

draws its energy and ‘weak’ authority from an oscillation in tone between the comic and the serious. I do not devote as much attention as Hayes to the specific fictional strategies Coetzee draws from Beckett, but in Chapter 1 I do emphasise the reasons for John’s receptiveness to Beckett’s work, alongside that of other high modernists. In Chapters 2 and 5 I draw more directly on Hayes’s argument in examining Coetzee’s equivocal self-representation in *JC* and *Elizabeth Costello*.

Following a book historical approach (a popular critical method at present), Peter McDonald, Andrew van der Vlies, Sarah Brouillette, and Herman Wittenberg, among others, have produced fine readings of aspects of Coetzee’s novels.<sup>23</sup> At moments in the course of this study I draw on the work of each of these critics, particularly McDonald and Brouillette in the context of my discussion of ‘He and His Man’ in Chapter 3, where I elaborate on how Coetzee has positioned himself in relation to the South African literary tradition.

On the whole, in this thesis I avoid cleaving to a single theoretical line: instead I move between different approaches in an effort to illuminate different facets of these fictions. In Chapter 1, for instance, I contextualise my discussion of Coetzee’s strategy of third person subjective displacement in *Youth* with an account of the historical factors that condition John’s interest in the high modernists and the basis of that interest in the promise of modernist literary form. While I draw on various critics along the way, my priority in that chapter is to keep in focus the relationship between John’s feeling of complicity and distance and Coetzee’s corresponding fictional strategy in that book.

In Chapter 2 I refer to writers as diverse as Foucault, Cora Diamond, and Kierkegaard to explain the oscillating emphasis on embodiment and discursivity that lies behind the significance of Costello’s ambiguous status in that novel. Again, ranged alongside the various Coetzee critics I cite in that chapter, these three writers seem to make strange company: yet it seems to me appropriate to answer a work as hybrid as *Elizabeth Costello* with an eclectic set of critical perspectives, which in turn reinforces a line of my argument that Coetzee’s later fiction celebrates a multiplicity of perspective and opinion on the authorial voice and literary life over a unified one. I lay the foundations in this chapter for my discussion in Chapters 3 and 5 by arguing that ‘acclaim’ is more than the condition of being publicly praised (*OED*): it is also a condition of being subject to others’ claims, invited or encouraged to speak on particular occasions to particular topics or on behalf of a group or cause. Via Costello, Coetzee treats literary acclaim as an opportunity to present the writer as an *instance* in exploring questions about the cultural authority of literature, rather than an

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<sup>23</sup> See McDonald’s chapter on Coetzee, ‘A Provincial Storyteller,’ in *The Literature Police* (2005), van der Vlies’s chapter on *In the Heart of the Country* in *South African Textual Cultures: White, Black, Read All Over* (2007), Brouillette’s chapter, ‘Locating J.M. Coetzee,’ in *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (2007), and Wittenberg’s essay, ‘Towards an Archaeology of *Dusklands*,’ in *The Aesthetics of Place* (forthcoming 2011).

authoritative spokesperson for a cause or creed. I suggest that Coetzee's styling of the Costello lecture-fictions as 'lessons' underlines the ethical charge of this form of public intervention by foregrounding the role of the individual reader, rather than representing the writer as a didactic figure.

In Chapter 3 I sharpen my focus on literary celebrity by concentrating on Coetzee's Nobel Lecture, 'He and His Man,' which I interpret as a reply in the form of a counterclaim to the claims made upon his person by this award. As I noted above, in this chapter I dwell on the reception history of Coetzee's work and the context of the Nobel Prize as a foundation for my analysis of the text of his Nobel Lecture. The paradigm shift from Sarah Brouillette's and Pascale Casanova's work on world literary space and literary autonomy to a close reading of Coetzee's 'lecture' in relation to *Robinson Crusoe* may seem precipitous, but this kind of interpretive flexibility once again finds a strong measure of justification in Coetzee's gnomic lecture offering itself. Cobbled together from borrowings from stories authored by Daniel Defoe, this 'lecture,' delivered in Stockholm in December 2003, reads as an allegory of authorship that puts in question the relationship between the author and his fictional creations. It is a gesture that subverts the expectation that the writer turn himself into a public spokesperson and one that implies that his fictions constitute more complex, eloquent responses to the claims made upon him to speak to the pressures of his times. I develop this reading by examining 'He and His Man' in the context of lectures delivered by Coetzee on other award occasions, the Nobel Lectures of two other literature laureates, Nadine Gordimer and Harold Pinter, and the Swedish Academy's citation for Coetzee's award. The contrast of Coetzee's lecture with Pinter's is especially important given JC's thoughts on Pinter in *Diary of a Bad Year*, which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 5 in relation to the question of collective shame. The broader questions that crystallise in this chapter, which I pursue in the chapters to follow, include the following: how does Coetzee go about negotiating the tension between his putative international status and his formative experience in South Africa, a tension which continues to nourish his recent fiction? how does Coetzee's treatment of the relationship between the writer's life and work in his fiction alter our understanding of autobiography? and how does Coetzee's careful qualification of the authorial selves he projects in his later fiction clarify and complicate the idea of the acclaimed writer's social responsibility?

In Chapter 4 I use Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes to buttress my discussion of photographs, which I argue are central to understanding the check Coetzee puts on Paul Rayment's idea that he can wilfully write himself into Australian history, a check which holds for Coetzee himself as the subliminal autobiographical subject on whose emigration to Australia Rayment's dialogue with Costello is framed. In *Youth* and *Summertime* the narration of scenes from John's life

is structured around acts of flight from and return to South Africa, but it is in *Slow Man* that the various dimensions of the experience of emigration (linguistic, social, historical) come most starkly into relief. In this chapter I explore how Costello's role in the narrative links Rayment's concerns about authenticity, origins, and originals with Coetzee's concerns as a writer newly resident in Australia. I argue that the Fauchery photographs dwelled on in the book perform the essential function of bringing together and into focus the metafictional dynamic (familiar from *Elizabeth Costello* and 'He and His Man') between Costello and Rayment, and the public life of the work of art – here photographs but also this particular novel. The question of Drago's 'forgery' highlights how the past, in the retrievable form of a static photographic image or narrative, is available for re-interpretation and reconfiguring under the gaze of those in the present.

In Chapter 5 I use Edward Said and Mark Sanders at key moments to reinforce my discussion of complicity as a literary strategy and ethical question in *Diary of a Bad Year*, extending a point I raise in Chapter 2 – namely, that traced in the image of Coetzee, JC in *Diary of a Bad Year*, like Elizabeth Costello, focalises without finalising questions about the writer's authority in respect of political issues that affect his society. In this chapter I use the term *complicity* to describe the interfolding of the author Coetzee with the protagonist JC and to examine how this strategy of nominal alignment becomes especially significant in the context of JC's argument with Anya about collective shame. It is on the authority of JC's reputation as an internationally acclaimed writer – on the authority, that is, of his *name* – that he inquires into what an individual's response should be to crimes committed *in the name of* a population group to which one belongs or an idea (freedom, democracy) to which one subscribes. In dwelling on JC's thoughts on the condition of shame-through-complicity, I emphasise the role played by the gaze of others in prompting a sense of personal shame (it is in this respect that shame differs from guilt). This is a particularly important point (extending my discussion of the gaze in relation to photographs in *Slow Man*) as it underpins Coetzee's privileging in the later fiction of the point of view of others. These 'others' range from characters who directly contest the author's word (Rayment, Anya), through characters who interpret episodes from the writer's life in his absence (the interviewees in *Summertime*), to the abiding other whose view and voice Coetzee's later fiction increasingly pre-figures: the reader.

Chapter 6 brings together the threads of the argument I develop in the foregoing chapters. My main priority in this chapter is to show how in *Summertime* 'John Coetzee' emerges more distinctly than before as a text, subject to the interpretation of others – the others in this case predominantly being individuals whose emigrations to or from South Africa reinforce John's and Coetzee's ambivalent attitude towards South Africa. I explain how autotextual traces in the novel undermine the biographer Mr Vincent's project of focusing on the man alone and compel a re-

evaluation of the interpenetrating relationship between the writer's life and work. In this respect, the novel's premise that John Coetzee is dead prompts one to ask whether in the case of a writer like Coetzee, whose novels so often foreground the figure of the writer and the process of writing, the author is not always-already dead, or 'late.' In the wake of the author's implicit death in *Summertime*, Roland Barthes returns in this chapter to offer a theoretical perspective and stand as a comparative example to Coetzee of a writer whose writings slip the genres and rationalisations and identities others would harness them with. Coming full circle with my chapter on *Youth*, Chapter 6 closes by examining John's reluctance to stake a claim to the native land of South Africa and his reluctance in his notebooks – which is also Coetzee's reluctance through these fictions – to stamp a definitive, monological claim on his authorial history by saying 'I.'

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# Chapter 1

## The Perspective of Distance: *Youth*

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In the last interview of *Doubling the Point*, 'Retrospect,' Coetzee sketches in broad outline and with characteristic circumspection the temperamental and historical factors that, looking back, he finds conditioned his engagement with literature from his teenage years to adulthood. This three-page autobiographical fragment is marked by Coetzee's meticulous care in putting distance between himself as the narrator of the account and the maturing individual who is its focal subject. In this respect, this account is an important precursor to the third person, present tense narrative strategy Coetzee employs in *Boyhood* and *Youth*. It also serves as a neat summary of the personality and lines of development Coetzee would trace in the figure of John in those two later works. The plot of *Youth* is present here in embryo.

The realization that he is disabled comes early, or so the evidence seems to say, when he looks back over his life, filling in the story. As a teenager, this person, this subject, the subject of this story, this I, though he more or less surreptitiously *writes*, decides to become, if at all possible, a scientist, and doggedly pursues a career in mathematics, though his talent there is no more than modest. How do I read this resolve? I say: he is trying to find a capsule in which he can live, a capsule in which he need not breathe the air of the world. All his life he has lacked interest in his environment, physical or social. He lives wherever he finds himself, turned inward. In his juvenile writings he follows in the steps of Anglo-American modernism at its most hermetic. He immerses himself in Pound's *Cantos*. He admires Hugh Kenner above other critics. He admires Kenner's range of knowledge, his wit (which he is, alas, too plodding to imitate), but also the sangfroid with which Kenner ignores a whole range of experience: as for living, let the servants do that for us. At the age of twenty-one he departs South Africa, very much in the spirit of shaking the dust from his feet. (*Doubling the Point* 393)

For the purposes of my discussion in this chapter, the details in this extract to highlight are 'his' desire to seclude himself – to 'find a capsule' where he can escape breathing 'the air of the world' – and his corresponding interest in 'Anglo-American modernism at its most hermetic.' South Africa

figures here as the matrix of influences and effects that he wishes to extract himself from, but there is no mention of the alternative place he is drawn to. A few lines later in 'Retrospect,' Coetzee notes that 'he feels at home neither in Britain nor the United States,' nor while in either of these places does he feel homesick: 'He merely feels alien' (393). Earlier in *Doubling the Point*, in the interview on Kafka, Coetzee and Attwell develop an interesting discussion around the issue of modernist alienation as a 'place' and a 'practice' (202). In this exchange Coetzee rejects the notion of alienation as an existential condition, a state of anguish, but accepts it as a literary 'strategy in the service of skepticism,' 'open to writers since the mid-eighteenth century' (203).

My discussion in this chapter concerns the interfolding in *Youth* of John's relationship to South Africa and London with his relationship to prominent 'hermetic' modernist writers. As in *Summertime*, in *Youth* the experience of emigration is a crucial factor conditioning the autobiographical turn of the narrative. Whereas in *Summertime* the interviewees' relationship to South Africa inflects their opinions of the late John Coetzee, in turn implicating the author of *Summertime* living in Australia, in *Youth* John is squarely the emigrant attempting to negotiate his relationship to South Africa by seeking a metropolitan literary identity. *Youth* also gives a clear account of John's choice of literary precursors, whose life and work provide different models for John of holding his country and culture of origin at arm's-length.

I argue in this chapter that John's desire to escape South Africa is inseparably a desire to find a literary form in which to negotiate his historical and political complicities. I begin by focusing on how John's sympathies shift through Eliot's impersonal theory of poetry and Pound's and Ford's aesthetics of *le mot juste* to a Beckettian attitude of corrosive doubt and self-qualification. In the latter part of the chapter I turn to the mode of narration in *Youth*, arguing that the lingering trace of the shift in John's literary sensibility is evident in the questions that litter the narrative. These can be read as John's own questions to himself about his motives and the likely outcome of his actions, but they also signal the critical distance separating the unheroic John from the distinguished author Coetzee. Marking out a refractive zone between the narrated and the narrating consciousness in *Youth*, these questions do more than draw attention to John's uncertainty about his future: they foreground a mental habit, exemplified by Beckett's characters, of self-questioning. This reflex, which becomes more pronounced in Coetzee's later surrogates – the celebrated author-figures Elizabeth Costello and JC – turns the 'autobiographical' text into a site of questioning and contestation.

## **‘Fly by those nets:’ Contexts of Escape**

‘When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets’ (Joyce 231). Like Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916),<sup>1</sup> John in *Youth* experiences his identity and history as an oppressive inheritance. Dedalus resolves to flee the twin imperialisms of Britain and Roman Catholicism in Ireland (Deane 31), but his phrasing ‘fly by those nets’ carries the ambiguous sense of planning too to turn to purpose the network of religious, political, and linguistic constraints his situation in Ireland imposed on him by remaking himself as a writer of Dublin and Ireland in exile. Similarly, in *Youth* John’s departure from South Africa prompts him to reassess the literary potential of his complicity with apartheid and other imperial regimes. The first fifth of *Youth* recounts the circumstances leading up to John’s decision to leave South Africa to establish himself in London and there pursue a literary life. The remainder of the book recounts his failure to distinguish himself as a lover and poet, but more particularly to achieve the decisive escape from South Africa he originally intended. Taking flight from South Africa, his destination is less the motherland of England than what seems to him the most accessible capital of European literary culture, London, where he aims to make his name as a writer, reinvent himself in less reductive terms than as a citizen of a country where he feels his ethnicity to be an accusation. He imagines London to be a space where he can recast the terms of his identity through writing and in this way distance himself from his incriminating ethnic affiliations. Eliot, Pound, and Ford serve as John’s primary models and guides in negotiating his estrangement from his ‘South African self’ (*Youth* 62), and Beckett further answers his ambition to transcend class and ‘mere nationality’ (*Youth* 64). By the end of the book John is no longer so idealistic as to imagine that he can define himself as a writer sans nationality: while he remains attracted to the idea of a text without an author or a text in which the state of the author’s heart is irrelevant, his priority modulates from escaping his attachments to qualifying them.

Chapter Four of *Youth* ends on a note of indecision as John considers whether to flee South Africa without taking his degree (in mathematics and English). The Sharpeville massacre, public protests against apartheid, the prospect of being summoned to serve in the national defence force – these are among the alarming developments that collectively spur him into flight. Chapter Five opens on John in London, and although it is shortly revealed that he has taken his degree (41), the ‘temporal ellipsis’ between the two chapters sustains the impression of John’s emigration as an

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<sup>1</sup> Attridge refers to *A Portrait* as one of *Youth*’s ‘major forebears’ (*J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* 140).

impulsive, cowardly act (Head 15).

A climate of political tension and violence backdrops John's departure, but his abiding sense of South Africa as a cultural backwater is a central part of his decision to leave. He considers his upbringing in South Africa 'a bad start, a handicap:' in his eyes it comprises an 'undistinguished, rural family, bad schooling, the Afrikaans language' (62). His reading in European literature is driven by a determination not to appear a 'provincial bumpkin' (25) when he arrives in Europe or, once he is based there, betray 'colonial gaucherie' (71). Although John is not strictly a victim of political oppression in South Africa, he experiences life there as oppressively provincial. After quitting his London job at IBM he becomes aware of himself as a refugee of sorts in England, but recognises that an explanation to the British Home Office of what he has fled from in South Africa – 'boredom ... philistinism ... atrophy of the moral life ... shame' (104) – would secure for himself from the authorities neither sympathy nor asylum. Yet as the last item in this litany suggests, there is a sense in which precisely as a beneficiary, a reluctant beneficiary, he is a victim of the crude race politics of apartheid. (As we will see in Chapter 5, Coetzee addresses this feeling more fully in *Diary of a Bad Year*.) Prior to his departure he admits to feeling acute discomfort at the ease with which apartheid sponsors polarising rhetoric and blanket threats – evidenced in the chant of the PAC, '*Drive the whites into the sea!*' (38) – in such a way that one's skin colour becomes an incriminating 'badge of ethnicity' (Head 13). While respecting the need for justice to be done in South Africa (100), he professes no interest in politics, yet resents the way it implicates him as an individual who wants no part of it. Caught in a political field where there is no neutral ground, his sense of vulnerability in his home country rests on a conviction that descendants of European settlers in Africa, like himself, 'with their pianos and violins, are here on this earth, the earth of South Africa, on the shakiest of pretexts' (17). The 'pianos and violins' mentioned here stand for the refinements of European culture, out of place on the implicitly rural earth of Africa.

A confluence of factors thus informs John's relocation to London that in shorthand the novel plots onto a conception of South Africa in relation to London as province to metropolis. The asymmetrical poles of this binary opposition – an urban centre set not against a village but an outlying geography – is symptomatic of the biased contrast this opposition is intended to strike. John's notion of London as a cultural space where he can find his literary voice and create a new identity for himself as a writer is informed by an urge to break from the shadow of his parents and his incriminating ethnic affiliations as a white male Afrikaner. (He also imagines it quite simply as one of a handful of cities in Europe where through art life 'can be lived at its fullest intensity' (41).) To give some historical traction to John's idea of the promise of London, it is helpful to turn to Raymond Williams's description of how the widespread movement of artists to the metropolises of

Europe in the early decades of the twentieth century led to a changed sense of cultural community and, particularly for writers, an altered perception of language:

the key cultural factor of the modernist shift is the character of the metropolis: in these general conditions, but then, even more decisively, in its direct effects on form. The most important general element of the innovations in form is the fact of immigration to the metropolis, and it cannot be too often emphasized how many of the major innovators were, in this precise sense, immigrants. At the level of theme, this underlies, in an obvious way, the elements of strangeness and distance, indeed of alienation, which so regularly form part of the repertory. But the decisive aesthetic effect is at a deeper level. Liberated or breaking from their national or provincial cultures, placed in quite new relations to those other native languages or native visual traditions, encountering meanwhile a novel and dynamic common environment from which many of the older forms were obviously distant, the artists and writers and thinkers of this phase found the only community available to them: a community of the medium; of their own practices. Thus language was perceived quite differently. It was no longer, in the old sense, customary and naturalized, but in many ways arbitrary and conventional. To the immigrants especially, with their new second and common language, language was more evident as a medium – a medium that could be shaped and reshaped – than as a social medium. (*The Politics of Modernism* 44)

I will have more to say in Chapter 3 about Coetzee's strategic self-positioning as a writer in relation to South African 'provincial' life; at the moment I am interested in examining how John's expectations of the promise of London as a space in which to reinvent himself as a writer are sharpened by his reading of the work of prominent literary modernists.<sup>2</sup> Eliot and Pound are the primary sources of his ideas about how to transform or, to use a term John prefers, transfigure, himself from an unknown provincial *arriviste*<sup>3</sup> into a finished literary product of the European metropolis. But, via Ford, it is Beckett whose work – transcending place but not the self who writes – answers John's need to address, if not escape his anxiety of identity.

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<sup>2</sup> Discussing the interpolation of the name 'Coetzee' in *Dusklands* and the book's debt more broadly to modernist strategies of parody and anti-realism, McDonald describes Coetzee as a 'modernizing provincial who was at the same time a provincializing modernist' (308)

<sup>3</sup> I consciously echo Coetzee's use of this word in 'What is a Classic?' In this lecture, which I discuss in more detail later in this chapter, he argues that Eliot's writings constitute an extended attempt to define nationality in terms of literary culture and so overlay his American origins with a European identity – in contrast to Pound, who more demonstrably answers the stereotype of the 'eager American cultural *arriviste* lecturing the English and/or the Europeans about their heritage and trying to persuade them to live up to it' (*Stranger Shores* 6).

## **‘An escape from personality:’ Pound and Eliot**

Followed closely by Eliot, Pound is the authority John defers to on cultural matters. Implicitly John sympathises with Pound’s experience, while teaching in an Indiana college, of ‘provincial small-mindedness’ (*Youth* 19). He takes Pound’s remarks on other writers as pronouncements on what to read in preparation for the new life he plans for himself in Europe: he avoids the Romantic and Victorian poets for their ‘easy sentiment’ (*Youth* 21); lacking French he takes it on trust that Baudelaire, Nerval, Corbière, and Laforgue are poets to emulate (22); he reads Flaubert for the ‘hard, jeweller’s craft of poetry’ he brings to prose (24); and on Pound’s assertion that Henry James, Conrad and Ford Madox Ford are consequences of Flaubert (24), he pursues a reading of Ford.

From the example of Pound’s life and work John derives the idea that the artist should sacrifice his life to art, where art is conceived as a higher calling, a commitment to aesthetic activity that is not a mere professional occupation but a vocation. John naively believes art in general and poetry in particular offer a way of redeeming the tawdry events of one’s personal life, particularly those of ‘ignominy’ and ‘sorrow’ (20). He finds compelling the idea that one’s ‘private suffering’ can be transmuted into a form others can identify with and admire as ‘great.’ The lesson he takes from their poetry is that the artist must steel himself to endure a lifetime’s impediments and discontents, summarised as ‘exile, obscure labour, and obloquy’ (20), on the faith that public recognition and canonisation justify the writer’s endurance of hardship. For John, the appeal of achieving the status of a ‘major’ poet is strengthened by his sense of having been handicapped by his provincial background. His artistic ambitions can thus be viewed as a determined effort to make up for his undistinguished formative years in South Africa. A further detail of Eliot’s and Pound’s aesthetic that speaks to John’s temperament and priorities is the concession to the artist’s ‘inner solitude’ (11): ‘artists can never be fully present to the world: one eye has always to be turned inward’ (31). This formulation answers John’s distaste for politics and the cowardly aspect in his character that I earlier noted was implied by his abrupt removal to England.

An important source of John’s ideas from Eliot is the essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent.’<sup>4</sup> John quotes a few lines from this essay in the context of an inner debate on how to reconcile, on the one hand, his uninspired professional and emotional life in London and sense of his waning creative spark with, on the other hand, his ambition to write great poetry.

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<sup>4</sup> First published in the *Egoist* in 1919.

‘Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion but an escape from emotion,’ says Eliot in words he has copied into his diary. ‘Poetry is not an expression of personality but an escape from personality.’ Then as a bitter afterthought Eliot adds: ‘But only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.’ (*Youth* 61)

According to Eliot’s impersonal theory of poetry, the ideal poet is a segregated being whose mind detachedly transmutes the crude material of emotional experience into the finer currency of literary expression. To illustrate his point Eliot draws the analogy of a chemical transaction involving oxygen, sulphur dioxide, and a shred of platinum. The platinum catalyses a reaction between the two other elements but itself remains unchanged. Similarly, for Eliot the mind of the poet alters the elements of personal experience by combining them to form new aesthetic unities, without itself leaving an imprint on the product. ‘[T]he more perfect the artist,’ writes Eliot, ‘the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material’ (‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ 18). On this view, poetry is less a matter of expressing one’s personality than surrendering to the exigencies of the poetic medium (‘Tradition’ 20). To put this point in the metaphor of chemistry, one could say that the poet sublimates his personality in his art. As someone who hopes to transform himself into a writer in London by gaining for himself a literary name, and so, in Larkin’s phrase, climb clear of his wrong beginnings,<sup>5</sup> the idea of poetry as ‘an escape from personality’ is understandably appealing to John.

It is a mistake, Hugh Kenner notes, to understand Eliot here to be attributing to the poet an ‘inhuman repose:’ the repose resides in the poem, not the poet (*The Invisible Poet* 103). Kenner points to ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ as an example of Eliot’s theory about poetic impersonality. Not strictly a character and ‘certainly not a person,’ Kenner writes, Prufrock amounts to ‘the name of a possible zone of consciousness where these materials can maintain a vague congruity’ (*The Invisible Poet* 35). It is entirely to the point that the ‘materials’ Kenner here refers to are literary allusions, since Eliot’s view of the poet as the agent of an almost scientific transmutation of experience into art entails a carefully cultivated ‘historical sense’ (‘Tradition’ 14). In Eliot’s view, a poet can only properly recognise his contemporaneity once he has acquired, through a great labour of reading, an ‘appreciation’ of his relation to the ‘dead poets and artists’ (15). It is by setting himself against these literary precursors that a poet’s stature can be measured

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<sup>5</sup> The original line occurs in Larkin’s poem ‘Aubade:’ ‘Not in remorse / – the good not done, the love not given, time / Torn off unused – nor wretchedly because / An only life can take so long to climb / Clear of its wrong beginnings, and may never’ (Larkin 190).

(15). For Eliot, just as the output of living and dead (European) writers coexists in a transtemporal, transnational canon, so the literature of particular European countries composes a ‘simultaneous order’ and has a ‘simultaneous existence’ with the literature of wider Europe (14). In this famous essay, Eliot makes writing at all seem a daunting task for any serious poet by attributing an inordinate authority to the canon of European literature that watches over every new poetic effort. The essay functions as a covert rationale for Eliot’s densely allusive practice in the poems of his early period, pre-eminently *The Waste Land* (1922), and gives an air of judicious authority to Eliot’s young critical voice. This essay is one among others by Eliot in which he presents himself to the English reading public as an arbiter of literary taste by favouring certain writers over others in defining the composition of the European literary canon.

The relevance of these notes on Eliot’s sense of literary tradition to my discussion of John in *Youth* lies in the curious fact of an American emigrant to England promoting an idea of significant world literature as essentially, historically European. There are direct links between Eliot’s impersonal theory of poetry, his invocation of European tradition in his essay, and his allusiveness as a poet. Bernard Sharratt observes that Eliot’s status as an American exile in England gives rise to his tone, in the poems as much as the essays, of ‘aloof omniscience,’ behind which lurks ‘nervous anxiety’ about his ‘linguistic precariousness’ in English society: ‘Rather than being in awe of Eliot’s multi-voiced ventriloquism as an index of ironic impersonal control, one can as easily see an anxiety of identity at work. ... To resort to other men’s words ... may be the linguistic equivalent of reaching for a mask, a socially acceptable persona’ (Sharratt 227). In Coetzee’s John there is a similar anxiety about his origins and a similar desire to refashion his identity in the forge of London literary culture. Apart from the intrinsic appeal of Eliot’s theory of poetic voice, I am suggesting that, more than Pound, the example Eliot sets as a naturalised American emigrant and self-made cultural authority in London is an important detail underpinning John’s receptiveness to his work.

In his 1991 lecture ‘What is a Classic?’, Coetzee develops a discussion around Eliot’s silence about his American origins and his residual ‘Americanness’ in Eliot’s lecture of the same title, delivered to the Virgil Society in London in 1944. Eliot’s silence on his origins particularly interests Coetzee because the Eliot he is describing is a man who in his personal life methodically anglicised himself while in his writing sought to claim ‘a European and *Roman* identity, under which London identity, English identity, and Anglo-American identity were subsumed and transcended’ (*Stranger Shores* 3; Coetzee’s italics). Coetzee notes how through his writing career Eliot repeatedly asserted Rome as the originary capital of Western Europe and Virgil’s *Aeneid* as its originary classic (*Stranger Shores* 1). Coetzee goes on to consider two alternative interpretations of this process of ‘self-fashioning’ at the heart of Eliot’s project as poet and literary critic: the

‘transcendental-poetic’ reading, which interprets Eliot’s work in the light of the ideas about literature Eliot espouses in his criticism, and the less sympathetic, demystifying ‘social-cultural’ reading, which understands Eliot’s efforts to redefine his identity and affiliations as a reflex response to his provincial origins and ‘narrowly academic, Eurocentric education’ (*Stranger Shores* 8). Coetzee evaluates these alternative readings with reference to a moment in his own adolescence when in the garden of his parents’ home in Rondebosch in 1955 he chanced to hear a recording of Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier* and for the first time felt the ‘impact of *the classic*’ (10). Coetzee asks the same question of this experience as he asks of Eliot’s efforts to claim descent from Virgil and Rome: to what extent was his experience of the classic a ‘disinterested and in a sense impersonal aesthetic experience’ and to what extent ‘the masked expression of a material interest’ (11). For Coetzee as much as for Eliot, this ‘material interest’ was a matter of ‘electing high European culture’ as a route out of life in an ‘historical dead end,’ a place – for Coetzee, Cape Town; for Eliot, New England – judged to be irremediably behind-the-times (*Stranger Shores* 11). The point to emphasise here is that in the process of addressing the question of what constitutes a classic, Coetzee (i) aligns himself with Eliot as someone who has raised himself from provincial beginnings to a position of cultural authority that allows him, in a public lecture, to pose, and propose an answer to, the question of the classic, and (ii) distances himself from Eliot and the silence in Eliot’s text by exposing and questioning the motives that lay behind Coetzee’s own decision to point his life and career away from South Africa towards ‘high European culture.’

Pound may be to John the more provocative example of how to live out a literary attitude in personal life, but the words are Eliot’s that John records in his diary and are quoted in *Youth* in the context of John’s desire to transcend his South African beginnings. Where the interpretation of literature is concerned, Eliot’s conception of poetry attributes greater significance to the literary text than the life of the writer who wrote it. But this is not to discount the value of the personal element in Eliot’s poetry, understood in the light of certain of those events in the writer’s life that a biography would detail. Saunders notes of Ford Madox Ford that ‘[h]is Flaubertian advocacy of the author’s self-effacement is often – like Eliot’s theory of impersonality – a necessary fiction rather than an accurate description of what he achieved’ (Saunders 11). As Olney observes of Eliot’s poetry, it is not ‘that the personal element ever ceases to be important. On the contrary, it is the very impetus that brings the poetry about and it is there as nodes of intensity in the finished poem; but it must not remain merely personal or it will not have entered into the poem at all’ (Olney 8). The phrase ‘merely personal’ finds an echo in John’s ‘horror at spilling *mere emotion* on to the page’ (*Youth* 61; my italics). This phrase occurs in a sentence that follows immediately after the narrator mentions that John has recorded in his diary the pregnant lines from Eliot’s essay (quoted

at the beginning of this section). Though in this case ‘mere,’ in describing emotion, denotes the unremarkable mundane, the word can also be taken to designate the reductive civilian identity John seeks to overlay with the higher-order status as a writer of a European metropolis. To John’s mind, prose is better suited to achieving Eliot’s ideal of giving to the disorder of personal feeling disinterested pattern. Detachment and composure are qualities John associates with prose, which he imagines ‘does not demand emotion:’ ‘Prose is like a flat, tranquil sheet of water on which one can tack about at one’s leisure, making patterns on the surface’ (61). It is with some irony, then, that the first prose piece John tries his hand at fails to bear out this principle of personal detachment: the outer setting is a South African beach and ‘[e]verything of importance happens in the mind of the narrator’ (61).

It is evident in *Youth* that John does not intend to return to the country of his birth. While working at IBM he numbers among his recent achievements the practical fact that he ‘has escaped South Africa’ (59), nor does he believe he would ‘shed a tear’ were a tidal wave to wipe southern Africa from existence (62). But at a deeper level the country of his birth is ‘the country of his heart’ (137) and thus something not so easily escaped, since after all he continues to define himself in terms of, though in opposition to it. He likens it to an albatross about his neck (101); he imagines it as a wound within him that will not stop bleeding (116) – a description that echoes (or anticipates) Dawn’s characterisation of Vietnam in *Dusklands*.<sup>6</sup> Later, suspecting that the Merringtons’ Malawian nanny judges him a typical Afrikaner, he wants to inform her that he has ‘quit’ South Africa (121), shaken its dust from his feet (137). These characterisations all underline John’s outright rejection of the country of his birth and his desire to purge himself of the residue it has left in him. He is thus not an exile in the etymological sense of the word – one banished or barred from his native country, intending to return to it later – but a voluntary emigrant.<sup>7</sup> Edward Said notes how in a state of banishment ‘the exile lives an anomalous and miserable life, with the stigma of being an outsider:’ yet he goes on to note that unlike the word ‘refugee,’ which for Said connotes ‘large herds of innocent and bewildered people requiring urgent international assistance,’ the word ‘exile’ conveys ‘a touch of solitude and spirituality’ (‘Reflections on Exile’ 181). Breyten Breytenbach’s gloss of the word as ‘a state of waiting for the changes that would permit you to return to the place of origin ... and a way of life defined by your relationship to that lost paradise’

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<sup>6</sup> The passage in *Dusklands* runs: ‘Vietnam has cost me too much. I use the metaphor of the dolorous wound. Something is wrong in my kingdom. Inside my body, beneath the skin and muscle and flesh that drape me, I am bleeding. Sometimes I think the wound is in my stomach, that it bleeds slime and despair over the food that should be nourishing me, seeping in little puddles that rot the crooks of my obscurer hooked organs. At other times I imagine a wound weeping somewhere in the cavern behind my eyes. There is no doubt that I must find and care for it, or else die of it’ (32).

<sup>7</sup> ‘Exile:’ from Latin *exul* – ‘banished person’ (*OED*).

(‘Reflections on Identity’ 270) confirms these last qualities while bringing out some of the pain and pathos of the condition. It would be more accurate to describe John as someone who seeks to *estrangle* himself from his home country and all that it represents, including his family and what he thinks of as ‘his South African self’ (62).

John’s idea of somehow expelling parts of himself that are engrained with the influences of his upbringing suggests his acute sense of having been tainted by association. This sense of taint can be expressed as a sense of foldedness or complicity with others, specifically the Afrikaner nation, for whose actions John feels accountable. The taint John wishes to be rid of is the taint of culpability for his relationship to apartheid as a white Afrikaans-speaking South African. But culpability is not the only component of his desire to escape ‘his South African self:’ it is integrally compounded too of a desire to gain independence from his family: if not to disown them, then to grow far enough apart ‘that he might as well be a stranger’ to them (98). We have seen how John takes Eliot and Pound as alternative authority figures to guide him in this process of estranging himself from his South African identity by attempting to fashion a literary self in London. We have seen too how Eliot’s theory of poetry seems to provide John a method of achieving a degree of self-estrangement through writing, and how this theory can be seen to emerge from Eliot’s project of distancing himself from his American origins and claiming a European identity. I now want to focus on the features of Ford’s work John responds to that mark a continuity with Eliot’s aesthetic sketched above and anticipate the aspects of Beckett’s work that speak to the novelist and critic John will become.

### **The ‘tragi-comedy of self-deception:’ Ford**

According to the narrator of *Youth* John comes to Ford through Pound, who pronounces Ford ‘the greatest prose stylist of his day’ (53). Max Saunders notes that it ‘was often Ford’s critical ideas – such as that “poetry should be as well written as prose,” and that descriptions of objects could express emotional attitudes – for which Pound became the vigorous propagandist’ (v).<sup>8</sup> From his reading of Pound John derives the idea that ‘poetry should be hard and clear as a flame’ (21) and that Flaubert ‘brings to the writing of prose the hard, jeweller’s craft of poetry’ (24). This dual emphasis on the hard and the clear is consistent with those qualities that appeal to John about mathematics: its ‘arcane symbols’ and its ‘purity’ (22). In the case of both mathematics and Pound’s vision of poetry, John is sensitive to the materiality of the word-sign as a mark on the page.

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<sup>8</sup> In ‘Homage’ Coetzee attributes the dictum ‘Poetry should be at least as well written as prose’ to Pound (6).

It is this sensitivity that gives rise to the notion of the poet as a kind of artisan chiselling beautiful forms from the dross of language. A concomitant feature of the Flaubertian ideal as propounded by Pound is on the ‘clear,’ the precise expression. In Pound’s view the poetry being written in turn-of-the-century London could be faulted on a number of counts, primarily its sloppy derivativeness: ‘a horrible agglomerate compost, not minted, most of it not even baked, all legato, a doughy mess of third-hand Keats, Wordsworth, heaven knows what, fourth-hand Elizabethan sonority blunted, half melted, lumpy’ (Pound qtd. in Bornstein 24). Pound envisaged a poetry ‘harder and saner, it will be what Mr. Hewlett calls “nearer the bone...” it will not try to seem forcible by rhetorical din, and luxurious riot. We will have fewer painted adjectives impeding the shock and stroke of it’” (Pound qtd. in Nadel 3). Clarity-in-concision is the watchword here, an aesthetic that resonates with John’s interest in mathematics as an articulation of the ‘realm of the forms’ (*Youth* 22).

Though the narrator of *Youth* spares a mere two words, in a parenthesis, on the detail of Ford’s change of surname (from ‘Madox Hueffer’ to ‘Madox Ford,’ by deed poll in 1919), this detail of Ford’s biography has an immediate relevance to John’s anxieties about his origins, summarised in his Afrikaans surname and fluency in Afrikaans. In the Master’s thesis he completed on Ford while in London, ‘The Works of Ford Madox Ford with Particular Reference to the Novels,’<sup>9</sup> Coetzee notes that Ford’s discomfort about his German roots, condensed in his given surname ‘Hueffer,’ informs Ford’s preference for male ‘outsider’ characters in the novels and explains Ford’s emphasis on his Englishness in his memoirs. ‘Ford seems never to have lost awareness of his German descent,’ writes Coetzee in the thesis.

This awareness was not blunted by his comparatively cosmopolitan upbringing and his ‘un-English’ education [through contact with prominent Pre-Raphaelites]. During the [First World] War, his name was to become a liability. His self-consciousness, of which this was an element, presumably lay behind his attempts in his memoirs to project himself as ‘more English than the English;’<sup>10</sup> and it is reflected in his novels in a series of men of foreign descent who are nevertheless perfect English gentlemen: Don Kelleg, an anglicised American, in *An English Girl*; Robert Grimshaw, half Greek, in *A Call*; and Count Macdonald, Russian, in *The New Humpty-Dumpty*.

(‘The Works of Ford Madox Ford’ 1.18-1.19)

This biographical detail aside, John’s interest in Ford is part of a more general attraction to the twin

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<sup>9</sup> Coetzee submitted the thesis on Ford for an MA degree at the University of Cape Town in November 1963.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *Doubling the Point* 20.

Flaubertian aesthetic principles of *le mot juste* and authorial self-effacement that he understands Ford's work to embody. The puristic idea of *le mot juste*, the word that will do perfect justice to the thing it signifies, sponsors the idea of writing as a craft. Graham Greene compliments Ford in Fordian terms when he describes him as 'not only a designer' but a 'carpenter' in whose work one feels 'the love of the tools and the love of the material' (Greene 8). In the dissertation on Ford, Coetzee detects some influence of William Morris's 'social medievalism' in Ford's admiration for the 'small producer' and the craftsman in society, an admiration Ford outlines in *Great Trade Route* (1937) ('The Works of Ford Madox Ford' 1.11).

Coetzee's dissertation on Ford has an interesting status in relation to *Youth*: on the one hand a supplementary text, on the other hand a more primary text than *Youth* itself since it comes from the hand and mind of the individual at the centre of Coetzee's later narrative reconstruction of that earlier period in his life. The thesis is a testament to what interested John/Coetzee in his engagement with Ford's work, but, more than this, it reveals the direction in which Coetzee's thinking on literature was heading at the time. In Coetzee's words, as a study of Ford the dissertation is 'not biographical' ('The Works of Ford Madox Ford' x) but seeks to draw the 'main lines' of Ford's life and gauge their 'immediate effect' on the writings, specifically the fiction (x).<sup>11</sup> In the thesis Coetzee judges *The Good Soldier* (1915) Ford's greatest accomplishment, describing it as 'probably the finest example of literary pure mathematics in English' (x). This description of the novel<sup>12</sup> rests on an appreciation of the self-reflexive strategies at work in the narrative, which in Coetzee's view are 'tighter' and 'more powerful' than those Ford develops in the earlier novel *A Call* (1910). The hinge-figure in *The Good Soldier*, who enacts the 'tragi-comedy of self-deception' (5.04), is the first person narrator Dowell, a finical American man whose limited insight into European mores and implication in the history of the relationships that are the subject of his narration mark him as an unreliable narrator. While Dowell is sufficiently self-aware to reflect on the pain he continues to feel, this pain is amplified by his failure to fully and clearly understand the meaning of the story he tells ('he is not up to finding its meaning,' writes Coetzee, 'for its meaning must include him' (5.25)). In his discussion of *The Good Soldier*, Coetzee's interest lies in taking a

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<sup>11</sup> Coetzee's approach in the Ford thesis stands in contrast to his Ph.D. on Beckett. Early in the Beckett thesis, Coetzee notes that in the context of his investigation he is not concerned with 'the views of the historical Samuel Beckett:' he seeks to conduct his analysis of Beckett's prose style on strictly formal grounds ('The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett' 3). He later iterates this position with reference to Proust, echoing Beckett's own dismissal of the historical Proust in the foreword to his monograph *Proust* (1931). Coetzee closes his thesis with a quiet concession to Beckett's personal history by gesturing at the climate of war in which Beckett composed *Watt*.

<sup>12</sup> Coetzee would appear to have derived the terms of this description from Paul L. Wiley, who writes that 'at its highest levels *The Good Soldier* becomes an almost pure exercise in language, a notable example of a literary tradition reaching full self-awareness and hence the capacity for reflecting upon itself' (Wiley 173, qtd. in Coetzee, 'The Works of Ford Madox Ford' 5.06)

‘serious critical approach to the problem of point of view’ (5.08) in that novel. Coetzee’s later extended critical engagement with Beckett’s prose works, up to *The Unnamable*, can be seen to emerge from the fertile intersection of the risk, for the novelist, of self-deception that attends the first person retrospective narration of personal experience, and the challenge, for the critic, of evolving a method sufficiently rigorous to unpick the ‘problem’ of narrative point of view.

### **The ‘rhythm of doubt:’ Beckett**

John’s discovery of Beckett’s prose works, beginning with *Watt* (1953), is narrated late in *Youth*. He is above all struck by the fluency of the narrator’s voice in that novel: ‘There is no clash, no conflict, just the flow of a voice telling a story, a flow continually checked by doubts and scruples, its pace fitted exactly to the pace of his own mind’ (*Youth* 155). At first sight there appears to be a contradiction here, for how can a voice that is constantly interrupted by ‘doubts and scruples’ be fluent? The fluency of this voice consists in a pattern of reflexive hesitations. The hesitations form a syntactic pattern that generates the rhythm of the prose, which in the Beckett thesis Coetzee calls ‘the rhythm of doubt’ (‘The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett’ 95). John’s delight in reading Beckett stems from his sense that he has happened upon proof that prose narrative is equal to the task of cleanly reproducing an individual’s patterns of thought. It is the relationship between the material word on the page and the unrefracted thought in the mind that interests John: the challenge of precise verbal expression. As we have seen, John’s preoccupation with the ‘purity’ and ‘arcane symbols’ of mathematics supports his interest in Pound’s and Ford’s commitment to the aesthetics of *le mot juste* and the conception of writing as a craft. Earlier in *Youth* the narrator remarks that ‘[i]f there were a department of Pure Thought at the university he would probably enrol in pure thought too; but pure mathematics appears to be the closest approach the academy affords to the realm of the forms’ (22). In *Watt*, the imperative of logic, the reflexive motions of doubt, and the formula of question and answer, give rise to patterns of syntax that corrode the holistic reality of the characters and their experiences, the ‘content’ of the novel.

Whereas in *The Good Soldier* the first-person narrator Dowell, with his self-awareness and despair, remains an indubitable human presence, in *Watt* the torsions of doubt and rigorous self-qualification mangle any semblance of credible human character and drama. The narrator of *Watt*, like Watt himself, is patently unreliable, and self-consciously so: uncertainty is a dominant motif in the book. The appearance of a character named Hackett (Beckett the hack) in Part I and another named Sam in Part III signal the author’s impatience with the protocols of the Novel that refine the author of out existence in the work. Other signs of this impatience include the narrator’s despairing

asides, floating question-marks and ellipses that mark omissions in the text, footnotes, narrative fragments collected in an appendix – all of which foreground the manuscript status of *Watt*, reminding the reader that what he holds in his hands is a messy verbal weave, a thing of frayed edges and loose ends. The narrator of *Youth* ends the section about John's first reading of *Watt* by noting John's impression that, in contrast to Ford, 'Beckett is classless, or outside class, as he himself would prefer to be' (155). Given that John is in London because he wants to escape the historical matrix into which he was born, I suggest that beyond the parodically rational turn of *Watt*, John's positive response to *Watt* also has to do with Beckett's eschewal of specific geographical sites in favour of making the act and texture of writing itself the subject of the work.

In 'Homage' (1993), a text originally delivered as a public address, Coetzee recalls some of the writers whose influence shaped his development as a writer. These include Rilke, Musil, Faulkner, Eliot, Pound, Ford, Beckett, and Zbigniew Herbert. Whereas from Pound Coetzee says he learned how to capture the rhythm of the speaking voice in a line of poetry, from Beckett he gained a sense of how he might more closely map the movements of the mind in prose narrative. He recalls how in Beckett's work of the late forties and early fifties (the work that most engaged him) he admired the way the disciplined syntax constrained a wild expressive energy: 'The thought was like a ravaging dog; the prose was like a taut leash' ('Homage' 6). Coetzee's interest in the integrity of the relationship between thought and language was to become one of the governing preoccupations of the Beckett thesis.<sup>13</sup>

Apart from its interest as a text in which Coetzee details the qualities he responded to in particular precursors, 'Homage' provides insight into Coetzee's understanding of the evolution of his identity as a writer. 'Homage' opens with this striking sentence: 'This is about some of the writers without whom I would not be the person I am, writers without whom I would, in a certain sense, not exist' (5). In the closing sentences of the piece Coetzee interprets literary influence as a dual process of anticipation and response on the part of the developing writer: a precursor awakens as much as answers certain temperamental and stylistic dispositions in the apprentice writer. He goes on to suggest that a writer's style reflects an approach or mode of response to experience. Whereas ideas can be extracted from a literary work, style on this view is bound up with the way in which the writer perceives and interprets his experience:

a style, an attitude to the world, as it soaks in, becomes part of the personality, part of the

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<sup>13</sup> See Clarkson's close discussion of the relation between Coetzee's use of pronouns in his fiction and unstable sites of consciousness in language. Clarkson, *J.M. Coetzee* 28-33.

self, ultimately indistinguishable from the self. To put it another way: in the process of responding to the writers one intuitively chooses to respond to, one makes oneself into the person whom in the most intractable but also perhaps the most deeply ethical sense one wants to be. ('Homage' 7)

Here Coetzee frames a writer's choice of a literary model as an ethical choice: to write after the example of a particular writer is to elect, or less purposively, open oneself to, a mode of engaging with the world. In an interview a decade later, Coetzee distances himself from 'Homage:' he recalls that it was hastily composed and judges it misleading insofar as it brings together influences of different orders. He notes, for instance, how it fails to take account of the influence exerted on one's imagination by writers and texts which one might not directly respond to but which nevertheless, through the osmotic processes of culture, affect the way one thinks and writes (Coetzee, 'An Exclusive Interview'). But in the same later interview Coetzee reaffirms his fiction as the site of an ongoing process of negotiating between his relationship to South Africa and the canon of writers whose work has shaped his fictional aesthetic, pre-eminent among them, Beckett.

### **Subjective Displacement**

With reference to the 'hermetic' modernists Pound, Eliot, Ford, and Beckett I have so far suggested that *Youth* is intimately a negotiation of John's, and in turn the author Coetzee's, relationship to the country of his birth, the place that named and formed him. John flies it as a space marked by incendiary racial politics and provincial culture, but at the book's close plans a return to it by writing in the tracks of nineteenth century English travellers in the Cape. As Rita Barnard has noted, the line from Goethe that serves as the epigraph to *Youth* – 'Wer den Dichter will verstehen / Muß in Dichters Lande gehen' – on the one hand provides a gloss of John's experience of discovering what being a poet in London actually entails by travelling and living there himself, while on the other hand it can be taken as Coetzee's 'oblique confession' that 'his fiction has to be understood in some sort of relation to his native country' (Barnard, *Apartheid and Beyond* 15). The subtitle 'scenes from provincial life,' which is carried over from *Boyhood* to the U.S. edition of *Youth*, is a further instance of interpretive indirection, as the focus of *Youth* falls more squarely on the provincial mindset of the protagonist than on actual scenes from his provincial life.

The limited 'horizon of knowledge' (138) that John intends to combine with modern self-consciousness in the narrative about South Africa that his reading of Europeans' narratives of travel in Africa inspires him to write, can also be seen to describe Coetzee's delimitation of John's

horizons of knowledge in *Youth*. *Youth* is not overtly retrospective in the manner of a conventional memoir in which a first person narrator recalls episodes from his past, as in Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* (1951). Nor is its immediacy a matter of a personal journal filled with the author's impressions and recollections, as in Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910). Nor, as in the case of Nabokov's *The Gift* (1952), does *Youth* itself emerge as the product of the period of literary aspiration and apprenticeship that is the subject of the narration. Instead, *Youth* is a rare combination of third person narration in the present tense.

As in *Boyhood*, in *Youth* Coetzee avoids the first person mode of narration in favour of the third person and the present tense. This gesture embeds the character John in the contingent moment of narration, where his reflections emerge spontaneously from the experiences he undergoes rather than being placed within a formal retrospective frame. Clarkson explains how this gesture, which she describes as 'subjective displacement' (21), creates 'the sense of a dynamic interface between the writing and written selves' (39). Whereas the use of the first person in conventional or straight autobiography implies a 'symmetrical relation' between the self that writes and the self that lives out his history in the fiction, the third person destabilises this symmetry (Marais, 'J.M. Coetzee and the Protocols of Writing the Self' 223). Even as the third person has the effect of disaggregating the narrated consciousness ('he') from the time of narration, the present tense retains the suggestive hint that the character is not utterly distinct from the one who writes (Clarkson, *J.M. Coetzee* 27, 39). This gives rise to the image of the writer negotiating the relationship or '*wrestling*,' as Clarkson phrases it, 'between self and other, present and past, self and self – since the written site of that self is internally and dialogically split across self and other, present and past, writer and protagonist' (*J.M. Coetzee* 39). Attridge notes that this mode of self-representation does not negate certain continuities between Coetzee and his character or necessarily imply that the author wants to avoid taking responsibility for the fictional John's behaviour: 'rather, it signals that the author has no interest in *making a case*, in convincing the reader of the unimpeachability of his motives or the fullness of his repentance' (Attridge 148; Attridge's italics). Attridge goes on to make a point that Coetzee echoes in his essay on Doris Lessing's autobiography, namely that fiction has more extensive and subtler resources than orthodox forms of autobiography (such as memoir, apology, confession) for giving intelligible form to the unconscious or inner workings of an individual's life (Attridge 148; Coetzee, *Stranger Shores* 294-5).<sup>14</sup> The reader is thus reminded that the narrated scenes of autobiography – the formative period of 'boyhood' and 'youth,' and the restive, ironic 'summertime' of young adulthood – are critical constructions that

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<sup>14</sup> In *Summertime* Martin raises precisely this question of how one can presume to describe authoritatively what goes on in the 'inner life' of another (216).

dislodge 'the notion of a coherent, transcendental subject,' preserve of conventional autobiography (Marais, 'J.M. Coetzee and the Protocols' 223, 224).

The high incidence of questions in *Youth* underlines the gap between the character John and the accomplished author of *Youth* he will become. These questions can be read as John's questions to himself about his motives and the likely outcome of his actions, but at another level the questions are a constant reminder of the critical distance separating the unheroic John from the distinguished author Coetzee. They are a sign of the ironic counterpoint between the mature authorial figure implied by the narrator and the author's unflattering portrayal of his younger self in John (Head 10). As we will see in the chapters to follow, a principle of critical counterpoint integrally informs Coetzee's later fiction.

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'We are born, so to speak, provisionally, it doesn't matter where; it is only gradually that we compose, within ourselves, our true place of origin, so that we may be born there retrospectively' (Rilke, qtd. in *Stranger Shores* 73). In contrast to Rilke's lyrical formulation of what it means to have a home, *Youth* depicts John's reluctant realisation that the claims of his origins are inescapable. As we have seen, John's relocation to London is motivated by a sharp desire to escape the cultural and political matrix of apartheid South Africa by fleeing to a cultural space where through writing it seems possible to transcend the limitations and stigma of his race, class, and nationality. His training in mathematics and work in computer programming, no less than his reading of the hermetic modernists, conditions John's idea that the author's personality is sublimated in the literary text into a non-significant trace. This ideal of authorial dissolution or invisibility modulates into a more responsible mode of writing as John finds that he cannot decisively escape South Africa since it integrally constitutes his sense of identity, from his name and accent to the Karoo landscape he associates with the freedom of writing. He comes to realise that his political and historical complicities cannot be evaded but must be negotiated through literary form. If writing remains for him a line of flight from South Africa, it is a line that leads through the aesthetic of modernist writers, themselves negotiating a detachment from their native countries, to a return to South African scenes and a re-engagement with his colonial self with the perspective of ironic distance. What he achieves is not the dream of impersonality or authorial self-effacement theorised by Eliot but a form of self-disclosure marked by rigorous self-scrutiny.

Patrick Hayes has recently persuasively argued that the unstable tone of Coetzee's fictions – the recurrent tension between the serious and the comic – and Coetzee's tendency to have his protagonists speak from positions of creative weakness, firmly planted neither on one side of a

polemic nor the other, instead situated ‘beside the point,’ are characteristics derived from his engagement with Beckett’s work that are fundamental in generating the critical force of Coetzee’s fiction. Coetzee’s fiction, Hayes argues, attempts to ‘move beyond’ or at least revise the terms of a longstanding discursive tradition which seeks to privilege literary value or truth (or more broadly: culture) over politics (Hayes 3). To this end, Hayes argues a point that holds especially for Coetzee’s later fiction: that rather than ‘making a claim for the transcendent power of the artist, Coetzee’s fiction insists upon his weakness and his vulnerability to hostile interpretation’ (193). This insistence is only seemingly on a position of weakness, for it is neither a ‘position’ so much as an anti-foundational attitude, nor ‘weak’ to the extent that its power lies in eliciting readers’ interpretations that themselves necessarily risk assuming a position of mastery over the fictional text and so courting illegitimacy (Hayes 193). As I show in the following chapter, the image of the writer Coetzee projects in *Elizabeth Costello* is akin to John in *Youth* in being unheroic and self-doubtful to a disabling degree. This delegitimising gesture (to borrow Hayes’s terms) makes of the celebrated author less a representative figure or spokesperson than the occasion for a contest of interpretations. It is this slippage of authority, which manifests as a ‘turn’ upon critical voices raised against the authorial persona, that I suggest Coetzee’s later fiction increasingly insistently enacts.

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## Chapter 2

### Intervening in the Performance: *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons*

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‘That has always seemed to me one of the stranger aspects of literary fame,’ Coetzee remarked in an interview after receiving the Nobel Prize in December 2003, ‘you prove your competence as a writer and an inventor of stories, and then people clamour for you to make speeches and tell them what you think about the world’ (Coetzee, ‘An Exclusive Interview’). *Elizabeth Costello* is the record of Coetzee’s creative response to his sense of the disjunction between the solitary business of sitting in a room writing stories and the pressure to deliver public speeches as a consequence of literary success. The nine parts of the book – eight ‘lessons’ and a postscript – originated as six public lectures Coetzee delivered on different occasions; all but lesson 8 were published in earlier versions before being collected in book form.<sup>1</sup> More than *Boyhood* and *Youth*, which revisit formative periods in the author’s life, *Elizabeth Costello* marks the beginning of a phase in Coetzee’s career in which the figure of the acclaimed writer, suggestively modelled on himself, assumes prominence.

In the previous chapter I suggested that the numerous questions hanging in the text are a lingering sign of John’s adoption of a Beckettian mental habit of self-qualifying doubt, which registers at the level of Coetzee’s narrative strategy in *Youth* John’s realisation that his South African self can be displaced but not disowned. *Youth* and *Elizabeth Costello* seem to be very different books indeed, but they are similar in respect of presenting a history of an individual who resembles Coetzee at a stage in his development as a writer, but who emerges distinctly as a doubting, fallible, unheroic figure. Where *Youth* raises the question of the degree of consistency between Coetzee and his protagonist, *Elizabeth Costello* sets this question within a broader frame than the individual authorial history, namely the social responsibility of the acclaimed writer. In this chapter I argue that in *Elizabeth Costello* Coetzee reconfigures the notion of responsibility by

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Realism’ derives from Coetzee’s Ben Belitt lecture, ‘What is Realism?’, delivered at Bennington College in November 1996. ‘The Novel in Africa’ originated as Coetzee’s 1998 Una’s Lecture at the University of California, Berkeley. For his two Tanner lectures at Princeton University in October 1997 he presented the two texts that make up *The Lives of Animals* (1999): ‘The Philosophers and the Animals’ and ‘The Poets and the Animals.’ ‘The Humanities in Africa’ originated as Coetzee’s Carl Friedrich von Siemens lecture, which he delivered in Munich in March 2001. He first presented ‘The Problem of Evil’ as a paper at the Nexus Conference on Evil in Tilburg, Holland, in June 2002. Coetzee wrote ‘Eros’ with a view to it becoming the epilogue to a collection of essays based on papers delivered at a symposium that took place under the title ‘Erotikon’ at the University of Chicago in March 2001; this collection, *Erotikon: Essays on Eros, Ancient and Modern*, was published in 2005 (Mulhall 214-15, fn. 1). For a detailed discussion of the genesis of *Elizabeth Costello*, see Attridge 192-6.

portraying the celebrated writer, here in the guise of Costello, not as a teacher or spokesperson for a group or set of interests but as an exemplary figure in demonstrating empathy with others through writing.

In his chapter on *Elizabeth Costello* in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* ('A Writer's Life'), Attridge observes that there is 'no inconsistency' between Costello's disclaimer in 'At the Gate' that she suspends belief in order to write and 'her passionate expression of beliefs elsewhere; the former, she makes clear, refers to her existence as a novelist, whereas the latter arises out of her experience as a human being' (204). Is it possible to maintain a distinction between being a writer and being a person in history subject to strong and inconsistent feelings and beliefs, particularly when the individual in question is an acclaimed writer called upon to speak publicly in their own person about 'problems and issues'?<sup>2</sup> The lessons of *Elizabeth Costello* demonstrate the difficulty of maintaining a clean distinction of this kind between being or speaking as a writer and being or speaking as a person embedded in specific historical circumstances. This difficulty manifests as a tension at various levels in the book, ranging from Costello's identity as an 'author-function' and feeling body, through her relationship with other characters, to the structure of the lessons themselves.

The suggestions of consistency between Coetzee and Costello range from their names and stage of life to their literary success and intellectual preoccupations. These consistencies are qualified by the function Coetzee has Costello perform as a surrogate writer-turned-public intellectual exhibiting herself and her views within the frame of fictional narrative. The lessons of the book embed Costello's public lectures in the circumstances of her private life as an ageing writer. One of my priorities in this chapter is to highlight the ways in which Coetzee brings into relief the seams<sup>3</sup> between the writer's public utterances, the private contexts from which they emerge, and the public contexts in which they are received. Manifestations of this seam include the discrepancies in the biography of Costello's son John and resonances between characters in *Elizabeth Costello* and characters in Coetzee's earlier novels. The *seaminess* of *Elizabeth Costello* anticipates Coetzee's closer treatment in *Diary of a Bad Year* and *Summertime* of the relationship between the writer's civilian and emotional life, and his work and public image.

In 'The Life and Times of Elizabeth Costello' David Attwell describes Costello as Coetzee's

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<sup>2</sup> Coetzee uses this phrase in 'The Novel Today' (3).

<sup>3</sup> Leon de Kock has used the term 'seam' to describe the rifts of difference that characterise South African literary culture. He borrows the term from Noël Mostert (1992): but whereas Mostert uses it to describe a territorial frontier, de Kock applies it as a metaphor for a 'crisis of inscription' in South African letters that he argues is cultural and psychological (de Kock 11-12). In this chapter my use of the term has a less radical reach in serving as a figure of the disorder of identity glimpsed in the juxtaposition of scenes from Costello's public and private life, underwritten always by Coetzee's earlier writings.

‘Erasmian solution’ to the pressures of public acclaim (36), a character who is both ‘a compromise and a surrogate: a compromise because through her Coetzee goes some way toward meeting the demands placed on him to step into the public limelight, and a surrogate because she does, to some degree, speak for him’ (33-4). As I show in Chapter 4, surrogacy is a central theme in *Slow Man*, where it arises in relation to Rayment’s prosthetic leg, his desired relationship to the Jokić family (Drago in particular), Drago’s ‘forgery’ of the Fauchery photographs, and Costello’s status in the book. In both *Elizabeth Costello* and *Slow Man*, Costello’s profile and function as Coetzee’s surrogate become especially significant in the context of questions about the suitability of fiction as a medium for posing and exploring serious questions about ethical human behaviour. In particular, one is prompted to ask: what is the cost of Coetzee choosing to cast serious opinions on serious matters – from the industrial slaughter of animals to evil – within fictional narrative? What, in turn, is the advantage of presenting contentious arguments in this form?

This is a question I revisit in Chapter 5 with reference to JC’s opinions on national shame in *Diary of a Bad Year*. There I contrast JC’s ‘strong’ opinions with Harold Pinter’s Nobel Prize Lecture, a text deeply marked with Pinter’s emotional investment in his subject matter. The design of *Diary of a Bad Year* and *Elizabeth Costello* seems to suggest Coetzee’s evasiveness in taking responsibility for the opinions Costello airs in her lectures. But to maintain the charge of evasiveness – as Peter Singer implicitly does in his response to *The Lives of Animals*<sup>4</sup> – is to persist in overprivileging Coetzee as a source of decisive opinion and to understate the versatility of fiction as a venue that accommodates, without reconciling, conflicting points of view.

The contestation that takes place between Costello and her interlocutors within the borders of the lessons anticipates the contestation the text itself courts. In this respect, Costello is not merely an opening for Coetzee to express opinions without claiming them conclusively as his own, but an opening for the reader to enter the difficult field of life in which her arguments are embedded. Part of this difficulty, for Costello and for those characters she has disagreements with, involves separating out their intellectual arguments from their emotional attitudes towards the subjects they are addressing and their personal opinions of each other. For instance, in the case of the debate on the meat industry, Costello’s strong feeling, which resists being rationalised, cannot be separated from her argument, for the intransigence of this feeling and her commitment to speaking out of her sense of herself as an animal being form the ground of her response and present a challenge to those who would respond to her on strictly rational terms.

I register the *lateness* of *Elizabeth Costello* by showing how Costello’s sense of her ailing

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<sup>4</sup> See Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* 91.

body and tailing career informs the by turns conservative and impassioned edge of her opinions. In doing so, I treat Costello as a fully embodied character with a discrete history, but alongside this reading I emphasise Costello's utility as a manifestation of what Foucault calls the 'author-function.' I suggest that Costello's dual status, here as in *Slow Man*, as an historical individual and one of Coetzee's authorial personas speaks directly to Coetzee's concern in his later fiction with returning the sepia grain of individuality to the laundered public image of the author, and in this way negotiating the claims of literary celebrity on a writer like himself through the critical reflexivity of fiction. In Costello, I argue, the writer emerges not as a cultural authority but as an *instance* in which the pressures and responsibilities of living among others are brought into focus to be negotiated.

I begin this chapter by elaborating on Costello's identity and suggesting how her figural status is in key with the anti-realist features of the book. I go on to recuperate her intractable sense of herself as a feeling body whose defence of the value of literature rests on the writer's power to make the reader *feel with* the body of another in fiction. In the concluding section I suggest that the tension sustained through the book between the self-distancing play of irony and the irreducible suffering body can be usefully understood in the light of an existentialist literary aesthetic, a point I flesh out with reference to the work of Søren Kierkegaard.

### **The Dynamics of Characterhood**

The first lesson of *Elizabeth Costello*, 'Realism,' opens with the question of the opening. The task of securing a premise for the narrative to follow is cast as a matter of laying a bridge and crossing to the other side, 'the far territory,' where it is possible to take the ground of certain assumptions for granted.

There is first of all the problem of the opening, namely, how to get us from where we are, which is, as yet, nowhere, to the far bank. It is a simple bridging problem, a problem of knocking together a bridge. People solve such problems every day. They solve them, and having solved them push on. (1)

The ground granted by this first gesture is the convention of realism, the contract between writer and reader that at once invests Costello with autonomous life and foregrounds her status as a fictional character. The image of the bridge and the act of crossing it, indeed the idea of a character

as an authorial opening, have a significance that reaches beyond the content of Costello's first lecture to inform the design of the lessons themselves. Elizabeth Costello, or E.C., is herself a bridging device between the author's personal history and the alternative personal histories he inscribes in his fictions. The sentence that informs the reader that 'Costello' is her maiden name (*Elizabeth Costello* 2) and that her son is named John subdivides the point of view while preserving the suggestion of a genealogical link between the author Coetzee and these two characters. Durrant has noted that 'Costello's position is ultimately irreducible to Coetzee's' (119) and Mulhall has observed that their 'personal circumstances and literary track record offer at most very general points of resemblance' (67). While I agree with both of these views, I do not believe it is sufficient to leave the complexity or complicity of their relationship at that.

Foucault's analysis of the 'author-function' is useful here. In 'What is an Author?'<sup>5</sup> Foucault details how the category of 'the author' has historically functioned in a variety of ways, ranging from providing a method for organising texts to undergirding conventions of literary interpretation. The author's name, according to Foucault, is more than 'simply an element of speech' (123): it allows texts to be attributed, differentiated, and classified; it also provides an index of the status of a discourse and how it will be received in the society in which it circulates (123). The name of the author thus 'remains at the contours of texts,' Foucault writes; it is neither 'a function of a man's civil status, nor is it fictional; it is situated in the breach, among the discontinuities, which gives rise to new groups of discourse and their singular modes of existence' (123). And again: 'It would be as false to seek the author in relation to the actual writer as to the fictional narrator; the "author-function" arises out of their scission – in the division and distance of the two' (129).

Foucault's observations here have a sharp relevance for understanding Coetzee's deployment of his names or fragments of his names in his fiction. *Dusklands* is perhaps the best illustration of Foucault's point that the author's name does more than denote a person, actual or fictional: it structures the way a text is received and interpreted. In that novel, the author's name traces a hermeneutic circle as 'Coetzee' variously denotes Dawn's supervisor and implied reader of his Vietnam report, the protagonist of 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee,' and the father and son pair who successively 'edit' Jacobus's 'Narrative.' Coetzee's later fiction is populated with figures or figments of Coetzee, avatars whose status as famous authors opens the way for Coetzee's excavation of those parts of the writer's individuality that usually escape public exposure until the work of biography begins. Wicomb has noted the visual patterning in the surnames 'Costello' and

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<sup>5</sup> First published as *Les Mots et les choses* (1966). I use here the text of the first English translation rather than Foucault's revised text translated into English in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Poststructuralist Criticism* (1980), edited by Josué V. Harari. In his Introduction to the latter volume Harari points out the differences between the original and revised text of 'What is an Author?' See Harari 42-4.

‘Coetzee,’ ‘where a degree of repetition coexists with difference’ (13). *Diary of a Bad Year* is a further step in the direction of aligning the protagonist with (the image of) the author Coetzee, principally by way of their names, where congruence is inscribed ‘with difference:’ in that book ‘JC,’ ‘Señor C,’ and ‘Juan’ are each an ‘approximating translation’ (Mailloux cited in Cornwell 107) of the author’s proper names.

It is difficult not to read Coetzee’s act of crossing to ‘the far territory’ of the fictional scenario in which Costello is embedded in the light of his transoceanic crossing from South Africa to the far territory of Australia. In lesson 1 of *Elizabeth Costello*, Costello’s remarks in the interview with Susan Moebius on her (Costello’s) identity as an Australian writer suggest that, insofar as she is a writer, she views nationality not so much as an arbitrary marker of identity as a prescriptive label: she rejects the assumption that being ‘an Australian writer’ necessarily implies something about the nature of her fictional method and concerns. Costello’s comments on the challenge of ‘making up’ an Australia distinct from the ‘Australias made up by many other people’ (12) contains the grain of views Coetzee has expressed elsewhere on the idea of a national literature and the practice of filing writers by nationality.<sup>6</sup> McDonald has shown how an attitude of ‘revisionist anti-nationalism’ emerges in Coetzee’s 1981 CNA Award acceptance speech, where Coetzee defends the idea of the provincial writer as a way of positioning himself ‘on an alternative, necessarily inexact, and specifically literary map ... to create space for his own metropolitan “affiliations”’ (McDonald 306). (I will say more in Chapter 3 about the implications of Coetzee’s comments in this acceptance speech.) Andrew van der Vlies extends this argument in *South African Textual Cultures*, where he argues that Coetzee is pre-eminent among writers born in South Africa in ‘repeatedly and self-consciously put[ting] under erasure the category of a national literature’ (135).<sup>7</sup>

Even if one chooses not to place much emphasis on the suggestion of correspondence between Costello’s and Coetzee’s views here, it remains the case that the opening gesture of ‘Realism’ makes a deliberate show of *transferring* the focus from the South African-born Coetzee to an Australian-born female character 12 years his senior. Against their outward biographical differences stands the notable link between them as *writers*: Costello’s reputation rests on *The House on Eccles Street*, a reworking of Joyce’s modernist classic *Ulysses* (1922) from the point of view of Leopold Bloom’s wife Molly; similarly, in *Foe* (a text that for some time now has been a touchstone in debates on postmodernism)<sup>8</sup> Coetzee re-envisioned Defoe’s classic castaway narrative

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<sup>6</sup> See Coetzee, ‘Speaking: J.M. Coetzee’ 23-4 and Coetzee, ‘Two Interviews’ 460.

<sup>7</sup> For the full argument in each case, see McDonald 303-20 and van der Vlies 134-54.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Hutcheon 77-8, 107-8, 150, 198-9; de Jong (ed.); and Spivak.

*Robinson Crusoe* (1719) from the point of view of the aspiring female writer Susan Barton, whose marginality as a woman in eighteenth-century English society informs her preoccupation with the unvoiced story of the tongueless Friday. This literary link between Coetzee and Costello is foregrounded in 'Realism' in the name of the character Susan Kaye Moebius. The association between Moebius and Susan Barton is underscored by the title of Moebius's book, *Reclaiming a History: Women and Memory*, while Moebius's second name 'Kaye' recalls the eponymous cypher-like protagonist of *Life & Times of Michael K*, whose silent presence in that novel identifies him closely with Friday in *Foe*. Her surname 'Moebius,' an alternative spelling of 'Möbius,' evokes a Möbius strip, which is an accurate image for this character's relationship to Susan Barton, and indeed for Costello's with Coetzee: two sides of a single entity, functionally continuous with each other, though superficially distinct.<sup>9</sup>

There is a further resonance between Costello's first name, Elizabeth, and the protagonist of *Age of Iron*, Mrs Curren. Although nowhere in *Age of Iron* is Mrs Curren explicitly called by the name Elizabeth, she signs off a note for her housekeeper Florence with the initials 'E.C.' (*Age of Iron* 41); and in an interview, Attwell and Coetzee refer to her as Elizabeth (*Doubling the Point* 249-50). The nominal links between, on the one hand, Costello and Coetzee, and on the other, Costello and Mrs Curren, invite a consideration of the relationship between these two characters and novels as more than a matter of resemblance and thematic overlay. I suggest that it is more productive to think of these nominal links as foregrounding decisive elements of Coetzee's history distilled into his fiction, where they become available for scrutiny as the experiences of his characters. It is important to highlight the traces from Coetzee's earlier novels in Costello's character and situation and more broadly in *Elizabeth Costello* because, as Costello is carried forward into *Slow Man* and the later fiction becomes more overtly an exercise in literary autobiography, so the element of authorial self-referentiality and the autotextuality among Coetzee's novels become more marked. As I show in Chapter 6, autotextuality, or the process of self-quotation, is especially notable in *Summertime*, where it reinforces the reader's impression of the late author John Coetzee as a variously writable text.

To return to Costello and Mrs Curren: while their historical contexts are quite different, they share the experience of living in an ageing, ailing body. A retired professor of Classics, Curren is an embattled and marginal figure living in Cape Town in the late 1980s. Costello, in contrast, travels

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<sup>9</sup> A Möbius strip is a 'surface with one continuous side formed by joining the ends of a rectangle after twisting its one end through 180°' (*OED*). Though the strip seems to have a front and transverse side, this distinction falls away when one traces a fingertip along the plane of the strip and finds that the sides form a continuously traversable surface.

the world giving public lectures on the strength of her reputation as a successful Australian novelist. Mrs Curren believes herself to be an exile in her own country (*Age of Iron* 76): in a letter addressed to her daughter, who has emigrated to the United States, she elaborates with pathos on her sense of isolation and abandonment in her homeland. This letter constitutes the text of *Age of Iron*: it has the immediacy and emotional density of a testimony and appeal to the absent ‘beloved’ of her address (her daughter and the reader), but also the status of an artefact-bequest. Bar Lesson 7 and the postscript, the lessons of *Elizabeth Costello* have, like Curren’s letter, a performative element in that they hinge on a public lecture that Costello delivers or a public exchange of opinion in which she is involved. Coetzee’s original presentation of six of the ‘lessons’ as lectures adds a further dimension to their ambivalent status as performance and text. That *Elizabeth Costello* is a composite of recycled occasional pieces and some new material by Coetzee is itself a ‘testament to the proliferating possibilities for subsidiary or auxiliary rights for what writers produce’ (Brouillette 136), especially writers of Coetzee’s celebrated status. The point I want to emphasise here is that, as in so many of Coetzee’s earlier novels, *Elizabeth Costello* shows the seams between the acclaimed writer’s public utterances and the contexts out of which they emerge and in which they are received. These seams are discernible at the level of the characters themselves.

The dynamics of characterhood I have been considering raise the question of the coherence of Costello, her son John, and the book itself, and the implications of this for how we respond to Costello and the lessons of the book. The staggered evolution of the book from six of Coetzee’s public lectures gives rise to some puzzling inconsistencies in these two characters’ biographies as they emerge in *Elizabeth Costello*. Attridge has noted some of these inconsistencies: in Lesson 1 John is on leave for the year from his job at a college in Massachusetts, yet he refers to North America as ‘a foreign continent’ (23);<sup>10</sup> in the same lesson he tells Susan Moebius that he has been married and unmarried, when in Lessons 3 and 4 the narrator tells us that John lives with his wife and children (Attridge 194, fn. 4). Whereas Attridge sees these inconsistencies as oversights on Coetzee’s part, Stephen Mulhall suggests that Coetzee deliberately ‘refrains’ from rendering consistent the ‘discrepant portraits’ of John in the Belitt lecture, the Tanner lectures, and the novel into which they are absorbed (Mulhall 175). Phrasing his point in a way that echoes Costello in Lesson 8 (*Elizabeth Costello* 221), Mulhall argues that ‘the John Bernard of Lesson 1 both is and is not the John Bernard of Lessons 3 and 4’ (Mulhall 175). Mulhall’s rationalisation of this inconsistency runs as follows:

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<sup>10</sup> Attridge maintains that John also refers to it as ‘an unexplored continent’ (*Elizabeth Costello* 27), but this is incorrect: this is how he describes Susan Moebius as he is about to part from her after they have spent a night together.

These rough edges can of course be smoothed out with some imaginative effort on our part; but the need to do it, and so the author's apparent unwillingness to do it for us, is pressing, and it suggests a certain desire on Coetzee's part to demonstrate how far we are prepared to go as readers to confer coherence and plausibility on fictional creations even when their author chooses not to do so. (175)

For a writer as scrupulous as Coetzee about language and the formal qualities of narrative (character, plot, narration, and so on), it is difficult to believe that the discrepancies Attridge identifies are all simply oversights on Coetzee's part. In connection with this point it is instructive to recall the surprise of the early readers of *Dusklands* when they realised that there was no error in the narration of the contradictory accounts of the river-crossing episode in 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee,' and the confusion of Coetzee's Hebrew translator at the apparent misspelling of 'many' as 'menny' in *Disgrace* (146).<sup>11</sup> The inconsistencies, noted above, that persist among the lessons in their 'finished' version in *Elizabeth Costello* are the frayed edges that remind the reader of the genesis of this text from a staggered series of Coetzee's public lectures. These inconsistencies can also be taken to foreground the status of Costello and John less as discrete historical individuals than manifestations of the self-reflexive, dialogical impulse that runs through the lessons. On this view, one should not expect perfect consistency in John's biography, Costello's views, and Costello's identity in the book, as these two characters' function is to occasion a variety of stances and positions on contentious issues. These positions do not necessarily add up to a philosophy or credo attributable to a single person, but provoke critical dialogue on the question of whether it is the job of the writer to defend a belief or position on principle or on behalf of a group or cause.

Further, the testing of the realist illusion through the book cautions against taking Costello as soundly embodied.<sup>12</sup> Foregrounded in Lesson 1, the pact of realism is progressively undone in the sequence of subsequent lessons. In Lesson 1 the narrator's comments puncture the illusion that it is Costello speaking via Kafka's Red Peter on the topic of realism to Coetzee's audience. Lesson 7 departs from the structure of the foregoing lessons by giving a fluid third person form to Costello's thoughts on eros without conjuring a frame for them as public utterances. Lesson 8

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<sup>11</sup> For an interesting discussion of early responses to this feature of *Dusklands*, see Wittenberg; and for the 'we are too menny' anecdote, see Coetzee, 'Roads to Translation' 151.

<sup>12</sup> For Dooley, the inconsistencies in John's biography are overt gestures on Coetzee's part that 'the conventions of realism are of little importance' in the lessons (58).

marks a further shift away from scenes of the ordinary by presenting the account of Costello's trial of belief in a self-consciously parodic key. Costello's appearance as 'Elizabeth, Lady Chandos' in the postscript, where she writes sans faith in the ability of words to stand for stable referents and on a note of hysteria that 'All is allegory' (229), dissolves what remains of the thin realist pretence that has sustained the intellectual inquiries through the book. Thus the unstable forms in which Costello's utterances are presented support Costello's role in enabling a 'play of positions' (Attwell, 'The Life and Times' 34) that resist being easily settled or reconciled. But the problem with privileging a view of Costello as a moveable, self-reflexive discursive function is that one runs the risk of *understating* the grounds of Costello's doubts and quandaries in her deeply felt sense of herself as an embodied creature, whose occupation as an ageing writer cements her convictions.

So far in this chapter I have detailed how a range of resonances circulate in Costello that make her functionally continuous with Coetzee while marking her as distinct from her author, an opening or point of departure for debates on a variety of topics. That is to say, I have stressed Costello's *discursive functionality* without giving due weight to the grounds of her attitudes in her sense of herself as a feeling body, attitudes which retain their pathos in the face of the corrosive ironies that play about these lessons.

### **The Authority of the Feeling Body**

The narrator of Lesson 1 interrupts the narrative of Costello's visit to Altona College to remind the reader that realism is premised on embodying ideas in credible situations:

Realism has never been comfortable with ideas. It could not be otherwise: realism is premised on the idea that ideas have no autonomous existence, can exist only in things. So when it needs to debate ideas, as here, realism is driven to invent situations – walks in the countryside, conversations – in which characters give voice to contending ideas and thereby in a certain sense embody them. ... In such debates ideas do not and indeed cannot float free: they are tied to the speaker by whom they are enounced, and generated from the matrix of individual interests out of which their speakers act in the world ... (9)

What the narrator does not specify here, although it is implied, is the imbrication of ideas with feelings that the ensuing lessons amply demonstrate. Particularly in Lessons 3 and 4, the indubitable weight of bodily feeling is set against the nimble movements of reason. In this part of the chapter I want to show how, even as she speaks on the strength of her cultural authority as a

writer, Costello locates the authority of her words in her individualised sense of herself as a feeling body embedded in relationships with others.

Costello's late stage of life is a significant factor in appreciating her views. Attridge notes in passing that Costello has reached a stage in life 'when the demands of the body, also easy to ignore in the healthfulness of youth, complicate the activities of the writer; when the inseparability of mental processes from physical desire and revulsion becomes unmistakable' (200). Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's study *Old Age* (1970), Hania Nashef points out that the effects of Costello's age manifest as diminishing tact and tolerance for others' opinions, a certain candour or bluntness, a sense of impatience and urgency, a vocal rejection of things she finds unacceptable, and a scouring uncertainty (143). Early in her public speech in Lesson 3 Costello points out that she intends literally, rather than ironically, the parallel she draws between herself and Kafka's domesticated ape, Red Peter: 'I mean what I say. I am an old woman. I do not have time any longer to say things I do not mean' (62). The basis of her comparison is that, like Red Peter, she speaks not as a specialist on the philosophical question of how humans ought to treat animals, but as an animal 'exhibiting, yet not exhibiting, to a gathering of scholars, a wound, which I cover up under my clothes but touch on in every word that I speak' (71). This 'wound' she bears is the painful knowledge of the normalised use to which animals are put in laboratories and factories in the name of scientific research and efficient food production. This wound identifies her speech, like Red Peter's, as a form of testimony (*Elizabeth Costello* 70), more than an academic argument. In this speech and in the seminar Costello hosts in Lesson 4, she is concerned to emphasise how rational argument skews the perspective on the question of the ethical treatment of animals away from the immediate experience of being alive in a body to a plane of abstraction. For Costello, the 'sympathetic imagination' (80), embodied in the work of 'the poets' (imaginative writers), offers a corrective sense of what it feels like to be another and thus justification for opposing both metaphysical and utilitarian arguments in support of the meat industry.

I am less interested in getting into the intricacies of the counter-arguments to Costello's position than in noting how Costello's views are coloured by her bodily state and how this state is held in tension with her status in the world as a public figure presumed to speak for a group or cause. To John, watching her at dinner in Lesson 3, she looks 'grey and tired and confused' (89). That these are not merely the effects of jetlag is confirmed when in the car on the way to the airport at the end of Lesson 4 Costello remarks, 'It's that I no longer know where I am,' and goes on to speak about her overwhelming uncertainty about her perception that people around her are engaged in a crime of 'stupendous proportions' (114). In Lessons 5 and 6, too, Costello's disorientation is a notable feature of the way she is represented by Coetzee. Her unwellness on her visit to South

Africa in Lesson 5 appears to be connected to the heat and her transcontinental travel, but privately she ‘suspects her indisposition is not just of a bodily order’ (143). The possibility that Costello’s late self-doubt, confusion, and disorientation is a function of a disquiet of the soul is implicit in Lessons 3, 4, and 5, and comes fully to the surface in Lesson 6. Costello invokes the soul in Lesson 3 in self-righteous defence of her vegetarianism; in Lesson 5 she questions the effect on Joseph’s soul of endlessly carving a single image of the crucified Christ; while in Lesson 6 her thoughts are focused by an inchoate sense that reliving scenes of cruel violence in literature depraves the writer as much as the reader. In Lesson 6 it occurs to her that her changed opinion about the limits of representation may simply be due to her disorientation (160) or a desire for ugliness to be hidden lest it reminds her of her own death-bound body (179).

In an interview in *Doubling the Point* (the context is a discussion of Friday in *Foe*), Coetzee speaks about the ‘standard’ of the body that marks a limit to his characters’ scepticism: ‘Whatever else, the body is not “that which is not,” and the proof that it *is* is the pain it feels. The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt’ (248). Earlier in the same interview Coetzee contrasts the discourse of criticism with the discourse of fiction by defining the latter, after Swift’s Houynnhms, as ‘that which is not’ (246). The link to Swift is important because he stands for a model of irony that Coetzee has examined in his criticism and Costello invokes in lesson 4.<sup>13</sup> Whether one credits the stirrings in her soul or her spatio-temporal disorientation as the greater cause of her uncertainties, the point holds that the instability *and* the force of Costello’s views have a significant basis in an acutely individualised sense of her subjectivity as an emotional body in space, rather than simply a subject of discourse. And yet at the same moment one grants that while Costello speaks under the mark of death as an ageing person of vulnerable moral sensibility, what she says is belied by her status in these lessons as a moveable author-figure and point of dispute.

In her interesting article ‘The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,’ Cora Diamond emphasises an aspect of Coetzee’s representation of Costello that the early respondents to *The Lives of Animals* (Amy Gutmann, Peter Singer, Wendy Doniger, and Barbara Smuts) overlook, namely the intractable weight of her bodily feeling. Specifically, Diamond describes this as ‘a kind of woundedness or hauntedness, a terrible rawness of nerves’ (47). Diamond notes that despite Costello’s self-presentation as someone ‘immensely conscious of the limits of thinking, the limits of understanding, in the face of all that she is painfully aware of,’ the respondents nonetheless ‘deflect’ Costello’s testimony by reducing it to ‘a position on the issue [of] how we should treat animals’ (52,

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<sup>13</sup> In his essay ‘The Agentless Sentence as Rhetorical Device’ (1980), collected in *Doubling the Point* (170-80), Coetzee analyses the rhetorical value of the short passive in Swift’s 1711 pamphlet *Argument against Abolishing Christianity*. See *Doubling the Point* 175-77.

49). That is, the respondents extract ideas and arguments from the lessons ‘as if they had been simply clothed in fictional form as a way of putting them before us’ (Diamond 53). Diamond argues that in doing so the respondents fail to take sufficiently full account of the challenge Costello’s characterisation of herself as a ‘wounded animal’ poses to the orthodox philosophical treatment of ethical issues (Diamond 48). For Diamond, orthodox academic modes of philosophical inquiry that attempt to *reason out* the difficulties in our apprehension of reality amount to strategies of ‘deflection’<sup>14</sup> to ‘a philosophical or moral problem apparently in the vicinity’ (57). Attridge agrees that it would be a mistake to treat Costello’s arguments ‘*as arguments*’ without reference to the fictional scenarios in which they play out, since it is the life circumstances from which they emerge that give them their full ethical weight (197). As an embodiment of the ‘ethic’ she espouses, that is, as a writer, Costello upholds the sympathetic imagination as a way for people to align their arguments about, for instance, the meat industry, with a gross sense of themselves as animals. However, Diamond observes that it is not enough to identify with Costello’s deeply felt position but to recognise that relations of power and emotion among people add to ‘the difficulty of attempting to bring a difficulty [of reality of this kind] into focus’ (Diamond 55). This point becomes clearer when we consider how in Lesson 6 the reader is unwittingly implicated in Costello’s dilemma about representations of evil.

While we might be inclined to read the lessons chronologically as episodes extracted from the coherent Life of Costello, to do this would be to forget the invocatory motions with which Lesson 1, and the book as a whole, opens. At the outset Costello is summoned to the purpose of *hingeing* a conversation on topics from a range of conflicting points of view. In each lesson the critical tension emerges from the division of point of view between Costello and other primary characters whose relationship to Costello affects their responses to her views or her responses to theirs. *Affect* is the key word here, as the currents of feeling that accompany the characters’ intellectual disagreements raise the stakes of their arguments in a way that makes one hesitate to call *Elizabeth Costello* an academic novel<sup>15</sup> in which dissertative elements are simply made more digestible by being clothed in fictional scenarios (I return to this point later in this chapter). Particularly in the case of Costello’s lectures on the lives of animals, her views are revealed to have an emotional valency not easily paraphrased.

I will briefly sketch the lines of intersubjective investment among Costello and her

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<sup>14</sup> Diamond borrows the term ‘deflection’ from Stanley Cavell (‘Knowing and Acknowledging.’ *Must We Mean What We Say?* (1969): 238-66), whose work she draws on in following through the latter part of her argument.

<sup>15</sup> Marjorie Garber, whose essay-response is included in *The Lives of Animals*, describes it as belonging to the genre of the academic novel or novella (*The Lives of Animals* 76).

interlocutors in order to show that Diamond's point, noted above, is borne out not just as a theme but as a function of reading – specifically in Lesson 6. In Lesson 1 the point of view is triangulated among Costello, her son John, and Susan Moebius. The narrative is focalised through John, who thinks of himself as his mother's protector and incipient trainer (2, 3, 30). Susan's admiration for Costello leads to her one-night affair with John, who recognises that Susan is only interested in him because he is his mother's son (26). The emotional triangle between the three characters is underscored by the repetition of bee imagery: in their interview Susan speaks of Molly Bloom as a queen bee (13); John notes to himself Susan's 'queenly manner' (22); later he finds himself disoriented in the corridors of the 'beehive' of the hotel (23). It initially seems odd that John should include the detail that he is unsure of his co-ordinates in the hotel, specifically Susan's room in relation to his mother's, but it makes sense in the light of the field of triangular desire Coetzee sets up between these three characters: Costello dependent on John and cautious of admirers like Susan; Susan attracted intellectually to Costello but settling for sex with John; John attracted sexually to Susan but defensive of his mother.

Similarly, in Lesson 2 Costello's critical attitude towards Emmanuel Egudu's ideas about the African body and 'oral novel' are at the story's close set in the context of her past affair with him. Whereas in the present moment of the lesson she feels an unreasonable ripple of jealousy towards the Russian dancer who shares his shipboard bed, at an earlier stage of her life she treated his status as an 'oral poet' as a point of flirtation and arousal. In Lessons 3 and 4 John's wife Norma's criticisms of Costello's moral arguments against the meat industry are inextricable from her hostility towards Costello herself. John is caught between the two, inclined to defend his mother but careful not to set himself against his wife. In Lesson 5 Costello's objections to her sister Blanche's grim view of the humanities and Costello's reservations about the local carpenter Joseph's devotion to carving replicas of Christ on the cross, are inflected with her regret that as sisters they have grown so far apart as to be sisters merely in name.

As in Lesson 1, where the aptly named John finds himself in a mediating position between Susan Moebius and Costello, Lesson 6 dramatises in Costello's relationship to Paul West the difficulty of separating a response to a book from a response to its author. (As we will see in Chapter 3, Coetzee situates his Nobel Lecture at this interface.) Costello's assumption that the evil she detects in West's description of the murder of Hitler's would-be assassins depraves West as much as she feels it depraves her and other readers, forestalls those who would align Costello's views with Coetzee's. It is indeed the case, as Mulhall points out, that Costello reproduces in her own words the scenes described in West's book that she deems obscene and unspeakable and for which she agitates to be censored altogether. The effect of this surreptitious gesture on Coetzee's

part is to put in question the culpability of we who read Costello's account at the moment Costello restricts the question of moral complicity to herself and West. As Mulhall observes,

our relation to Coetzee mirrors that of Costello's to West, thereby enacting in our own experience the breakdown of barriers between author, character and reader that Costello presents to us within the text as morally maddening; and we find that our acts of reading are no more immune to moral critique than are Costello's. (211-12)

In Chapter 5 I emphasise how a similar dramatisation of complicity and interpretive open-endedness is evident in *Diary of a Bad Year*. To return to Lesson 6, it is important to note that even though Costello makes a point of confronting West to excuse herself for the apparent discourtesy of extending her argument about the effects of writing about evil to include himself as the author of the book she is discussing, West is singularly silent in response. Indeed, of all the lessons, bar Lesson 7, which relates Costello's inner argument rather than an argument she delivers in public, Lesson 6 is marked by an absence of dialogue among the characters. After delivering her paper, Costello fields one question, to which she gives a tight reply. The dialogue in Lesson 6 almost exclusively occurs in Costello's mind in the form of a fleet of doubts about the motivation for and validity of her ideas on evil. The end of the lesson is inconclusive. Having retreated to a toilet cubicle to reflect on the 'madness' of her speech, Costello senses there ought to be some 'third alternative' to returning to the hotel or the venue that would alleviate her confusion and provide 'some way of rounding off the morning and giving it shape and meaning: some confrontation leading to some final word. ... But the corridor, it seems, is empty' (182). The failure of a third alternative to materialise is presented as a failure from Costello's point of view: that it is a *provisional* failure is indicated by the phrase 'it seems.'

The lack of resolution to Costello's doubts here is an instance of Coetzee's refusal to provide the reader with a clear answer to a troubling question. Attridge has noted how similar phrasing in Coetzee's earlier novels produces the same effect of a provisional conclusion, suspended interpretation. Focusing on the scene in *Waiting for the Barbarians* where the Magistrate prowls around the barbarian girl in his room trying to justify his intimate interest in her, Attridge suggests that the phrase 'the new thick voice that seems to be mine' gives the reader access to the Magistrate's sensation of 'being taken over, of something foreign uttering itself through [him]' (Attridge 45); in a similar way, Attridge argues that the prevalence of 'perhaps' in the narration of Parts 1 and 3 of *Life & Times of Michael K* invites the reader's interpretation by emphasising 'the contingent, the processual, the provisional that keeps moral questions alive' (Attridge 54). In

Lesson 6 of *Elizabeth Costello*, then, the question of the moral implications of the writer's and reader's involvement or complicity in fictional scenes is not merely presented as a point of debate but a question that entangles and implicates the reader in the process of reading the lesson at all.<sup>16</sup>

### Politics and the Question of Belief

As I have already shown, *Elizabeth Costello* implies without specifying definitively the connections between Costello and Coetzee and their respective attitudes and opinions. Alongside the question of the ethical capabilities of narrative fiction, the book raises the issue of Costello's representivity. What does it mean to be an Australian novelist? What values and whose interests does Costello stand for? Questions of this sort, which have dogged Coetzee through most of his career,<sup>17</sup> are squarely the focus of Lesson 8. Obligated to specify her beliefs to secure herself passage through the Gate, Costello describes herself to her judges as a 'secretary of the invisible' (199), one who maintains beliefs provisionally (195). 'That is my calling,' she says, 'dictation secretary. It is not for me to interrogate, to judge what is given to me. I merely write down the words and then test them, test their soundness, to make sure I have heard right' (199). When this account of herself fails to win her judges' favour, she alters her position in what is clearly a spirit of expediency and declares that she believes in the frogs of Dulgannon precisely because they are indifferent to her belief (217). At her second hearing, one of her inquisitors asks Costello whether she has changed the basis of her plea by revising the image of herself as a 'secretary of the invisible' to one who simply believes in frogs. Rather awkwardly she replies that she is not the same person she was when she issued her first statement, that *I* and *You* – Jacobson's shifters – are unreliable markers of identity. 'You might as well ask which is the true Elizabeth Costello: the one who made the first statement or the one who made the second. My answer is, both are true. Both. And neither. *I am an other*' (221). Back at her lodgings, her petition rejected, Costello reflects that her application for passage through the Gate hinges on a declaration of her fidelities and a performance of sincerity (224). But how can Costello declare her fidelities – assuming she has them – if, when she writes, she is not herself, that is, her fidelities are not strictly "hers"? How seriously should we take a character like Costello who evidently believes in fidelities but does not believe in openly declaring them?

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<sup>16</sup> A memorable gloss of the responsibilities of reading occurs in *The Master of Petersburg*, when in the face of Councillor Maximov's scepticism Dostoevsky asserts that reading is a deeply complicitous act, not a disinterested and vicarious one: 'reading is being the arm and being the axe *and* being the skull: reading is giving yourself up, not holding yourself at a distance and jeering' (47).

<sup>17</sup> Brouillette provides a condensed account of this (114-23).

As with a number of Costello's positions, the notion that she is not herself when writing echoes remarks Coetzee has made elsewhere. 'Writing is not free expression,' Coetzee writes in *Doubling the Point*.

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

The idea of the countervoice, which forms the basis of Clarkson's recent book on Coetzee, recurs in the interview on Kafka later in *Doubling the Point* when Coetzee defends his reluctance to provide an interpretation of *Life & Times of Michael K* (yet nonetheless offers an interpretation of sorts). There he argues that it is a mistake to privilege the writer's opinions about his own work over other readers' opinions because neither can the writer 'claim the critic's saving distance ... nor can he pretend to be what he was when he wrote – that is, when he was not himself' (*Doubling the Point* 206). Thus the conception of writing as a matter of invoking and managing a dialogue between competing voices informs the authorial attitude of respecting the readers' interpretive voice by rejecting the idea of the author as chief interpreter of the work. (I return to this idea, elaborated by Barthes in 'The Death of the Author,' in Chapter 6.)

Coetzee adopted a similar attitude in a 1995 interview in which he was challenged to explain why, as someone who, in the interviewer's words, 'can't take outrage at ethnic or religious insults seriously,' he thinks he is qualified to write a book titled *Giving Offense* (Coetzee, 'An Interview with J.M. Coetzee' 110). 'Let me try to respond as clearly and precisely as possible,' Coetzee replied.

I take offense itself seriously. It is a fact of life. The question is whether I respect the motion of taking offense. To be more precise, the question is not whether I, in person, respect this motion: the question is, what does it mean to respect – really respect – the taking-offense of others when you do not share the religious convictions or ethnic sensitivities from which this taking-offense emerges? This seems to me a properly philosophical question, and I hope that in the book I give it a philosophical answer, to the best of my abilities. ('An Interview with J.M. Coetzee' 110)

Coetzee's reply here provides a useful gloss of my suggestion that we think of Costello, and later JC

in *Diary of a Bad Year*, as a case of the writer presented as an *instance* in which social pressures and responsibilities are brought into relief to be acknowledged and examined. It is in this light that we can appreciate Coetzee's idea of fiction as a form of 'living out' difficult questions of responsibility and accountability,<sup>18</sup> and my suggestion that the writer is in this respect a paradigmatic figure. Further, the construction of Costello as a fallible authorial persona shifts the emphasis from the capsular arguments of a stable autobiographical subject to a figure whose self-doubt and qualified status occasion a contest of countervoices.

As I have shown through this chapter, Costello's trial of belief in Lesson 8 and her defence of her ideal self as a writer as one who suspends 'opinions and prejudices' (200) in order to faithfully conduct the voices of others, is locked in tension with the positions she takes in the other lessons, notably on the ethical treatment of animals and evil. This tension between Costello's personal convictions and her ideal commitments as a writer recalls Coetzee's comments on *Age of Iron*:

So a contest is staged, not only in the dramatic construction of the novel but also within Elizabeth's [Mrs Curren'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 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. ... what is of importance in what I have just said is the phrasing: the phrases *is staged, is heard*; not *should be staged, should be heard*. There is no ethical imperative that I claim access to. Elizabeth is the one who believes in *should*, who believes in *believes in*.  
(*Doubling the Point* 250; Coetzee's italics)

The marked difference between Mrs Curren and Costello is that whereas the former speaks from a position of marginality as an old white retired female professor of classics living in South Africa in the late 1980s, Costello hails from 'pacific' (*Elizabeth Costello* 15) Australia and, more significantly, addresses public gatherings on the strength of her achievement as a writer. Yet they are aligned in insisting that they speak for themselves rather than a group to which they might be taken to belong. Costello, for instance, justifies her convictions about vegetarianism out of a desire to save her soul; similarly, Mrs Curren insists throughout her narration on the specifically individual

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<sup>18</sup> Coetzee makes explicit the idea of fiction as a space for living out difficult ethical questions in his reply to Attwell's question about the relationship between Coetzee's 'lived canon' and South Africa. This exchange took place in an interview conducted after Coetzee had received the Nobel Prize for Literature. See Coetzee, 'An Exclusive Interview.'

quality of her testimony, given in terms of her own painful situation.<sup>19</sup>

Patrick Hayes has argued that Costello shares with Mrs Curren and David Lurie the dubious status of being a fool-hero (247). In making this claim he extends Attwell's characterisation of Costello as an Erasmian figure, who allows Coetzee to explore 'self-reflexive questions about positionality' (Attwell, 'The Life and Times' 37). Like Attwell, Hayes finds in Coetzee's essay on Erasmus a careful delineation of the paradoxical 'force' or persuasiveness of speaking to pole-positions of the political and the ethical from a (non-)position of creative weakness, a strategy which involves avoiding staking a position in a polemic by making a strong assertion, adopting instead the guise of the fool whose seemingly dismissable voice nonetheless sounds a lingering note of accountability (Hayes 246-52). As I explained in my Introduction, my interest in the experience of emigration and literary celebrity lies in how these experiences *condition* the autobiographical turn in Coetzee's later fiction. The word 'condition,' I noted, implies the entailment of a qualification or provision. I now want to elaborate on how the Costello lecture-fictions make a virtue of provisionality.

Noting Coetzee's strategic use of Kafka in Lessons 1 and 8, Brouillette correctly points out that the overtly allegorical treatment of the question of belief in Lesson 8 positions this lesson in metatextual relation to the rest of the book. 'The statement Costello pens,' writes Brouillette, 'in fact comments on, or is homologous to, the book as a whole, as a reflection on the very nature of belief, and as an articulation of her final resistance to simple political positions that offer obvious lessons for living or prescriptions on behaviour' (139-40). In her chapter on Coetzee in *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace*, Brouillette shows how Coetzee's artful intervention through Costello in the public sphere is anticipated by his exploration of personal accountability in *The Master of Petersburg* and *Disgrace*, novels in which retired university lecturer Lurie and novelist Dostoevsky are subjected to similar pressure to make their private experience available for public scrutiny and judgement in the name of political exigencies (112-43). Brouillette contextualises her discussion of these three novels by highlighting the differing interpretive priorities of Coetzee's local and global readerships: she broadly characterises the local South African reading public as sharply politicised and the global as unconstrained by political valuations. She argues that Coetzee's fiction plays itself off and deconstructs a range of binaries (a local politicised context of citizen-activists versus a disinterested global literary market, the 'socio-

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<sup>19</sup> One thinks, for instance, of her response to the scenes of violence and distress she witnesses in Gugulethu: 'These are terrible sights ... They are to be condemned. But I cannot denounce them in other people's words. I must find my own words, from myself. Otherwise it is not the truth' (*Age of Iron* 99).

cultural' versus the 'transcendental poetic' literary impulse,<sup>20</sup> the ethical pole versus the political), while Coetzee positions himself as author ambiguously within and outside his fictions (118-19, 125). As I've already noted, Attwell too has discussed *Elizabeth Costello* in the light of Coetzee's guarded self-presentation and rare public interventions as a writer, drawing on Coetzee's two essays 'What is a Classic?' and 'Erasmus: Madness and Rivalry' (1992) to argue that Costello amounts to an 'Erasmian solution' to the problem of reconciling transcendental musings and yearnings with a critical sensitivity to historical realities.

Both Attwell and Brouillette highlight Costello's attitude of non-commitment to a set of fixed beliefs, her reluctance to state a literary credo for herself, or, to put the point in more positive terms, both credit Costello's *openness* to voices and perspectives not her own. From her reading of Lesson 8, Brouillette concludes that Costello 'does, after all, believe, but not with conviction, and not in belief' (141), while Attwell suggests that 'the artful provisionality of the nonposition' Costello tends to claim as her own is belied by her faith in the powers of 'the sympathetic imagination' (37).<sup>21</sup> The body of both Brouillette's and Attwell's accounts of Costello concerns the history of Coetzee's fictional and discursive responses to the political pressures he has felt as a writer working in South Africa during the years of apartheid and its immediate aftermath. While both critics' accounts were written before the publication of *Diary of a Bad Year*, which far more directly than *Elizabeth Costello* addresses the question of the acclaimed writer's identity as a civil subject and relationship to politics, it remains the case that both critics read Costello in the light of Coetzee's reluctance to offer statements of his own, unmediated by fictional narrative, on political affairs. (Both cite Coetzee's public statement on Rushdie's non-attendance of the Weekly Mail Book Week in 1987.) That is to say, both read Costello in terms of the writer as a public intellectual refusing to speak, except in the idiom of fiction, on politics. Given that nowhere in *Elizabeth Costello* is politics foregrounded as such, is it not problematic to read Coetzee through Costello in these terms?

I maintain that it is not, because even though Costello does not explicitly articulate her views on political issues or reflect on the relationship between literature and politics, as JC does in

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<sup>20</sup> As I noted in Chapter 1 (see pages 25-6), Coetzee offers these opposing forms of interpretation in his reading of T.S. Eliot in 'What is a Classic?' (*Stranger Shores* 1-19).

<sup>21</sup> I say 'faith' rather than 'belief' because the former carries a spiritual connotation to conviction that is evident in Costello's notion of literary inspiration ('receiving the spirit into oneself,' taking dictation from '*powers beyond us*' (*Elizabeth Costello* 52, 200; Coetzee's italics)) and her preoccupation with the state of her soul – particularly in relation to her vegetarianism in Lesson 3 (89) and in Lesson 6 with reference to the moral transgressiveness of writing or reading about evil. Durrant has argued that Coetzee's fiction 'unequivocally rehearses the failure of Costello's sympathetic imagination' (120) (for instance, in the Medical Officer's and Susan Barton's failure to inhabit the point of view of K and Friday), while establishing this failure, characterised by ignorance and abjection, as the ground for ethical awareness. See Durrant, 'J.M. Coetzee, Elizabeth Costello, and the Limits of the Sympathetic Imagination.'

*Diary of a Bad Year*, her attitude towards declaring beliefs or ‘fidelities,’ and indeed the wearily allegorical nature of the lesson in which her trial of belief takes place, paradoxically amounts to an unambiguous endorsement of provisionality. I have already indicated how provisionality manifests as an attitude and has the effect of drawing out critical responses to questions posed in the fiction but left inconclusively resolved. In this connection, it is worth considering more closely the significance of the semantic shift from ‘lecture’ to ‘lesson.’

A lecture is typically an uninterrupted speech delivered by one person to a listening audience. Mikhail Bakhtin has argued that even though a lecture seems to be a monological discourse, it is in fact dialogical in its anticipation of a response from an audience (117-18). It seems inaccurate to say that Coetzee’s original six lectures are *recuperated* as ‘lessons’ in *Elizabeth Costello*, when their original design foregrounded an element of fictional dialogue usually absent from the discourse of a lecture. The description of eight of the book’s nine parts as ‘lessons’ is ambivalent in not specifying who undergoes the learning experience and what precisely is learned, although implicitly it is Costello throughout. It is ambivalences of this sort that *opens* the text of this semi-fictional book onto the field of criticism, accommodating the interpretations of its myriad readers. The text’s ability to accommodate the reader highlights one of the less obvious significances of the word ‘lesson.’ Usually thought of as a discrete period of learning a pupil in a classroom undergoes or a particular thing that has been learned, ‘lesson’ also has the liturgical sense of a biblical passage read aloud during a church service (*OED*).<sup>22</sup> The denotation of ‘lesson’ as a ‘reading aloud’ covers Coetzee’s original public delivery of six of the lessons collected in *Elizabeth Costello*, but also the countless readings of the lessons by others than Coetzee – ourselves. In ‘As a Woman Grows Older’ Costello’s daughter Helen tries to convince her mother that her stories have ‘changed the lives of others ... Not because what you write contains lessons but because it *is* a lesson’ (12; Coetzee’s italics). Coetzee’s representation of Costello disrupts the idea of the writer as a figure representing the interests of a group or cause, the writer as spokesperson or moral exemplar. Rather, Costello is presented as a fallible and doubting individual whose strong opinions provoke further dialogue and contestation. In this respect, it is notable that most of the public lectures presented in the book are received poorly by their audiences.

In Lesson 1 Costello’s lecture on realism is met with hesitant applause that gradually swells. In Lesson 2 Costello herself is unconvinced by the ideas she expresses about the novel, and her speech is duly answered with indifferent applause (39); in contrast, Egudu’s lecture gains ‘loud and spirited’ applause (45), but draws Costello’s criticisms. In Lesson 3, Costello’s lecture ‘The

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<sup>22</sup> Mulhall has also noted this point (195).

Philosophers and the Animals' finds 'scattered applause' (80) ('not her metier, argument,' thinks her son John), while the debate with O'Hearne in Lesson 4 ends on a note of 'acrimony, hostility, bitterness' (112). In Lesson 5 a similar dynamic to that in Lesson 2 between Costello and Egudu is set up between the critical Costello and her sister Blanche, whose lecture evokes a 'murmur of general puzzlement' (123). Lesson 6, as we have seen, is marked by an absence of meaningful dialogue among the characters: Costello delivers her talk with doubts and misgivings, it is followed by a 'thin ripple of clapping' (124), and she is left alone with her discomforting doubts unresolved. In each case the public speech is foregrounded as a point of discussion, if not dispute. Whether this debate takes place among the characters or is presented as a volley of questions in Costello's mind, the effect – in the face of the resemblance between Costello and Coetzee – is to turn the focus from the authorial persona to the questions and issues her presence occasions.

### **From Scepticism to 'Fierce Comic Anguish'**

I have suggested that the nonplussed response of the audiences to the various lectures in the book (bar Egudu's) is in key with the unresolved note on which many of the lessons end, and that this response anticipates the contestation the text celebrates at the expense of the authorial persona. In what remains of this chapter I return to the question of the surrogacy of Costello and of fiction as a suitable venue for serious ethical arguments and point to an instructive precedent in the writings of Kierkegaard for Coetzee's procedure in the Costello lessons.

In the course of this chapter I have detailed why it is necessary to simultaneously take account of Costello's status as a discursive function, a hinge for disagreement and debate within and beyond the text, and a character who speaks in an impassioned voice out of her sense of herself as an ageing human body. *Elizabeth Costello* is not, after all, a novel in which the protagonist undergoes a development through her personal experiences: it is largely from the lonely vantage point of Costello's late stage in life, frail and vulnerable and self-doubtful, that she expresses her eccentric opinions. I have argued that Costello emerges from the lessons not as a spokesperson for a group or cause, nor as a moral exemplar (she discourages President Garrard from admiring her vegetarianism by pointing out that she wears leather shoes (89)). Rather, in Costello Coetzee presents the writer as an individual whose work in narrative entails identifying with subject positions not her own and thus as an instructive instance for exploring questions about what it means to live with the knowledge of others' suffering by temporarily living it out through the act of literary imagination (reading or writing).

As I've already noted in passing, in her response to 'The Lives of Animals' Marjorie Garber

situates Coetzee's text in the genre of the 'academic novel' (*The Lives of Animals* 76). In classifying the text in this way Garber fails to take account of the complexity of Costello's relationship with Coetzee and the sustained tension between irony and embodiment that I have drawn attention to in the lessons. More to the point, Garber's gesture does not do justice to the existential weight of the individual difficulties and questions that Coetzee negotiates through Costello in the lessons, nor does it credit fiction as a medium of expression specially suited to *working through* such ethical issues. In view of the fact that Costello's lectures have a largely philosophical bearing, it is worth recalling that the philosophical movement or attitude (not 'school') that came to be known as existentialism placed special emphasis on fiction, particularly in the form of prose narrative, as a medium for expressing or *realising* ideas about human subjectivity from the point of view of individuals in concrete situations. The writers most often loosely grouped together and spoken of as 'existentialists' are Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Beckett, Sartre, and Camus; there are others, such as Gabriel Marcel and Martin Buber, who share concerns with the former group but do not express them in fictional forms. In *Elizabeth Costello* Kafka is the writer most often invoked as a touchstone of allegory (in Lessons 1, 3, and 8), a writer whose words seem to mean more than they say and thus make readers' interpretations seem terminally inadequate. I noted earlier that Costello turns to Swift too as further model of irony. Beyond Swift and Kafka, about which more deserves to be said,<sup>23</sup> I suggest that Kierkegaard, as a writer whose work provides prototypical expression to what later came to be called existentialist concerns, provides a valuable point of comparison for the modes of indirection Coetzee employs in *Elizabeth Costello*. My priority here is not to plumb the correspondence between Coetzee and Kierkegaard but simply to draw the outline of a comparison in order to press home my point that to call *Elizabeth Costello* an academic novel is to fail to take account of the *existential* dimension of Costello's engagements.

Kierkegaard's writing offers a thoroughgoing self-reflective analysis and demonstration of irony as a mode of literary expression. His use of numerous pseudonyms in his works<sup>24</sup> provides a primary point of comparison with Coetzee's play with names in his novels, here in a character like 'Costello.' Each pseudonym, Kierkegaard maintains, is a 'poetically actual individuality' (qtd. in Kern 46), an instance of a cluster of possibilities concentrated in a name and a nominal history. Gabriel Josipovici notes that Kierkegaard uses pseudonyms not to confuse or play with his readers

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<sup>23</sup> In his promisingly titled essay 'Between Swift and Kafka: Animals and the Politics of Coetzee's Elusive Fiction,' Richard A. Barney disappointingly says very little more than Costello herself about the interest of Swift and Kafka for her purpose and their broader influence on Coetzee's thinking and writing.

<sup>24</sup> These include Victor Eremita (*Either/Or* (1843)), Johannes de Silentio (*Fear and Trembling* (1843)), Constantine Constantius (*Repetition* (1843)), Vigilius Haufniensis (*The Concept of Dread* (1844)), Hilarius Bookbinder, William Afham, the Judge, Frater Taciturnus (*Stages on Life's Way* (1845)), and Johannes Climacus (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846)).

‘but to bring out the subjunctive nature of what is being said’ (123). It is the subjunctive mode – the mode of fiction<sup>25</sup> – that for Kierkegaard best renders the instability of human experience, the volatile possibilities of the historical given. Kierkegaard’s practice of expressing views through pseudonymous author-figures allows him to reflect on those views indirectly, as if from a distance, as if they were not his own but another’s. More than simply floating arguments and crystallising points by staging dialogue among fictional characters, as Plato does in his works, Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms situate him in negative relation to his work, allowing him to render the paradoxical situation of being at once a subject limited and determined by his history and a subject able to reflect on it dialectically (Kern 58). For Kierkegaard, the problem with the philosophy of his day, pre-eminently that of Hegel, was that it sought to systematise human experience. A negative or ironic relation to the self is an indirect relation, and it is this kind of relation, Kierkegaard argues and at the same time *shows* through the form of his writing, that expresses more faithfully than a finalising philosophy the ‘elusiveness of existence.’ ‘An existential system cannot be formulated,’ writes Kierkegaard.

System and finality correspond to one another, but existence is precisely the opposite of finality. It may be seen, from a purely abstract point of view, that system and existence are incapable of being thought together; because in order to think existence at all, systematic thought must think it as abrogated, and hence as not existing. Existence separates, and holds the various moments of existence discretely apart; the systematic thought consists of the finality which brings them together. (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript* 107)

Crucially, like Coetzee, Kierkegaard views the activity of writing itself as an analogue for the striving or becoming of the existing individual, the complexity of whose subjective experience defies final formulation. ‘An existing individual,’ writes Kierkegaard, ‘is constantly in process of becoming; the actual existing subjective thinker constantly reproduces this existential situation in his thoughts, and translates all his thinking into terms of process’ (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript* 79). Kierkegaard’s words here call to mind Coetzee’s defence in ‘The Novel Today’ of the capabilities of the novel in the face of the inadequate treatment orthodox history gives to the fabric of an individual’s lived experience:

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<sup>25</sup> I am thinking here of Coetzee’s essay ‘The First Sentence of Yvonne Burgess’s *The Strike*’ (1976), in which he observes that what is suppressed from Burgess’s first sentence is the framing refrain ‘There was once,’ a locution he traces to the archetypal formula of the Majorcan storyteller, ‘era e non era’ (*there was and there wasn’t*), which ‘signals that all succeeding assertions ... are made in the split was-and-was-not mode of fiction’ (*Doubling the Point* 91).

orthodox history does not have the means to give the kind of dense realisation of the texture of life that the novel, or certain kinds of novel, do so well. And history does not have the formal means to explore, except clumsily and ‘from the outside,’ the individual experience of historical time, particularly the time of historical crisis. (‘The Novel Today’ 2)

In his university thesis, *The Concept of Irony, with Constant Reference to Socrates* (1841), Kierkegaard examines irony as a rhetorical strategy practised by his ‘paradigmatic ironist’ (Cross 134), Socrates. Socratic irony works by assuming a pose of ignorance in order to elicit interlocutors’ statements, which can then be challenged (*OED*). The lessons of *Elizabeth Costello* are designed to *draw out* responses from readers, not, as in the maieutic Socratic method, to achieve agreement with one or another position or opinion held by the author-figure in the fiction. Rather, the reader is led to identify with Costello’s felt experience while questioning her views. Costello does not strategically pretend ignorance, as Socrates would do to deceive his interlocutor into the truth. Instead, her self-doubt, disorientation, and sense of vulnerability mark her as a figure of unstable views, subject to revision and dispute. This deprived status is also true of JC in *Diary of a Bad Year*, as we will see in Chapter 5. In the context of his Opinion on authority in fiction JC quotes Kierkegaard’s words: ‘Learn to speak without authority’ (151). The trifurcated narrative structure of *Diary of a Bad Year* speaks to this observation in undermining the implicit claim of JC’s Opinions for the idea of the writer as a singularly authoritative public voice. The similar dispersal of point of view I have drawn attention to in *Elizabeth Costello* turns the focus from the authorial persona herself to the questions she poses, specifically concerning the writer’s cultural authority.

At the start of this chapter I noted that Costello’s status as a surrogate figure for Coetzee highlights the question of the suitability of fiction as a medium for addressing serious ethical issues. If one of the advantages of presenting conflicting arguments in the medium of fiction seems to be that Coetzee needn’t take responsibility for them, the form of the lessons makes of the author-figure Costello, and implicitly her creator Coetzee, the object of critical scrutiny. The element of dialogue brought out in the shift from ‘lecture’ to ‘lesson’ alters one’s understanding of the author as someone who by virtue of his acclaimed status is required to take responsibility for the ideas he expresses and the positions he maintains. Instead, responsibility is revealed to reside at both ends of the interpretive process, in the writer and the reader. The author, here Costello, is presented as a paradigmatic instance of *being open* to the points of views of others, while responsibility devolves upon the reader in the form of a call to respond critically to the openings in the text that manifest as Costello’s ambivalence and the lessons’ deferral of resolution. Further, the lessons reveal the

limitations of reasoned argument by showing the individual and interpersonal emotional contexts through which arguments are inevitably filtered. Aside from the limits of rational argument dictated by the exigencies of logic, the lessons also draw attention to the limits imposed by academic decorum. Beyond clipped arguments lie reservoirs of feeling drawn from often unseemly personal experience typically excised from academic debate. The explanatory value of such suppressed matter inflects Costello's tone in her lecture in Lesson 3, in her seminar exchange in Lesson 4, and in her presentation in Lesson 6; her encounters with Mr Phillips in Lesson 5 stand as an example of the kind of compromise solutions an individual finds for difficult quandaries in her experience. The point I want to underline here is that the lessons of *Elizabeth Costello* give an existential dimension to the motions of self-doubt and -reflexivity, tracking in Costello's late stage of life the shift from the composure of scepticism to the discomposure of a Beckettian 'fierce comic anguish.'<sup>26</sup>

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As an author-figure resembling her creator, Costello provides Coetzee with a degree of leverage to explore questions that arise around and claims that are made upon a fêted public figure like himself, without reducing this exploration to an exercise in straight autobiography or a polemical discourse. I have argued that the design of the book deflects attention from the figure of the acclaimed author to the questions she broaches in public scenarios. The movement from academic argument to the complex social life of ideas is evident in the shift from 'lecture' to 'lesson.' The ambivalence of the latter term loosens the idea of the author as a terminus of opinion and opens a view of reading as a form of self-implicating, critical engagement. Coetzee's deployment of Costello to enunciate arguments on topics in which Coetzee has a personal interest is not simply, as such critics as Singer have suggested, a strategy of evasion by which he refuses to take responsibility for the contentious views Costello airs. Rather, by turning the focus to a figure of comparative stature in a fictional narrative, Coetzee shifts the emphasis from what *he* thinks about topic X or Y to what a writer like himself, at a similar stage of life and career, might think. In shifting from the indicative to the subjunctive mode of fiction – or better, in shifting the indicative *into* the subjunctive mode, Coetzee demonstrates in an obliquely self-referential manner how an individual's, and particularly a writer's, arguments and opinions are embedded in the emotional matrix of interpersonal relationships and the circumstances of his or her history. It is a gesture by which Coetzee declines the role of

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<sup>26</sup> This jocoserious tone, Hayes argues, is one of the chief qualities Coetzee draws from Beckett's work (2). The dictum JC quotes from Kierkegaard can also be seen to support Hayes's argument that, like Erasmus's Folly, the 'authority' of Coetzee's protagonists comes from speaking from a (non-)position of 'creative weakness' (see Hayes 50, 245, 252).

spokesperson for a group or cause, instead presenting the writer as a doubting and fallible figure whose sense of implication in what he or she writes calls into question the implication of the reader in what he or she reads. In this sense, the later fiction is only nominally about Coetzee and his fictional avatars: the writer's public visibility, his or her *name*, becomes a versatile means of exploring the complicities of reading as a representative instance of belonging to a broader social body.

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## Chapter 3

### A Counterclaim to Acclaim: 'He and His Man'

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In the previous chapter I showed that in the lessons of *Elizabeth Costello* Coetzee highlights the strain of empathy in the idea of responsibility and embodies this quality, which distinguishes the writer as an exemplary figure, in the labile authorial figure of Costello. Like John in *Youth*, Costello is a fallible and decidedly unheroic figure, but unlike John, her self-doubt, accentuated by her late stage of life, is strategically orchestrated to promote dialogue and dispute beyond the public lectures and exchanges that she hinges. I suggested that the word *lesson* draws attention to the measures of empathy and critical distance entailed in reading and responding to a book like *Elizabeth Costello*, which I proposed we consider less as an academic novel than a performative instalment in Coetzee's intellectual biography. Coetzee's implication of aspects of himself in Costello, the arguments she broaches, and positions she stakes, in turn poses and enacts the question of the reader's implication in the act of reading. Literary acclaim, in this light, is as much a distinction as a responsibility: it is the condition of being subject to the expectations and claims of specific readers and readerships. As we have seen, Coetzee's response to this public application to the person of the writer is to introvert a reply through the author-function Costello and recuperate these replies from their originating contexts back into his own terms in the form of a novel-length fiction.

In his Nobel Lecture, 'He and His Man,' Coetzee's response to the acclamation of universal relevance is similarly introverted and ambivalent. In choosing to read a story rather than give a conventional lecture, Coetzee broke with the tradition of Nobel literature laureates using the occasion of their award to reflect in direct terms on their vocation as a writer, their work's significance, and the relation between their work and the matrix of contexts from which it emerged. Literary prizes are one of the ways in which writers are consecrated as cultural authorities: other ways include the processes by which they are published, marketed, interviewed, reviewed, and taught in schools and universities. Most writers who accept literary awards accept too the claim the award makes on them to speak publicly to a cause or set of interests. What does it mean for Coetzee to be hailed – more than hailed: *consecrated* – as a 'world' writer when his work draws such a considerable degree of its force from his experience of living in and with an historical consciousness of South Africa? That Coetzee utters not a word in his lecture about South Africa,

indeed utters not a word as the writer *for* his work and the contexts that produced it, constitutes a pointed reply to the consecrating implications of the Nobel award. By putting its own interpretation in question, Coetzee's quaint circumlocution on the topic of authorship in 'He and His Man' seems to confirm the Swedish Academy's endorsement of his work as universally interpretable at the same moment this multivalent response points up the inconsistency of calling upon the author to stand in and *speak for* his work on the assumption that the author's word carries special weight. In this slippery fashion, I argue, Coetzee's 'lecture' (for it is hardly that) reasserts his commitment to fiction as a mode of self-qualified utterance in which the person of the author may be implicated in but is not reducible to the authorial self projected in the work.

'He and His Man' presents a teasing picture of the relation between the writer and the work, more specifically the self who writes and the self who is written, that unsettles the usual assumption that authority resides in the *person* of the writer. (As I show in Chapter 6, the interface between the life and work of the writer becomes especially significant in *Summertime*.) The content of Coetzee's Nobel Lecture suggests that it might be more appropriate to say that insofar as Coetzee accepted the award for his work, he accepted the award on behalf of himself, as if he were not completely the deserving or responsible party. If this proposition seems perverse, it is instructive then to ask why Coetzee persists in cultivating the idea in his fiction that the writer is not properly the authority on what he writes but a figure whose status is produced or endowed by forces beyond himself. Where this idea occurs in Coetzee's work (for instance, in Lesson 8 of *Elizabeth Costello*) it implies that the agency resides in language, in the countervoices of imaginary characters, in the dynamics of narrative construction. But in a crucial sense, which the occasion of the Nobel Prize allows us more closely to appreciate, this authority is produced and attributed to Coetzee by the contexts in which his work has been received and appraised.

In the case of the Nobel Prize, cultural authority is ceremoniously conferred upon the writer, retrospectively for his literary achievement and prospectively for his higher-profile role in social life. Coetzee responds to this act of consecration by reading an unstably multivalent story that at once invites interpretation and shows how interpretation can lose sight of and overwhelm its object. Even as one is tempted to pick out correspondences between, for instance, Crusoe's isolation and trials on the island and Coetzee's in South Africa, or the bubonic plague and apartheid, or Crusoe's and Coetzee's success in the metropolitan literary marketplace, the text cautions against the reductions of allegory.

Instead of using the occasion to speak about current political affairs or a literary topic or the entwinement of his work with the circumstances and pressures of his life, Coetzee presented a story resembling a parable about authorship and authority constructed out of materials from Daniel

Defoe. 'He and His Man' pictures the relationship between the 'he' of the story, Robinson Crusoe returned from his island and settled in Bristol, and 'his man,' implicitly Defoe, as one characterised by nearness and distance, intimacy and strangeness. In his prefatory remarks to the lecture, Coetzee took care to distinguish the 'I' of his present, first person address from 'the one I call "he,"' a self-distancing disclaimer that recalls the opening gesture of Lesson 1 of *Elizabeth Costello*, by which Coetzee summoned Costello to speak, on his behalf, sans faith in realism to the same topic. In these opening remarks Coetzee went on to recount how as a young boy of eight or nine the delight with which he first read *The Strange and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719) was complicated by his discovery in an encyclopaedia that Defoe was the actual author, the author of the 'author,' of *Robinson Crusoe*, and not the eponymous character, as the book seemed to assert. 'He and His Man' is in key with the lessons of *Elizabeth Costello* in framing a discursive response in fictional narrative, presenting the author as a character dubious of the grounds and entailments of literary authority. More deftly than *Elizabeth Costello* and *Slow Man*, 'He and His Man' presents a picture of the interfolding of the writer with his fictional creations – a recurrent theme in Coetzee's later fiction. In my next chapter I show how in *Slow Man* this co-implication takes the form of a tussle for narrative agency between Paul Rayment and the author-figure Costello, whose obtrusive presence in the novel frames Rayment's story within Coetzee's personal history as an emigrant to Australia.

In the present chapter I focus on what is at stake for Coetzee in declining, once more, to speak *in propria persona* for his work on an auspicious public occasion, reading instead a fiction that puts its own interpretation in question. Given the status of the Nobel Prize for Literature as the pre-eminent global literary award and given the unusual form of Coetzee's lecture, I suggest that it is productive to read 'He and His Man' as a pointed *reply* to the consecrating implications of this award. In the first three sections of the chapter I discuss the context of the Nobel Prize for Literature, from the assumptions that undergird the award to how the Swedish Academy in its award citation justifies awarding the prize to Coetzee. I further contextualise Coetzee's 'lecture' by considering two of his other award speeches and the lectures of two other Nobel laureates in literature, Nadine Gordimer and Harold Pinter. In the final section I focus my attention more directly on the content of Coetzee's lecture.

### **The outsider**

As I argued in Chapter 2, the disjunction between the emotional force of what Costello says in her lectures and the provisional grounds of fictional discourse on which she speaks in the lessons

generates a dynamic tension between Coetzee and Costello that opens the way for the involvement of outsiders, ranging from Coetzee's audience on the occasions he delivered the lectures in person, to ourselves the readers. In this light, the Swedish Academy's gloss of Coetzee as a writer 'who in innumerable guises portrays the surprising involvement of the outsider,'<sup>1</sup> can be read as crediting the provision Coetzee makes in his fictions for the figure of the reader, the one who raises his or her voice to contest the meaning of the text. In noting this point I do not mean to diminish the importance of the deeply felt marginality of so many of Coetzee's characters, a marginality that is variously a function of their age, gender, race, sensibility, or profession; nor do I mean to understate Coetzee's practice of speaking most acutely to the political and historical concerns of his place and times through the oblique discourse of fiction. In his Nobel Lecture Coetzee again, tellingly, declines the opportunity to speak in his own voice, directly to his audience, as a civilian standing outside his literary work, naked of a literary persona, expressing his personal views. Instead, through the prism of fiction he speaks, or seems to speak, to the question of what it means to celebrate a person whose work consists in ventriloquising the voices of imaginary characters in written texts, the meanings of which are then read off in various directions according to readers' interpretive priorities.

In this light, 'He and His Man' complements the postscript to *Elizabeth Costello* as an oblique statement in fictional narrative on the impulse to allegorise inherent in all acts of reading. The critical commentary on Coetzee's Nobel Lecture ranges from interpretations, such as those of Gareth Cornwell and Mark Sanders, that concentrate on allegorisation as a theme and self-defensive mechanism of this text, to wider-view readings, like Chapman's, that treat the lecture as an occasion to reflect on Coetzee's novelistic career as whole. However, these accounts say relatively little about the institution of the Nobel Prize: in particular, the nature of Coetzee's lecture as a *reply* to the Prize's universalising implications. Cornwell has written insightfully about catachresis in 'He and His Man,' the inevitable process of reading a set of meanings into or onto those suggested by the text, of asserting that the text says something other than what it seems to say.<sup>2</sup> Following a similar approach to Cornwell, Sanders gives a Derridean reading to Coetzee's lecture, drawing out the sense in which writing is a business of deception insofar as it enacts a mimesis without a mimed original.<sup>3</sup> In different ways, Sanders and Cornwell devote their attention to tracing the incomplete doublings and deferrals among Coetzee, Robinson Crusoe, and Defoe in 'He and His Man' and showing how these cross-investments open onto Defoe's work and Coetzee's work on Defoe and

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<sup>1</sup> [http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2003/](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2003/).

<sup>2</sup> Cornwell, "'He and His Man': Allegory and Catachresis in J.M. Coetzee's Nobel Lecture' (2004).

<sup>3</sup> Sanders, 'The Writing Business: "He and His Man," Coetzee and Defoe' (2009).

their implications for how we read Coetzee's lecture. In contrast to these close readings, Chapman asks to what extent Coetzee may be said to owe his success as a novelist to 'the troubled times' of life in South Africa under apartheid.<sup>4</sup> Chapman explores this question by contrasting Coetzee's method and focus in his novels with Gordimer's in hers. Without saying much about the content of Coetzee's and Gordimer's lectures, and hesitant to venture into the territory of book history, Chapman offers only glancing comments on the context of the Nobel Prize. Sarah Brouillette has provided a far richer account of how Coetzee has positioned his authorial persona in relation to his work and his work in relation to the contexts in which it has been received in South Africa and abroad.<sup>5</sup> For this reason, in what follows I draw on Brouillette's account of the critical reception of Coetzee's fiction and bolster it with reference to Pascale Casanova's idea of 'world literary space' to lay the ground for my discussion of the institution of the Nobel Prize and the significance of Coetzee's use of Defoe in his lecture.

In the previous chapter I referred in passing to Brouillette's discussion of the polarisations that have marked the field of Coetzee criticism;<sup>6</sup> here I want to consider her account more closely. Extending the debate on the answerability of Coetzee's work to the pressure of history and politics, a debate formalised in clear terms by Attwell in *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, Brouillette admits that the polarities she draws are not absolute, but she argues they are nonetheless symptomatic of the urgency with which questions were asked about the social role of writers in the politically charged climate of apartheid South Africa. Brouillette writes:

it has not been any absolute distinction between the local and the global, or the individual consumer and the social citizen, or poststructuralist writing and a literature responsive to Marxism, that has earned Coetzee his position within the [global literary] market, but rather his ability to construct these pole positions in a way that forces readers to debate their relative credibility and purchase. (121-22)

'None could claim that Coetzee avoided political questions entirely,' Brouillette continues, 'since the very fact that he offered critics in general the chance to discuss South African politics, and the possible relationships between politics and aesthetics, was what gave him his presence within the global literary field' (122). The 'global literary field' Brouillette speaks of here corresponds to what

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<sup>4</sup> Chapman, 'Coetzee, Gordimer and the Nobel Prize' (2009).

<sup>5</sup> Brouillette, 'Locating Coetzee,' *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* 112-43.

<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 2, pages 61-2, and Brouillette 115-123.

Pascale Casanova in her influential book *The World Republic of Letters* (2004)<sup>7</sup> calls ‘international literary space’ or ‘the world republic of letters.’ For Casanova, whose discussion Brouillette draws on, there is a ‘literary universe’ that exists and sustains itself relatively independently of national boundaries and political relations of force (xii). Casanova argues that ‘the nation’ is an inadequate interpretive unit for organising and understanding the relations between individual works and bodies of literature on a world scale (xi, xii). Instead she argues that literary value or credit circulates as a form of capital in the transnational phenomenon of a literary economy that through the nineteenth and twentieth century had its centre pre-eminently in Paris. Casanova describes how the values bequeathed by the French Revolution contributed to identifying Paris as a space where artists from elsewhere in the world could come to practice their art in a climate of freedom and tolerance, unconstricted by the concerns and authorities of their national localities:

On the one hand, it [Paris] symbolized the Revolution, the overthrow of the monarchy, the invention of the rights of man – an image that was to earn France its great reputation for tolerance toward foreigners and as a land of asylum for political refugees. But it was also the capital of letters, the arts, luxurious living, and fashion. Paris was therefore at once the intellectual capital of the world, the arbiter of good taste, and (at least in the mythological account that later circulated throughout the entire world) the source of political democracy: an idealized city where artistic freedom could be proclaimed and lived. (Casanova 24)

As the parenthetic comment in this passage hints, the numerous anecdotal accounts by artists who lived and worked in Paris through the nineteenth and first three quarters of the twentieth century gave to it a mythic status as the capital of ‘those who proclaimed themselves to be stateless and above political laws: in a word, artists’ (Casanova 29; see also 26-7).<sup>8</sup> This impulse to transcend through art the claims of locality as conditioned by national politics is evident as much in the form of Coetzee’s novels as their explicit content. As we saw in Chapter 1, it is an impulse most clearly narrativised in *Youth*: John leaves South Africa under the strong influence of an idea gained from his reading of the high modernists that in the cultural capital of London he can make a name for himself as a writer and so live without stigmatic reference to his past in South Africa. This desire,

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<sup>7</sup> First published in 1999 as *La république mondiale des lettres* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil).

<sup>8</sup> In his critique of Casanova’s thesis, Christopher Prendergast points out that a large catalogue of anecdotes about Paris by a multitude of writers provides empirical grounds for the argument for Paris as the *de facto* world literary capital until recent times, but in itself this is not enough to secure Casanova’s argument. ‘At a deeper level,’ he writes, ‘the argument would require a more theoretically robust explanation than that implied by purely anecdotal accumulation’ (8, fn. 3).

as we saw, contributes to his admiration for Beckett, whom he senses is ‘outside class’ (*Youth* 155), as John himself aspires to be.

## **The Provincial**

Following Casanova, Brouillette explains how the rise of multinational publishing houses trading primarily in literature in English led to a shift away from Paris and the idea of such a metropolis as the most conducive site for an artistic life to Anglo-American metropolises like London and New York, which owe their status as ‘literary capitals’ to being centres of the globalised commercial book trade (Brouillette 59, Casanova 164). Coetzee’s reluctance to accept the label ‘South African novelist’ stems as much from his concern that his books speak to a wider than South African audience as his awareness that the material processes of the globalised book trade problematise this neat label. This awareness is evident, for instance, in his comment in a 1983 interview with Tony Morphet: ‘I sometimes wonder whether it isn’t that vast and wholly ideological superstructure constituted by publishing, reviewing and criticism that is forcing on me the fate of being a “South African novelist”’ (Coetzee, ‘Two Interviews’ 460).<sup>9</sup> Yet, while Coetzee might have good reasons for rejecting the national tag as a marker of his identity as a writer, I agree with Brouillette that the liminal self-positioning observable in his characters’ expression of reluctance and reservation about being members of a colonial society, as well as in Coetzee’s comments to the same effect in interviews (for instance, in *Doubling the Point* 393-94) amplifies the interest of his work for an international readership.

Much though Coetzee has sought to avoid lending his accredited literary voice to any straightforward anti-apartheid statement, insisting instead on some special autonomy for aesthetics, he has nevertheless clearly benefited from critical and market interest in literary writing coming out of apartheid South Africa, and he has sought to comment in his own ambiguous way on the South African political scene. (Brouillette 123)

That is to say, it remains the case that Coetzee has a special interest in positioning himself in relation to South Africa, if not as a spokesperson for a group (apartheid-era dissident white

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<sup>9</sup> See also Coetzee’s remarks in a 1978 interview with Stephen Watson (Coetzee, ‘Speaking: J.M. Coetzee’ 24). For other illuminating discussions of Coetzee’s self-conscious positioning as a writer in relation to his readerships in South Africa and abroad, see McDonald 303-20, van der Vlies 1-19, and Wittenberg.

Afrikaners, hide-bound liberals) or a representative of a literary denomination ('white writing')<sup>10</sup> within the country, then at least as a mediator between 'provincial' experience and the 'metropolitan' mores of his transnational readership. This mediating function, which is a matter of self-positioning and his publishers' marketing strategies, is most clearly evident in the phrase 'scenes from provincial life' that Coetzee recycles as the subtitle of his semi-autobiographical fictions *Boyhood*, the American edition of *Youth*, and *Summertime*. Focused in the idea of 'the provincial,' there is a tension that bears examining between Coetzee's interest as an author in emphasising this aspect of his historical experience as the anchoring caption to his narratives, and his fictional avatars' desire to escape the insularity of what they experience as provincial life.

One of the non-fictional sites where this tension came to the surface was Coetzee's award speech on receiving the CNA prize in 1980 for *Waiting for the Barbarians* (his most 'placeless' novel). In the speech he delivered on this occasion, published in the Afrikaans newspaper *Die Vaderland* under the title 'SA authors must learn modesty,' Coetzee challenged the assumption that South African writers in English are 'building a new national literature,' arguing instead that they are 'building on to an established provincial literature.' Coetzee's argument rested on the claim that 'what you can say, what you can think, what you can feel, are always limited and defined by the forms in which they can be expressed,' and that these forms are typically recast in the metropolitan 'cultural centres where the overlay of old forms is densest and where the resistance of old form to new expression is felt most oppressively.' Coetzee went on to defend the idea of the provincial writer by suggesting a rehabilitation of the connotations of the provincial from 'the backward, the smug, the philistine' to associations that could include 'a sense of cultural and historical continuity at the level of the lives of ordinary people, respect for localities; craftsmanship; sobriety.'

In this acceptance speech Coetzee was doing more than questioning the assumption underpinning the CNA Award that a writer like himself was contributing to one of the two national literatures the award was designed to promote in South Africa (English and Afrikaans): he was also 'attempting to position himself on an alternative, necessarily inexact and specifically literary map and to create space for his own metropolitan "affiliations"' in what amounted to 'a revisionist anti-nationalis[t]' gesture (McDonald 306). In other words, Coetzee here rejects the idea of a discrete and autonomous South African national literature or literatures in favour of reasserting the opposition between province and metropolis and the relationship of dependency it implies. If innovations in literary form typically occur in the metropolitan centres, it is on the staple scenes of

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<sup>10</sup> This is the title of a 1988 book of essays by Coetzee that focuses on a body of writing Coetzee describes as 'white' to the extent that 'it is generated by the concerns of people no longer European, not yet African' (*White Writing* 11).

provincial experience that these forms can offer the freshest perspectives. The provincial writer, in this light, becomes an agent of re-envisioning or ‘rediscovering’ the ordinary<sup>11</sup> where the ordinary is presumed to be most static and least interesting. In recasting the South African literary field in these terms, Coetzee uses the idea of the provincial to introduce an element of distance and perspective into his identity *as a writer* in relation to his historical experience. The significance of this gesture lies in the subtle shift from ‘provincial writer’ to ‘a writer of scenes from provincial life.’

In her account of the structure and dynamics of world literary space, Casanova gives more thorough theoretical elaboration, though in slightly different terms, to the polarity ‘province-metropolis’ that Coetzee invokes in his award speech. Casanova argues that world literary space is organised around an opposition between an ‘autonomous’ pole and a ‘heteronomous’ pole. Whereas the autonomous pole comprises ‘those spaces that are most endowed with literary resources, which serves as a model and a recourse for writers claiming a position of independence in newly formed spaces,’ the heteronomous pole consists of ‘relatively deprived literary spaces at early stages of development that are dependent on political – typically national – authorities’ (Casanova 108). This conception leads Casanova to distinguish between ‘national’ and ‘international’ writers (108). The latter group, upholding an autonomous conception of literature and aspiring to consecration beyond their country of origin, tend to privilege formal experimentalism over more direct (naturalising) modes of realism – ‘neonaturalist, picturesque, proletarian, socialist’ (Casanova 108). Coetzee’s penchant for equipping his fictional narratives with anti-realist features situates his work more comfortably in the latter category of the ‘international’ writer.

It is in the light of this point that Coetzee’s recourse in his Nobel Lecture to Defoe, ‘father’ of the English novel, becomes especially intriguing. At the moment of his ceremonious consecration as an international or world writer, Coetzee recurs to the prototypical realist novel, in which the economic aspect of the British colonial enterprise is promoted through the example of an individual’s industrious self-sufficiency. Is it plausible that Crusoe recommends himself to Coetzee’s purpose in this lecture on the grounds of his putative autonomy, his status as a character who eclipses and transcends the author who sought to contain his experience in a book? A character, to put the point differently, who in speaking for himself speaks for the work without recourse to ‘his’ author? Before turning more directly to Coetzee’s use of Defoe and Crusoe in the lecture, I want to consider the context of the Nobel Prize itself.

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<sup>11</sup> Njabulo Ndebele uses the phrase ‘the rediscovery of the ordinary’ in an essay collected in a book of the same title (1991).

## The Nobel Prize and Universality

In his will, made public in 1896, the Swedish industrialist Alfred Nobel made provision for an annual award to be made in his name in the fields of medicine, chemistry, physics, literature, and international fraternity (peace). The wording of his will stipulated divergent criteria of evaluation: the award must recognise an individual's lifetime achievement, yet it must be awarded for a particular, recent work, and it must honour work for its humanitarian value, work that confers the "greatest good upon mankind" or "tends in "an ideal direction"" (English 55-58). It is the nature of cultural prizes that they mutually benefit the individual recipient and the conferring organisation, raising the status and authority of both (English 38-39). By the same logic, behind the universal ambitions of the Nobel Prize lay a 'nationalist initiative on the European model, designed to raise the cultural profile and broaden the cultural authority of a self-consciously minor European nation-state' (English 55). As English notes, the Nobel Prize for Literature was unprecedented both in the global field it adjudicated and the size of its purse, setting the standard for a number of awards that aspired to its power of consecration – the Pulitzer in the United States, and the Prix Goncourt and Prix Femina in France (28, 54).

The Nobel Prize for Literature, as Casanova describes it, is an award that offers 'the greatest proof of literary consecration, bordering on the definition of literary art itself' (147). What sets it apart from other literary prizes is the Swedish Academy's concerted efforts to identify and celebrate qualities it recognises as universal (Casanova 148). In the early years of the prize, between 1901 and the First World War, the committee identified superior literary art with political neutrality. This emphasis on idealism, or more specifically the 'ideal of peace' Nobel wrote of in his will, gained a new inflection in the context of European politics in the late 1930s (Casanova 149). The criterion of universality was later refined to take into account how widely a literary work had circulated and how unanimously it had been positively received (Casanova 150). Since 1945, the definition of universality was further modified to recognise and privilege experimental and pioneering elements in a literary work (Casanova 152).

The Swedish Academy's 2003 award citation is clear in articulating the qualities of Coetzee's novels that it intends the award to celebrate. In the citation Coetzee is described as a 'postmodern allegorist' concerned with 'the dangerous attraction of the inner self ... the senses and bodies of people, the interiority of Africa' (Nobelprize.org). His characters 'seek refuge beyond the zones of power,' Michael K being the paradigmatic figure, 'a virgin being, viewing the world from an infinite remove,' 'desiring nothing,' 'neither war nor revolution, neither power nor money' (Nobelprize.org). Noting Coetzee's recent relocation to Adelaide, the citation goes on to specify

that for ‘the Swedish Academy, national roots are irrelevant and we do not recognise what in Europe is often called the literary periphery’ (Nobelprize.org). In sum, the Swedish Academy privileges the thematic emphasis on transcendence and immanence in Coetzee’s work. This award citation resonates with Coetzee’s own self-characterisation (tellingly in the interview on South African writers) in *Doubling the Point*, where he speaks of himself as ‘someone who has intimations of freedom (as every chained prisoner has) and constructs representations – which are shadows themselves – of people slipping their chains and turning their faces to the light’ (341). All of Coetzee’s novels labour to preserve the subtle colour and inflection of the individual voice at risk of being assimilated, or in Coetzee’s words, flattened and reduced,<sup>12</sup> to the chorus of a specific political cause. But, as in the lessons of *Elizabeth Costello*, there seems to be a marked silence in ‘He and His Man’ about political issues as such.

Coetzee’s Nobel Lecture is of a different species to the speech he delivered on receiving the Jerusalem Prize in 1987. On that occasion he spoke in plain terms about the challenges of writing in South Africa where apartheid has such a tyrannical hold on the commonplaces of life that artists are hard-pressed to out-imagine what is in front of them. The surprising form of Coetzee’s Nobel Lecture also stands in contrast to every other literature laureate’s lecture. In her 1991 lecture, titled ‘Writing and Being,’ Nadine Gordimer, the other South African writer to win the Nobel Prize in literature, spoke about the nature of the writer’s vocation, her early forays in writing, the tension between political commitment and aesthetic integrity. At one point in her lecture she remarked that ‘nothing factual that I write or say will be as truthful as my fiction. The life, the opinions, are not the work, for it is in the tension between standing apart and being involved that the imagination transforms both’ (Gordimer, ‘Writing and Being’). The first part of this remark echoes Coetzee’s argument in ‘The Novel Today,’ a 1987 speech in which Coetzee objected to the tendency of the discourse of history, particularly at that politically tense moment in South Africa, to set itself up and be taken as a master discourse over the discourse of the novel. Coetzee argued that by representing historical reality as it is experienced and perceived through the fabric of individual lives, the novel offers a way of rivalling the discourse of history by revealing its mythological pretensions. The second part of Gordimer’s remark, quoted above, provides an apt description of Coetzee’s procedure in *Diary of a Bad Year*, where the writer JC’s range of opinions are qualified by his interactions with his secretary Anya and her partner Allan. The design of that book is partly motivated by an awareness, which JC expresses with reference to Harold Pinter’s Nobel Lecture,

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<sup>12</sup> In ‘The Novel Today’ Coetzee remarks that his arguments in this public address possess ‘a fragile metalanguage with very little body, one that is liable, at any moment, to find itself flattened and translated back and down into the discourse of politics, a sub-discourse of the discourse of history’ (3).

that in entering the sphere of politics the writer sacrifices the idiom in which he is most authoritative: fictional narrative. Whereas in her lecture Gordimer reflects in general terms, though with reference to a few specific writers, on what it means to be a writer in a climate of political ferment and oppression, Pinter's 2005 Nobel Lecture takes the form of an impassioned and accusatory speech about politics. In this text, titled 'Art, Truth & Politics,' Pinter protests against the United States's war in Iraq and singles out Tony Blair for attack for his collusion with George Bush. Like Coetzee's offering, Pinter's text cannot accurately be described as a 'lecture:' it is closer to a tirade, its terms denunciatory, its tone strident.

By the measure of Pinter's text, Coetzee's 'lecture' appears not to be about politics at all. And why, after all, should it be, given the ambitions of the Swedish Academy as far as possible to stand outside politics in adjudicating worthy recipients of the Nobel awards? However, as English notes, the Nobel Prize for Literature 'has always carried something of the same moral burden [as humanitarian awards], increasingly so in recent decades as it has come to signify belated recognition of national and minority literatures and to favor writers of strong political conviction who have become icons of moral leadership in their particular national or subnational communities' (59).<sup>13</sup> Coetzee has throughout his career declined the role of the writer as social visionary: one recalls his comment in *Doubling the Point*: 'I am not a herald of community or anything else' (341). In the previous chapter I showed how the lessons of *Elizabeth Costello* present the acclaimed writer as an unheroic, fallible figure who, if she exemplifies anything, exemplifies the writer's ability to *feel with others, see as an other, but not speak for another*.<sup>14</sup>

In 'He and His Man' the writer, exemplary or not, seems hardly to be present. The historical author (Coetzee, Defoe) is offstage; it is the fictional character, purported author of his own story, Robinson Crusoe, who occupies the foreground of the text. And it is less as a writer than a reader that Crusoe is presented, a figure who with increasing agitation springs to pin down significations in the correlations he draws between events in his man's reports and his island experience. While the text might appear to be a benign meditation on the mystery of aesthetic creativity, Crusoe's example suggests that the political enters the text through the necessary act of the reader's interpretation.

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<sup>13</sup> This 'moral burden' stems from the stipulation in Nobel's will about the humanitarian value of the eligible work, a stipulation that has produced conflicting interpretations about whether artistic greatness is more a matter of sociopolitical responsiveness or aesthetic purity (English 60). This tension, English notes, is evident as much in the internal disagreements among jurors as in the competition among prizes themselves (60). It is also a tension borne out in the history of the criticism of Coetzee's novels.

<sup>14</sup> 'Storytelling is another, an other mode of thinking,' Coetzee remarked in 'The Novel Today' (4).

## The Text(ure) of an Individual Life

The epigraph to Coetzee's lecture suggests that the two individuals referred to by the title 'He and His Man' will be Crusoe and his manservant Friday. The 'he' of the text is recognisable as Crusoe by the mention in the tenth and eleventh paragraph of his sun-darkened skin, a parasol fashioned of palmetto leaves, and a parrot taught to squawk *Poor Robin Crusoe!* But for Friday Coetzee substitutes Defoe, who is represented as co-responsible for the reports that by a strange division of agency issue from Crusoe's pen. 'In the evening by candlelight,' runs Coetzee's text, 'he [Crusoe] will take out his papers and sharpen his quills and write a page or two of his man' ('He and His Man'). By day Crusoe strolls the quays of Bristol while in his mind 'his man gallops about the kingdom making his inspections' ('He and His Man'); at night Crusoe attends to his man's latest report in an act one could as well call reading as writing. From the priority given to these reports and from Crusoe's speculations about the true identity of his man, one is inclined to believe that in the world of Coetzee's text this man is a distinct historical personage, unacquainted with and living a life independent of Crusoe. But this intuition is constantly checked by the possessive determiner 'his,' which premises this character's life upon Crusoe's. That his man is no other than Defoe emerges from the detail that he has a mole on his chin, is pursued by debtors, but more decisively by the samples of his writing drawn from his reports. These samples Coetzee has cut and paraphrased from Defoe's *A Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724) and *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722). It troubles Crusoe that his man should resemble his island parrot who 'even at his best ... spoke no word he was not taught to speak by his master' ('He and His Man'). Crusoe finds that only 'when he yields himself up to this man of his' do authoritative-sounding phrases flow from his pen ('He and His Man'). In short, Crusoe's authority as a writer is predicated on the existence of 'his man,' even though this man's true identity remains veiled to Crusoe.

Given that the Nobel Lecture is intended to showcase the writer as a cultural authority, what might be the significance of Coetzee shifting the spotlight onto a character who is only nominally the author of his adventures? The answer has to do with the conjunction of character and text in the name 'Robinson Crusoe.' Like Don Quixote and Faust, Crusoe is more than a hero of fiction: he is a character who has acquired a 'semi-historical status, like the traditional heroes of myth' (Watt, 'Robinson Crusoe as a Myth' 288-9). In his essay on *Robinson Crusoe* in *Stranger Shores*,<sup>15</sup> Coetzee notes that 'it is a tribute to an author ... though of a rather backhanded kind, that he should be eclipsed by one of his creations' (18). The 'autobiographical charade' (Coetzee, *Stranger Shores*

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<sup>15</sup> This essay was originally published as the introduction to the 1999 World's Classics edition of *Robinson Crusoe*.

21), according to which Crusoe claims to be the author of *Robinson Crusoe*, is supported as much by the unprecedented empiricism of Defoe's narrative method as by the paratextual assertions about the text's authenticity to be found in the prefaces to the successive volumes of the book. In his seminal study *The Rise of the Novel* (1963), Ian Watt attributes *Robinson Crusoe*'s reputation as the first novel in English to its being 'the first fictional narrative in which an ordinary person's daily activities are the centre of continuous literary attention' (74), testimony to the writer's 'dispassionate and scientific scrutiny of life' (11). The preface to volume 1 of the novel (*The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*) contains the assertion that the text is a 'just History of Fact' (Defoe 3); the preface to volume III (*Serious Reflections during the Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*) is written in the first person and signed 'Robinson Crusoe,' who affirms that he is a living individual and that his story 'though Allegorical, is also Historical' (Defoe 240). As a prototypical realist character, Crusoe is distinctly enough realised to seem to stand alone from his fictional matrix, but at the same time he is presented as an instructive example for readers of particular kinds of behaviour: industriousness, fortitude, Calvinist introspection, resourcefulness, self-sufficiency.<sup>16</sup> While the Crusoe narratives burgeon with itemised descriptions of things in the world, Crusoe's experiences invite allegorisation in religious terms for the moral improvement of the books' readers. As Cornwell has noted, Defoe's emphasis on the reader's 'Improvement' (Defoe 3) is a symptom of the lingering influence of the emblematic traditions of spiritual autobiography, Guide literature, and Providence literature on his writing (103-4).<sup>17</sup> But in 'He and His Man' Crusoe emerges as an exemplary figure of the writer as much as a reader interpreting his man's reports in terms of his limited field of reference.

Crusoe's dual status as producer and interpreter of his man's reports allows Coetzee to suggest that allegorisation is a function of writing as much as reading. Whether Crusoe is viewed more substantially as the writer or reader of the reports, Crusoe's island experience marks the limit of his interpretive field. His allegorisations, which become 'increasingly fanciful, parodic, absurd' (Cornwell 102), involve near-obsessive recourse to his island experience, underlining this formative (textualised) experience of his life as the primary referent and drastically narrowing the interpretation of the outlandish things that come to him in his 'writing.' Crusoe acknowledges this point to himself in a parenthesis in which he wonders about the details, the remainder, not accounted for by his allegorical interpretation of his man's reports: '(But of what else does he secretly sing, he wonders to himself, this poor afflicted man of whom he reads, besides his

<sup>16</sup> Watt has argued that Crusoe's behaviour on the island exemplifies the principles of capitalist enterprise (*homo economicus*), while also providing an index of the secularisation of religious (primarily Calvinist) worldviews in Defoe's day. See Watt, 'Robinson Crusoe as a Myth' 288-306 and *The Rise of the Novel* 65-82.

<sup>17</sup> This influence has been detailed by Starr and Hunter.

desolation?') ('He and His Man').<sup>18</sup> This reservation, 'to the point' of the text precisely because given in an aside,<sup>19</sup> primes the ground for undermining readers' interpretations of Coetzee's text by implying that interpretation is necessarily *inexhaustive*: an inassimilable residue remains that partakes partially of the work and the author's life. This is why it matters in 'He and His Man' that 'Robinson Crusoe' denotes an individual and a text. In his attempts to interpret his man's reports in terms of his own island experience, Crusoe, as the primary reader of the reports, hits up against the limits of biographical interpretation, which are simultaneously the limits of the insight he can offer as the supposed actual author of these reports.

While his man's reports are predicated on Crusoe's activity of writing, the text maintains Crusoe's ignorance in respect of the things these reports contain. This dynamic extends to Crusoe's skill as a writer: 'Only when he yields himself up to his man do such [fine-sounding] words come.' The implication is that Crusoe is no more in a position to speak authoritatively about his man than Coetzee is willing to assume such a position in relation to his characters or texts. The word that signals the relevance of this dynamic to the context of Coetzee's lecture is 'report.' The definition of 'report' that answers Coetzee's use of the word in his lecture is a document of testamentary value, an account whose authority primarily lies in the writer's information having been gained at first-hand. It is as the subject of a writing life, the redundant primary witness to a literary achievement, that Nobel laureates in literature are called upon to offer the Swedish Academy a personal view, in the form of a lecture, of their work. Coetzee's report to the Academy does not fit this mould: a writer's reports are at issue in the text of his lecture, but they are presented second-hand through the mediating agency of the unreliable witness, the unwitting writer Crusoe.<sup>20</sup>

In an interview in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee responds to one of Attwell's questions about *Life & Times of Michael K* by expressing his 'immense' discomfort at being called upon to 'answer for (in two senses) my novels' (205; Coetzee's italics). The two senses of 'answering for' Coetzee takes issue with here are (i) speaking on behalf of his character and text, and (ii) defending his text against hostile criticism. Part Two of *Michael K* anticipates the reader's interpretive gesture by having the Medical Officer probe at K's reticent behaviour. In resisting (although only to some

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<sup>18</sup> In *Doubling the Point* Coetzee voices a similar concern about how far an explanation of *Life & Times of Michael K* in terms of Kafka and Kafka's situation can adequately explain Coetzee's contextual motivations for writing that novel: 'What is left of Franz 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? Is it not what is left *after* that interrogation that should interest us, not what the interrogation reveals? Is it not what Kafka does *not* speak, refuses to speak, under that interrogation, that will continue to fuel our desire for him (I hope forever)?' (*Doubling the Point* 199-200; Coetzee's italics).

<sup>19</sup> Relevant here is a strand of Hayes's argument about Coetzee's debt to Beckett in having his characters speak from positions 'beside the point.' See, for instance, Hayes 50-1.

<sup>20</sup> Kafka's short story 'A Report to an Academy' also comes to mind here, primarily from Coetzee's use of it in Lessons 1 and 3 of *Elizabeth Costello*.

extent: Coetzee does offer some thoughts on his novel) the call to interpret *Life & Times of Michael K*, Coetzee tests the resistance the character Michael K and the book to which K gives him name offer to the enclosures and finalities of others' interpretations, allotropes of the forms of institutional authority K seeks to evade in the novel. The title of that rich collection of interviews and essays, 'Doubling the Point,' reinforces, or *doubles*, the point (to the extent that there is a singular point) Coetzee dramatises in 'He and His Man.' In his introduction to *Doubling the Point*, Attwell explains that the title describes Coetzee's reflection or 'doubling back' in the book's interviews on ideas and texts he worked on in essays he wrote alongside his novels through the course of his career. The idea of 'doubling back,' Attwell notes, registers an 'element of redundancy' in the exercise of the author writing about<sup>21</sup> his essays and novels in discursive prose, but also holds out the possibility that the dialogues with Attwell 'will involve more than mere repetition' (*Doubling the Point* 3). At a broader level, Attwell notes, the title captures the self-reflexivity that marks all of Coetzee's writing, which emerges from the encounter, in Coetzee's biography at the Cape, between a history of colonialism and apartheid, on the one hand, and his intellectual debt to European modernism and modern linguistics, on the other (*Doubling the Point* 3). The colonial history of 'rounding the Cape' thus underlies the idea of 'doubling the point,' which, not at all fortuitously, is a phrase that originates in the narration of Crusoe's attempt to circumnavigate his island in *Robinson Crusoe* (Defoe 100).<sup>22</sup>

Which returns us to 'He and his Man.' On the surface Crusoe seems to enact an interpretive flight from text (his man's reports) to life (his own island experience). But because Crusoe's island experience is the subject of a canonised text, from Crusoe's point of view this movement appears to track from text to life, while from the reader's point of view it amounts a folding back of text upon text within Defoe's oeuvre. The name 'Robinson Crusoe' is the crucial hinge of this movement, for it denotes a novel, a character, and implicitly a self-made author. Crusoe is the special case of a character who seems to be a text unto himself, a self-contained universe: autonomous (or redundant). Earlier I asked whether this putative autonomy recommends Crusoe to Coetzee's purpose in this lecture. I suggest that this reading is not plausible as Crusoe's autonomy is predicated on the existence of his man. Certainly Crusoe can be seen to appeal to Coetzee as a figure who stands at the unstable border between history and fiction, who in gaining for his story

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<sup>21</sup> The interviews of *Doubling the Point* were conducted in writing.

<sup>22</sup> Sanders's essay was one of eight included in a volume of *Journal of Literary Studies* devoted to 'Coetzee and his Doubles.' In his review of *Summertime* James Meek offers an urbane gloss of Coetzee's Nobel Lecture: "'He and His Man'" is ostensibly about Robinson Crusoe and Daniel Defoe, but really about doubles ... The Nobel performance was itself a sort of doubling. "Here you see JM Coetzee, the silver-haired old fellow who joins you for dinner," it seemed to say. "Yet that isn't the Coetzee you are giving a prize to; you are giving a prize to Coetzee the writer, who perforce cannot be here. I shall read you some of his work'" (Meek 4).

the credibility of a 'true history' fulfils the claim Coetzee makes in 'The Novel Today' for the novel as a subjective discourse to rival the orthodox discourse of history.<sup>23</sup> But as much as Crusoe occupies the foreground of the text, it is Defoe, like Friday in *Foe*, who is equally, if subliminally the focal subject of the text.

Cornwell has observed that in the process of formulating it as a question, Crusoe forgets the question of his man's identity that he sets out to address. 'Robin intends or purports to say one thing,' writes Cornwell, 'but ends up saying another. It is as if his thoughts have been commandeered in the very process of their articulation by another, more urgent agency – the agency of narrative, driven by the linguistic logic of figuration and enfolding the imperative of interpretation' (102). Cornwell argues that 'He and His Man' demonstrates the ways in which '*language inevitably gets in the way of itself*' (Cornwell 98; Cornwell's italics). While I admit that this impasse may be at issue in the text, my sense is that the slippage of identity between 'he' and 'his man' more immediately dramatises the oscillating congruence and cleavage between the self who writes and the self who is written. I also maintain that this lecture-fiction is more directly a response to the universalising implication of the Nobel award and its entailment that the writer use the opportunity of the lecture to reflect on the personal-historical matrices out of which his work has emerged.

Earlier in the chapter I detailed how the Nobel Prize embodies a form of literary consecration that upholds an ideal of universality and aspires to judge writers' work without bias towards their nationality. Drawing on Casanova's and Brouillette's discussions of the polarisation of world literary space into autonomous and heteronomous poles, I noted how Coetzee has through his career rejected the designation 'South African writer' on the grounds that while his subject matter is provincial-colonial experience, his narratives speak to a wider than South African audience. I have argued that Coetzee's response to the Nobel award takes the form of a counterclaim to the effect that neither would it be sufficient for him to domesticate his work as the product of a narrowly South African experience, nor would it be in the anti-triumphalist, sceptical spirit of his fictional aesthetic to offer a frank, summary account of his literary achievement in the form of a conventional lecture. By hinging his lecture on a character like Crusoe, whose castaway experience exerts a magnetic hold on his imagination, limiting his interpretive field, Coetzee seems to point to the Swedish Academy's inconsistency in inviting a writer to reflect on the contextual wellsprings of his work on the occasion of an award that celebrates that work for its universal relevance and application.

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<sup>23</sup> See 'The Novel Today' 3-4.

## Chapter 4

### Emigration and Affiliation: *Slow Man*

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In the previous chapter I suggested why Coetzee's official public response to the consecration of the Nobel Prize for Literature took the strategically oblique and laconic form of an allegory about authorship. In *Slow Man* Coetzee extends his exploration of the metafictional dynamic between the one who writes and the one who is written, but he does so in a more relaxed and domestic idiom, and with the emphasis falling more squarely on the experience of emigration. More squarely, yet still obliquely: the novel shifts among forms of displacement and levels of narrative without prioritising one over another. Rayment's bicycle accident is the first and most abrupt displacement-event in the novel. The accident prepares the way for the second-order, historical displacement of Rayment's and Marijana's respective emigrations to Australia, which Rayment imagines constitutes the common ground on which to forge a bond with Marijana's son Drago. Costello's role in the novel draws attention to Coetzee's emigration to Australia as an occasion for exploring questions about affiliation, belonging, and the relation between personal and national history.

Rayment expresses his desire to affiliate himself to others by seeking, at a local level, to formalise his relationship to Marijana's family and, more broadly, by making the bequest of the Fauchery photographs to the Australian State archive. Whereas in *Slow Man* the emphasis falls on Rayment's desire to achieve forms of specific and general affiliation to groups of others, *Diary of a Bad Year* centres on JC's attempt to negotiate the drawbacks of his affiliations, particularly in the form of crimes committed in the name of a collective to which he belongs or in the name of ideas to which he subscribes. JC undertakes this negotiation on the strength of his name as a writer speaking for the public record. As we will see in the next chapter, JC's remarks on collective shame – which emerges as a condition sustained by one's consciousness of the gaze of others – pose the question of whether and how a line can be drawn between a personal and a collective history. For JC, as for Paul Rayment in *Slow Man*, this question is posed with pathos and urgency amid his thoughts about his debilitating body, what trace will remain of him once he is dead, and how he will be remembered.

In the first four sections of this chapter I explore how the Fauchery photographs seem to hold out the promise for Rayment of realising his desire to bond with Drago and remember himself to the Australian nation, but finally reveal Rayment's mistaken assumptions about both priorities.

Drawing on the work of Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes I explain how these photographs provide a means for Rayment to reflect at once on the unstable nature of the historical record and his status as a fictional character in this novel. Using my discussion of photographs as a foundation, in the final section of the chapter I show how Costello's presence in the novel sets Rayment's experiences in the context of Coetzee's concerns as a writer recently arrived in Australia seeking to orientate and place himself in relation to his new national and historical context. Imported into *Slow Man* from the book that takes her name, Costello's status as the nominal author of Rayment's story creates a tension between these two characters. From Rayment's point of view this tension amounts to a struggle for agency and control over the direction his story takes, but for the reader, Costello's presence shifts the narrative frame of the novel at once inward and outward: inward, in laying bare the creative process of the story involving Rayment and Marijana; and outward, in situating *Slow Man* in sequence with *Elizabeth Costello* as a fiction that absorbs and reconfigures the author's literary celebrity and emigration to Australia as material for a further guarded fiction of the *I*.<sup>1</sup>

### **Forms of Displacement and Disjunction**

The bicycle accident that jolts *Slow Man* to life immobilises the protagonist. The blow of the car that knocks Rayment from his bike into a semi-conscious heap on the tarmac opens a perspective in which the world swims before his eyes, eludes direct apprehension, escapes him. But even before he hits the ground, as he flies through the air in the split-second following the collision, Rayment has been shocked from that familiar space where words have meaningful referents in the world. While Rayment is air-borne, his mind narrates the event he is in the process of undergoing. The phrases that unroll in his mind materialise within a time-frame independent of the historical time in which his displacement from bicycle through air to tarmac takes place.

*Relax!* he tells himself as he flies through the air (*flies through the air with the greatest of ease!*), and indeed he can feel his limbs go obediently slack. *Like a cat*, he tells himself: *roll, then spring to your feet, ready for what comes next*. The unusual word *limber* or *limbre* is on the horizon too. (*Slow Man* 1; Coetzee's italics)

The italicised phrases here identify the accident as the occasion of a literary description, later

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<sup>1</sup> Coetzee uses this phrase in his essay on Gerrit Achterberg's sonnet sequence, 'Ballade van de gasfitter' (*Doubling the Point* 73).

attributed to Costello; but they are also a typographical sign of the sense of disjunction that comes to dominate Rayment's experience after the accident. As a physical event, the accident violently marks Rayment's body as the site of pain and loss. As an event in time, it marks a decisive rupture in Rayment's personal history, a line cordoning off a relatively unconsidered ('frivolous') past from a newly self-conscious present: 'By the sign of this cut let a new life commence' (26). As the accident opens the narrative it opens a new phase in Rayment's life, bringing him to consciousness in a haze of pain that is inseparably the author's gazing at words on a screen with an inchoate sense of where the conjunction of this character and this event might lead.

When Rayment wakes in hospital, incomplete words form in his mind, sourceless human voices reach his ears. In his delicate physical and mental state he is sensitive to the form of the phrases that are spoken to him (his doctor will '*bring him up to speed,*' his condition is '*not serious*' (6)), but the meaning of these phrases is no longer self-evident. He feels alienated from the hospital environment, but more pointedly from his injured leg. With an aversion that recalls Mrs Curren's reluctance in *Age of Iron* to pronounce to herself the name of the disease racking her body (cancer), Rayment distances himself from his amputated leg and the prosthesis spoken of by his doctor by thinking of each as a *thing*, foreign and unnameable.<sup>2</sup> Pain is the imperative that forces him to recognise and accept his new condition, which is strange enough to be a dream.

*Slow Man* begins, then, with a physical event that violently displaces Rayment from his bicycle and the groove of his accustomed life and disjoins his sense of his body and history. The surfacing in his thoughts of the sequence of letters 'Q-W-E-R-T-Y' (3) frames this physical event as a creative act of writing in which he is the partly self-conscious subject. Rayment's accident leads to a radical contraction of his horizons: crippled, he is restricted to his flat; inhabiting what he calls a 'zone of humiliation' (61), he dwells in his homespace and is chary of ventures into the outside world. By bringing the professional carer Marijana Jokić into his circumscribed life, Rayment's bicycle accident brings into view a different order of displacement – emigration.

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<sup>2</sup> The structure of the bicycle itself anticipates this divorce between 'I' and 'me,' mind as subject and body as object, which is a philosophical conceit that pervades Coetzee's novels, most notably the first part of *Dusklands*. Coetzee derives the idea from Descartes and follows Beckett in giving it narrative form (see Beckett's novels *Murphy* (1938), *Watt* (1953), *Molloy* (1951), *Malone Dies* (1951), and *The Unnamable* (1953) for the stages of Beckett's working-through of the implications of Cartesian dualism and systematic doubt). In significant respects Eugene Dawn, who quotes Descartes in his Vietnam report (*Dusklands* 20), is Coetzee's answer to Beckett's Murphy. For Coetzee as for Beckett, the bicycle is the vehicle that best summarises the Cartesian hypothesis of a mind serenely detached from the industrious machine of the body. Hugh Kenner memorably characterises the cyclist as a 'Cartesian Centaur: 'the mind set on survival, mastery, and contemplation of immutable relativities (*tout passe, et tout dure*), the body a reduction to uncluttered terms of the quintessential machine' (Kenner, *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study* 123, 124). In an occasional piece on cycle-touring in France, Coetzee completes Kenner's image in the following way: 'The lower limbs of the beast follow the preordained arc of the crank; while above the pumping thighs, still and godlike, sit the trunk and head, their humanity betrayed only by the sweat that pours from them (the bicycle itself remains cool and sleek)' (Coetzee, 'Cycling in France' 4).

Both Rayment and Marijana are emigrants to Australia: Rayment from France, Marijana from Croatia. The qualities in Marijana that appeal to Rayment range from her exotic name and handsome appearance to her efficiency about the house and her direct manner. He is especially attracted to Marijana as a capable maternal figure committed to supporting her family. It is largely because he has lost his mobility that he admires Marijana's stability in the real world (represented by her 'sturdy' legs (50)). He believes she embodies a structure of values he associates with the Old World of Europe, yet equally he sees her as a model of frank practical adaptability. This aspect of her character is reflected in her hybrid vocabulary and awkward but emphatic manner of speaking. She speaks a 'rapid, approximate Australian English' infused with slang, 'with Slavic liquids and an uncertain command of *a* and *the*' (27). Though himself an emigrant (a few times over), Rayment has a surer command of English idiom than Marijana. By the measure of his speech he is more fully assimilated to the Australian English linguistic community, but, unlike Marijana, he lacks the bonds of a family group, his own 'people.'<sup>3</sup> Rayment's interest in Marijana is charged by his solitary status in the world. Unmarried and childless, his parents and sister deceased, the erotic desire he feels for her is infused with a need to belong to a family. Whereas Rayment is something of a purist who resists change, Marijana is presented as an adaptable, cosmopolitan character – in this she anticipates Anya in *Diary of a Bad Year*. This contrast between Rayment and Marijana in personality and attitude, as well as Rayment's desire to affiliate himself to a group and remember himself to history, comes sharply into focus in their interactions over photographs.

### **The Aura of the Photograph**

In Coetzee's novels prior to *Slow Man*, photographs play a slight but significant role. In *Dusklands* Eugene Dawn carries around with him 24 incriminating photographs of American activity in Vietnam, classified material for his work on his Vietnam report. From poring over these photographs at night he draws a surreptitious pleasure that speaks to his voyeuristic fantasy of penetrating the mind and body of the other (at home, his wife Marilyn and son Martin; abroad, the treacherous Vietnamese). He gazes at his photographs secure in his detachment from the event he is ideologically complicit with but greedy for the gritty reality of. Magda in *In the Heart of the*

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<sup>3</sup> In *Age of Iron* Mrs Curren wonders what it means to 'have people' – it seems to her a phrase more suited to her domestic worker Florence than herself. This conviction stems largely from her sense of isolation and marginality as a white female retired professor of Classics, whose only child lives in America, and who is dying of cancer in Cape Town in the turbulent late 1980s when apartheid was entering its violent endgame. See also Chapter 22 of *Disgrace*, where David Lurie is forced to rethink what it means to speak of 'his' people after Lucy chooses to accept Petrus's offer of marriage (*Disgrace* 196-205).

*Country* is doubtful of many things, one of which is evidence of her childhood, and she suspects such evidence exists in the form of a forgotten daguerreotype secreted in a desk-drawer or trunk somewhere about her farmhouse (*In the Heart of the Country* 43). In *Age of Iron* Mrs Curren mulls over the absence of African labourers from a photograph taken of herself as a two-year-old child in a garden in Uniondale (*Age of Iron* 111).<sup>4</sup> A second photograph of her daughter's two sons afloat in a canoe on a lake in North America prompts Mrs Curren to interpret the life-jackets they wear as emblems of her daughter's insulated existence in America. It dispirits her to think that her daughter's children are out of touch with the brute facticity of death that she daily confronts as a cancer-ridden citizen of a country in the throes of revolt against apartheid (*Age of Iron* 194-5). As for the dissolute Vercueil, Mrs Curren thinks of him as unphotogenic in the manner of a recalcitrant prisoner or fabled animal, likely to emerge in a photograph blurred or incomplete (193). In contrast to their relatively marginal role in these novels, photographs in *Slow Man* are central to the plot.

Rayment's collection of Fauchery photographs focuses various conversations between the three main characters – Rayment, Marijana, and Costello – about forms of authenticity; they are also the object of Drago's 'theft' and 'forgery.' Rayment initially explains to Marijana that he started to collect these old photographs because he wanted to preserve in public memory the visual trace of the individuals represented in them. He later reveals that the collection sprang equally from his desire to preserve evidence of an outmoded method of photographic reproduction. He thinks of the photographs themselves as unwanted or forgotten, some of them 'last survivors, unique,' to which he has given 'a good home' (65). His interest in photography is limited to black and white prints. Originally a darkroom technician, he lost interest in photography with the advent of colour prints and digital modes of reproduction. Colourless prints evoke in him nostalgia not for a specific past but the past as such, instanced as a material relic. In their imperfection they seem to him more authentic visual documents than digitally doctored prints. But the question arises: how accurate is this assumption?

In his seminal essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility' (1936), Walter Benjamin argues that in the realm of visual art authenticity lies in 'the here and now of the original' artwork that has been passed down 'as the same, identical thing to the present day' (21). He notes that an artwork's authenticity is evidenced in the physical traces it bears of its passage through time and in the cultural record of its transfer through the hands of those who have owned it (21). As such, authenticity 'eludes technological ... reproduction' (21). Benjamin distinguishes between the claim to authority of an artwork reproduced manually as against one

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<sup>4</sup> In *White Writing* Coetzee writes about the silence around black African labour in novels in the English and Afrikaans tradition of the farm novel (see in particular 71-2).

reproduced by technological means. He argues that a manually reproduced replica cannot challenge the authority of an original because the traces of age on the latter are too subtle for imitation; absence of these traces identifies a false twin, a forgery. Because technological reproduction 'is more independent of the original artwork than is manual reproduction' (21), the former process can bring to light qualities of the artwork without physical interference. As examples, Benjamin notes how in photography an adjustment to a camera lens can change the focus and perspective with which an object is represented, and how in film the processes of slow motion and enlargement bring into relief details in the represented scene imperceptible to the human eye.<sup>5</sup> Technological reproduction has the further capacity to place a copy of an original artwork in a new context: Benjamin gives the example of a recording of an orchestral performance listened to in a private room (21-2). For Benjamin, 'what withers in the age of the technological reproducibility' is the aura of an artwork (22). He defines an artwork's aura as 'a strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be' (23).<sup>6</sup> It is precisely the auratic quality of his collected Fauchery photographs that Rayment is specially sensitive to.

Rayment attributes the aura of black and white photographs to the manual stages in the darkroom required to develop them. He contextualises his preference for analogue over digital photography as follows: 'to the rising generation the enchantment lay in a *techne* of images without substance, images that could flash through the ether without residing anywhere, that could be sucked into a machine and emerge from it doctored, untrue' (*Slow Man* 65). He is disquieted by the thought that an image in electronic form can be subjected to unconstrained manipulation in the period between its first recording and eventual printing. What unsettles him is that in this virtual space, the nowhere of an ether, the image is volatile in its potentiality: it is open to endless differentiation from the referent it purports to mirror. He finds a pathos as much in the textured singularity of the human individuals engrained in colourless images as of the prints themselves. For Rayment, these photographs' palpable age and air of obsolescence amplifies their authority as testaments to absence and loss.

Rayment's interest in the Fauchery photographs is thus not limited to the photographs' content but is antiquarian in a broader sense. He collects them because he perceives them to represent a more rooted and tactile mode of recording the world in images than modern electronic

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<sup>5</sup> According to Benjamin, the camera has the power of evoking what he calls 'the optical unconscious,' by which he means a deep structural choreography of objects invisible to the naked human eye (37).

<sup>6</sup> The translators of Benjamin's essay point out in a footnote that at 'stake in Benjamin's formulation is an interweaving not just of time and space – *einmalige Erscheinung*, literally 'one-time appearance' – but of far and near, *eine Ferne* suggesting both "a distance" in space or time and "something remote," however near it (the distance, or distant thing, that appears) may be' (Benjamin 43, fn. 5).

modes. Rayment's archaeological sense of history here recalls the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* who devotes a large share of his spare time to preserving and deciphering the enigmatic poplar slips he finds among the desert ruins outside his imperial settlement. He would like to believe that in the 'vacuousness of the desert,' and these ruins in particular, there lies 'a special historical poignancy' (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 16-17). The ruins and the poplar slips survive as relics of an earlier community's settlement, of which there remains no other material record. The Magistrate recognises that his preoccupation with these relics is a function of his social status and his private concern about how he will be remembered in history. This concern is both a natural reflex of his late middle age and a specific response to his sense of complicity with the Empire in its campaign (tortures, border raids), carried out by Colonel Joll of the Third Bureau, against the 'barbarians.' In drawing this parallel between Rayment and the Magistrate I want to emphasise their shared interest in *the trace* of that which is lost. This interest is significantly informed by an awareness of how in times of historical crisis individual voices are silenced by authorities or subsumed by collective narratives of struggle and resistance. In *Summertime*, a work in which the late author manifests in traces of writing and others' verbalised memories, it becomes clear that the Magistrate's and Rayment's preoccupation with the trace is wholly Coetzee's as a writer concerned to record in writing the movement of his characters' thought and feeling against the backcloth of collective history.<sup>7</sup>

To return to *Slow Man*, Rayment's hobby is more self-interested than it first appears: it answers his desire to affiliate himself to the Australian nation by ensuring that his name is publicly recorded as the donor of the Fauchery collection to the State Library in Adelaide. He thinks of his hobby as a matter of giving these Faucherys a home: by making a bequest of them – the 'Rayment Bequest' (65) – he hopes in turn to be accommodated in public memory as their preserver. Marijana approves of Rayment's pastime on the grounds that by collecting first-generation photographs he 'save history' [sic] (48). For Marijana, the value of Rayment's hobby lies in its contribution to an archive of public memory: as she says, 'So people don't think Australia is country without history, just bush and then mob of immigrants. Like me. Like us' (48). It is not clear to Rayment who is included in Marijana's 'us:' himself and herself, or herself and her family. Uneasy that she seems to locate the beginning of Australian history not with its aboriginal population but in the arrival of European immigrants, Rayment would like to imagine that his experience as an emigrant links his history not just to Marijana and her family but to the members of the early immigrant communities in Australia depicted in the photographs of his collection.

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<sup>7</sup> See *Summertime* 7, 104, and Chapter 6 of this thesis, page 154.

## The Silence of the Record

The Fauchery photograph that most deeply moves Rayment shows a woman and six children standing at the door of a wattle and mud cabin. It is one of hundreds in his possession of scenes from early mining camps in Victoria, New South Wales, and South Australia. Inspecting the photograph after his first exchange with Marijana about his Fauchery collection, Rayment has to check an impulse to align his history with that of the anonymous figures depicted in it and count himself one of their ‘tribe.’

Not just bush, he would like to tell Marijana. Not just blackfellows either. Not zero history. Look, that is where we come from: from the cold and damp and smoke of that wretched cabin, from those women with their black helpless eyes, from that poverty and that grinding labour on hollow stomachs. A people with a story of their own, a past. *Our* story, *our* past. But is that the truth? Would the woman in the picture accept him as one of her tribe – the boy from Lourdes in the French Pyrenees with the mother who played Fauré on the piano? Is the history that he wants to claim as his not finally just an affair for the English and the Irish, foreigners keep out? (*Slow Man* 52; Coetzee’s italics)

The repetitious phrasing in this extract (‘Not just bush ... Not just ... Not zero history ... from the cold and damp ... , from those women ..., from that poverty...’) suggests both the emphasis with which Rayment would like to put his point to Marijana, if she were present, and the specific qualities of the photographed individuals and their situation that arouse his sympathy. Beyond the signs of squalor and a labour-hard life, Rayment identifies with the figures in the photograph because static and helpless they seem to look back at him from the far side of history, consigned and all but forgotten. It is precisely Rayment’s fear of becoming, like these figures, voiceless in the echo-hall of history, immobile and anonymous before the gaze of posterity, or worse: uninstanced at all, lost to history (like Magda), that causes his gaze to linger on this photograph and inspires his collection.

Rayment’s sensitivity to the silence of the figures in this photograph is symptomatic of Coetzee’s concern in his critical and fictional work to draw attention to the discursive silence or quietness<sup>8</sup> of individuals sidelined by the collective movements of history. In the novels, this

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Anderson wonders if ‘quietness’ might be more accurate than ‘silence’ in describing the weighted presence of such characters in Coetzee’s novels as the barbarian girl, Michael K, Friday, and Vercueil (Anderson, “‘The Host of

priority is particularly pronounced in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life & Times of Michael K*, *Foe*, and *Age of Iron*; and Coetzee succinctly formulates it as an objective of criticism in the closing section of his essay 'Farm Novel and Plaasroman': 'Our ears today are finely attuned to modes of silence. We have been brought up on the music of Webern: substantial silence structured by tracings of sound. Our craft is all in reading *the other*: gaps, inverses, undersides; the veiled; the dark, the buried, the feminine; alterities' (*White Writing* 81; Coetzee's italics). In 'The Novel Today,' as I noted in the previous chapter, Coetzee characterises the discourse of the novel as a medium with the means to amplify and scrutinise the silences, exclusions, and distortions that occur in orthodox historical accounts. More to the point of my discussion here, Coetzee's critical interest in the silences and exclusions of history surfaces in the course of his essay on Mona de Beer and Brian Johnson Barker's book-length collection of photographs of pre-1910 South Africa, *A Vision of the Past* (1992). In this essay Coetzee asks whether it is plausible to treat 'social history' as a sub-category of 'history:'

If the lepers confined to Robben Island are in the book because they belong to social history, are the Xhosa chiefs also confined to Robben Island not in the book because they belong to history? Does a dead baby in its little coffin (in the book) fall into social history, while trenches full of dead soldiers (not in the book) fall into history? (*Stranger Shores* 348).

Coetzee agrees with the editors' guiding idea that 'ordinary' individuals and their pastimes are as deserving of a place in the historical record as prominent figures and seismic political events (like the 1960 Sharpeville massacre), but he objects to the tone of placid contentment that he finds dominates the editors' selection of photographs representing 'ordinary' folk in 'ordinary' scenes. Who are these ordinary people and what constitutes the ordinariness of their activities? Coetzee's point here is that the term 'ordinary' is expediently vague; it pretends to a coverage it does not achieve. He questions the editors' unexplained exclusion of pornographic photographs and photographs of an ethnographic sort exhibiting 'primitive' people. He implies that this sort of suppressed material contributed as much to sharpening the self-image of Victorian South Africa and the nature of its ordinary as stiff bourgeois family portraits and images of women in sunbonnets playing lawn tennis.

Susan Sontag points out that photographic images 'which idealise (like most fashion and animal photography) are no less aggressive than [photographic] work which makes a virtue of

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Vagabonds'" 196).

plainness (like class pictures, still lifes of the bleaker sort, and mug shots)' (*On Photography* 7). Sontag links this aggression to what she identifies as the fundamentally 'didactic' (7) quality of photography, by which she means a photograph's power to boast authority as a piece of documentary evidence, proof of an event. In a court of law, she writes, 'the camera record incriminates' (5). In contrast, the photographs in de Beer and Johnson's book are collected for the less urgent purpose of exhibiting what we might call – to borrow the subtitle to *Boyhood*, the US edition of *Youth*, and *Summertime* – 'scenes from provincial life.' But, as Coetzee points out, the editors' exclusion of improper or marginal photographs from the collection suggests that they seek to parade an innocent image of life in pre-1910 South Africa. To critically appreciate such a collection of photographs one needs to bear in mind these exclusions while remembering that the reader's view of de Beer and Johnson's 'vision of the past' is certain to be lensed by the historical events in South Africa, principally apartheid, that intervened between 1910 and the present.

Rayment's efforts to preserve his Fauchery photographs spring from his awareness that the historical narrative of a nation necessarily involves certain exclusions, 'acts of silencing and censoring,'<sup>9</sup> along with certain emphases. As an emigrant he has lived out discontinuities in space and culture; without living family he is peculiarly conscious that he lacks the affirmation and security of a foundational group from which to derive an identity for himself. Rayment explains to Drago that it is for the sake of 'our historical record' (177) that he maintains his Fauchery collection. This phrase evokes in him an upwelling of emotion because he senses that the particular photograph he holds, depicting two 'fellow' emigrants to Australia, is capable of establishing between himself and Drago the bond of shared witness.

Because just possibly this image before them, this distribution of particles of silver that records the way the sunlight fell, one day in 1855, on the faces of two long-dead Irishwomen, an image in whose making he, the little boy from Lourdes, had no part and in which Drago, son of Dubrovnik, has had no part either, may, like a mystical charm – *I was here, I lived, I suffered* – have the power to draw them together. (177; Coetzee's italics)

'What is valorised here is the real,' Wicomb notes, 'its transformation through photography that not only recalls the actual subjects of the past, but has affective value in the present' (20). Whereas

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<sup>9</sup> This phrase comes from Coetzee's preface to his book on censorship, *Giving Offense*. The book's 12 essays document his attempt 'to understand a passion with which I have no intuitive sympathy, the passion that plays itself out in acts of silencing and censoring. They also constitute an attempt to understand, historically and sociologically, why it is that I have no sympathy with that passion' (*Giving Offense* vii).

Rayment sees this image as the coin of his bond with Drago, Drago's later digital manipulation of another of Rayment's Faucherys has precisely the opposite effect of estranging them. But before turning to Drago's 'forgery' it is worth asking: what justifies Rayment's belief in the power of this photograph to act as a 'mystical charm' in creating a bond with Drago? Does this 'power' really lie with the photograph, or does it lie with the one who gazes upon it?

### **The 'already dead'**

Benjamin notes that part of the 'magical value' of photographs is generated by the propriety of a posed, static scene that excites an impulse on the part of the viewer to scan it for the specks that mark it as a dynamic moment in time.

... the most precise technology can give its products a magical value, such as a painted picture can never again possess for us. No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible compulsion to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, the here and now, with which reality has, so to speak, seared through the image-character of the photograph, to find the inconspicuous place where, within the suchness of that long-past minute, the future nests still today – and so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it. (Benjamin 276-77)

What interests Benjamin here is how the photograph transfixes a viewer while evoking in that viewer a desire to search for signs that betray its illusion of immediacy, its status as an *unmediated* moment distilled from the flux of time. In this illusion of immediacy there is an uncanny quality, and the possibility of temporal vertigo. Roland Barthes describes this uncanny quality of photographs in *Camera Lucida* (1980), a collection of his reflections on photography that is also his meditation on the death of his mother. Looking through photographs of his mother, Barthes finds an image of her, aged five (the year is 1898), standing with her brother at one end of a little wooden bridge inside a glass conservatory. A token of death, this 'Winter Garden' photograph distorts his sense of past and future, unsettling the chronology of his relationship with the woman he recognises in the girl represented in the image.

By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future. What *pricks* me is the discovery of this equivalence. In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: she is going to die: I shudder, like Winnicott's psychotic

patient, *over a catastrophe which has already occurred*. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe. This *punctum*, more or less blurred beneath the abundance and disparity of contemporary photographs, is vividly legible in historical photographs: there is always a defeat of Time in them: *that* is dead and *that* is going to die. These two little girls looking at a primitive airplane above their village (they are dressed like my mother as a child, they are playing with hoops) – how alive they are! They have their whole lives before them; but also they are dead (today), they are then *already* dead (yesterday). (*Camera Lucida* 96; Barthes's italics)

At the heart of the phenomenon Barthes describes here is what he calls the 'vertigo of time defeated' (97), the uncanny 'return of the dead' (9). This vertigo is the effect of a coincidence of temporal perspectives: the present moment in which the viewer gazes at the photograph; the viewer's imaginative projection of himself as he is in the present into the past moment of the image; and the viewer's outward gaze from that past moment towards the future moment of gazing-back at the image from the present. By inhabiting the image with his gaze Barthes experiences a disjunctive sense of himself in relation to his mother: he is at once his mother's senior and not yet born. His sense of his mother as '*already* dead,' although still a child, mingles with a recognition of his own mortality and the prospect of his own spectral after-life as a photographic image. 'The sensation he describes,' writes Douglas R. Nickel, 'is not one of indexical authority or legibility, but of disorientation and madness – the 'vertigo of time defeated,' a 'temporal hallucination' – as distinct orders of time collide in perceptual simultaneity' (233). Or, more succinctly, photography enacts 'a technological encoding of the future anterior' (Nickel 233). The sense of temporal disorientation at issue here arises in Barthes as the viewer of the photograph, but similar motions of self-distancing and self-projection occur when he is the one being photographed. In posing for a photograph, Barthes writes, 'I transform myself in advance into an image' (*Camera Lucida* 10-11).

In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art. ... I do not stop imitating myself, and because of this, each time I am (or let myself be) photographed, I invariably suffer from a sensation of inauthenticity, sometimes of imposture ... (*Camera Lucida* 13)

*Camera Lucida* belongs with *Roland Barthes* (1975), *A Lover's Discourse* (1977), and his last

essay, ‘Deliberation’ (1979),<sup>10</sup> works he published towards the end of his life in which, as Nickel notes (233), Barthes wrestles with the problem of self-writing by sorting and reflecting on autobiographical fragments. Coetzee’s engagement with Barthes’s work ranges from essays written in the spirit of Barthes’s *Mythologies* (1957),<sup>11</sup> through the echoes in *In the Heart of the Country of S/Z*<sup>12</sup> and his interest in the dynamics of the middle voice,<sup>13</sup> to a fiction like *Summertime*, which in exploring the inner workings of literary auto/biography recalls Barthes’s *Roland Barthes*.<sup>14</sup> It is not surprising that photographs crop up as a point of thematic emphasis in Coetzee’s later fiction as a convenient way of posing questions about the problems of putting an unposed self into writing. In *Diary of a Bad Year* (201) JC’s thoughts on portrait photographs of Samuel Beckett recall the ‘overlapping series of pretences’ (Nickel 233) I earlier quoted Barthes describing. On the dust jacket of the Harvill Secker edition of *Summertime*, the photograph of the author is not an image of Coetzee as he looked at the time of the novel’s publication in 2009, but as he was at a much younger age: this photo was used on the dustjacket of the 1985 Penguin edition of *Life & Times of Michael K*. (I return to this point in Chapter 6.) These details of Coetzee’s two most recent fictions suggest that Coetzee’s interest in cultivating and, crucially, I have been arguing, *qualifying*, an authorial self-image in the narrative and peri-textual material of his fictions is as pronounced today as Wittenberg has shown it was at the outset of his career.<sup>15</sup>

However, in Barthes’s case as in Coetzee’s, it is less photographic images than a lifetime’s output of words that produces the partly true, partly spurious after-lives of the writer’s self. For Barthes, the difference between photographs and words is that words cannot corroborate their authenticity: ‘the Photograph’s essence is to ratify what it represents. ... No writing can give me this certainty. It is the misfortune (but also perhaps the voluptuous pleasure) of language not to be able to authenticate itself’ (85). While Barthes is correct in observing that the documentary authority of a photograph lies in its illusion of self-presence, this authority is tenuous because as an image frozen and turned free of its place in space and time it calls for contextual framing in words. The

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<sup>10</sup> These are the dates of these texts’ first publication in French; they were published in English, translated by Richard Howard, as follows: *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, 1977; *A Lover’s Discourse*, 1978; *Camera Lucida*, 1984.

<sup>11</sup> In such essays as ‘Captain America in American Mythology’ (1976), ‘Four Notes on Rugby’ (1978), and ‘Triangular Structures of Desire’ (1980) – all collected in *Doubling the Point* – Coetzee practises a demystifying criticism on products of popular and consumer culture.

<sup>12</sup> This resonance is particularly significant given that Coetzee’s criticism and fiction is indebted to structuralist and poststructuralist approaches to language and literature, and *S/Z* is often taken as a hinge-text between these two approaches (for instance, in the essay introducing the selection of Barthes’s work in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*; see Leitch 1459). Coetzee taught *S/Z* at the University of Cape Town in the 1990s.

<sup>13</sup> For Coetzee on the middle voice, see ‘A Note on Writing’ (*Doubling the Point* 94-5), which departs from Barthes’s ‘“To Write”: An Intransitive Verb?’

<sup>14</sup> Coetzee has taught *Roland Barthes* at the University of Chicago (Coetzee, ‘All Autobiography is *Autre*-biography’ 214).

<sup>15</sup> See Wittenberg’s essay on the publication history of *Dusklands*.

difference between photographs and writing is for this reason surely less marked than Barthes maintains. He seems to concede this point when he writes that a photograph does ‘not necessarily say *what is no longer*, but only and for certain *what has been*,’ that a photograph is a ‘certificate of presence,’ but ‘it cannot *say* what it lets us see’ (*Camera Lucida* 85, 87; Barthes’s italics). Nor does the photograph disclose substantial information about the person responsible for ‘capturing’ and processing what Henri Cartier-Bresson once called the ‘decisive moment’ (Wells 253) embalmed in the photographic image. It is due to this incapacity to *say* what they show that photographs invite verbal captions. But words cannot complete or substitute for an image, merely supplement it. This is particularly true of photographs used in novels: the fictional work of W.G. Sebald is a good example of this. To emphasise my point that photographs in *Slow Man* are not themselves signifiers but rather a means of focalising the instability of the historical record – including the record of the *personal* history traced in the autobiographical text – I want to briefly consider how photographs function in Sebald’s work.

In the hybrid affairs that are Sebald’s novels – *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), *The Emigrants* (1996), *Vertigo* (1999), and *Austerlitz* (2001)<sup>16</sup> – uncaptioned photographs silently punctuate the prose. Sebald’s narrators, often modelled on the author and taking his name, are solitary individuals who sleep in hotel beds and see the incipience of the past in the present scenes they narrate. Their wandering through cities and towns and landscapes occasions their meditations on art, architecture, and literature that constitute the body of their narratives. Colourless and unreferenced, the photographs embedded in the text are less illustrations than points of gravity about which the narrative eddies and flows. Placed at irregular intervals and variously sized, banal and haunting, their net effect is to deepen the sepia tone of the prose. Suggestive of a muted history, these photographs are remarkable less for what they reveal than for their silence on the names and histories of the people they depict, and the location and era in which they were taken. For Susan Sontag, writing about *Austerlitz*, to offer evidence in the form of photographs in a novel ‘is to endow what has been described by words with a mysterious surplus of pathos. The photographs and other relics reproduced on the page become an exquisite index of the pastness of the past’ (‘A Mind in Mourning’ 4). Sontag’s observation here resonates with Rayment’s interest in the Faucherys, which, as we have already seen, he values not merely for their content but as artefacts of the dark-room process by which they are reproduced.

There are no photographs interleaved in *Slow Man* in the manner of Sebald’s novels, but

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<sup>16</sup> These novels were originally published in German as follows: *Vertigo* as *Schwindel. Gefühle* (Eichborn Verlag, 1990); *The Emigrants* as *Die Ausgewanderten* (Eichborn Verlag, 1990); *The Rings of Saturn* as *Die Ringe des Saturn, Eine englische Wallfahrt* (Eichborn Verlag, 1990); *Austerlitz* (Hanser Verlag, 2001).

there is a characteristic Coetzeean emphasis on the priority of being remembered. To remember, to *re-member*: disjoining the word in this way makes clearer the link between Rayment's desire to imprint his name in the Australian state record by way of the Fauchery bequest and his efforts to regain a measure of agency and independence as a body in the world and author of his life. In both instances he seeks to assert himself as a subject with the will to decide the terms of his existence in the face of a narrative (the history of a nation, Costello's story) apparently beyond his power to write.

In this section I have drawn attention to the silence or passivity of photographs in order to emphasise that while they present the illusion of self-presence, their authority as testaments of a past moment is limited and provisional, for they await anchorage and interpretation in the texts and contexts of those who gaze upon them. Similarly, my larger argument runs, the protagonists in Coetzee's later fiction are not themselves stable authorial self-projections but a means of focusing broader questions – in this case, the folly of imagining history to be a static slate and seeking to *guarantee* a niche on/in it. The slippage of focus from these personas to larger questions extends too to the critical voices of other characters ranged against them, which constructs the author-figures as subjects of critical interpretation as much Coetzee's as other readers'. This slippage or deflection of voice foregrounds self-qualification as an integral feature of Coetzee's forays in fictional autobiography. In the next section I show how the dispute that erupts over Drago's 'forgery' of the Fauchery photographs highlights the contestability of the historical record, while demonstrating the plasticity of fiction as a medium for reflecting on the risks of settling on a singular story of the self.

### **Drago's Forgery**

The Fauchery photograph of the two Irish women *speaks to* Rayment's sense of himself as an emigrant who hopes to affiliate himself to Marijana's family. His desire to attach his name to the Fauchery archive rests on an understanding that those photographs have historical value in themselves as relics and that his name will acquire public visibility and longevity through its association with those images. But what Rayment misprizes is the originality of the photographic image, which is always already a copy. Rayment's outrage at Drago's act of digitally superimposing his father's and sister's face onto the faces of two figures represented in two of Rayment's Fauchery prints stems from his sense that a pristine original has been corrupted or desecrated. His strong reaction is ironic on at least three levels. First, Rayment places an undue premium on his Faucherys' originality. He values the Faucherys because they are first-generation

prints, 'touched by Fauchery's hand' (205), and because for him they are relics of an obsolete mode of photographic reproduction that he imagines preserves the authenticity of the objects it represents. The special value he accords them is based on their status as artefacts bearing the traces of their history. Drago's two acts mingle in his mind as one: misappropriation of the images-as-objects and his digital doctoring of their content. But as Geoffrey Batchen observes (writing with reference to an Ansel Adams photograph),

[t]he complication of photography's physical identity ... has always been that there is no fixed point of origin; neither the origin nor any one point can be said to represent in its entirety the entity that is called *Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico*. And if there is no 'original' work, then there can be no 'faithful copy' either. To borrow a phrase from Ferdinand de Saussure's description of language, in photography there are 'only differences *without positive terms*.' (Batchen 232; Batchen's italics)

The second level of irony lies in Rayment's interpretation of the act as a violation of his property, which, as Costello points out (*Slow Man* 220), is an interpretation out of line with his view of himself as the temporary custodian of a collection of artefacts not rightly his own but public stock. The third and clinching irony is that Rayment's reaction betrays his earlier deeply-felt wish (expressed in the extract quoted earlier) to bond with Drago.

In reply to Rayment's accusations of her son, Marijana insists that 'images is free' [sic] (249). By this statement she means to highlight the naivety of the idea that to 'take a photograph' in the first place is to *steal an image* of something and to remind Rayment that Drago has displayed the 'stolen' or doctored images on his website, where they may be *freely* viewed by others. Marijana's point is that Drago's priorities and frame of reference are more modern and quite different from Rayment's. Rayment proves Marijana's intuition correct: he swats aside her suggestion that he placate himself by browsing Drago's website and renews his demand for the originals. Uninterested in computers, he values what he can hold in his hands. Rayment's first impression that Drago's alteration of the Faucherys amounts to a forgery is reinforced for the reader by the near homophony of the words 'Fauchery' and 'forgery.' Costello later observes that Drago is not a forger nor the act a forgery since Drago evidently did not perpetrate it with a view to making money (259). The pun in the surname 'Jokić' underscores the interpretation of Drago's act as a joke.

Drago's tampering with the Faucherys is foreshadowed by his sister Blanka's alleged theft of a silver chain from the store Happenstance. The charge against her is possibly false and the silver

chain she steals is known to be fake. These details reinforce the link between this incident and her brother's act, and these in turn with Rayment's concerns about his prosthetic status as a character. A glance at Barthes shows how photographs reinforce this theme of the false, the prosthetic, the fictional, in *Slow Man*. Due to the slow shutter speeds of early cameras, human subjects had to stand still (*stock-still*) for a prolonged period. This procedure lent itself to portraiture, but, as Coetzee points out in his essay on de Beer's book, gave to scenes of activity a stiff, emblematic air (*Stranger Shores* 345). Barthes explains how early photography imposed on its subjects an economy of posture that reduced a dynamic social reality to an uneasy still life.

Photography transformed subject into object, and even, one might say, into a museum object: in order to take the first portraits (around 1840) the subject had to assume long poses under a glass roof in bright sunlight; to become an object made one suffer as much as a surgical operation; then a device was invented, a kind of prosthesis invisible to the lens, which supported and maintained the body in its passage to immobility: this headrest was the pedestal of the statue I would become, the corset of my imaginary essence.

(*Camera Lucida* 13)

The terms that rivet Barthes's account here – subject and object, surgical operation, prosthesis – have an immediate, if partly fortuitous pertinence to *Slow Man*, for they highlight Rayment's concerns about agency and mobility as a person subject to the buffets of history and a character-pawn in another's narrative. His bicycle accident belongs with his first emigration with his mother to Australia as an event that befell him, one in which he had no choice. His conversations with Costello, on the other hand, remind him that his limited freedom of movement as an amputee is analogous to his circumscribed agency as a character in a novel: it is not the determinations of his history that are available for alteration, but his attitude to those determinations, what he makes of them.

An accident, Rayment reflects, is 'something that befalls one, something unintended, unexpected' (21). The name of the motorist – Wayne *Blight* – whose car collides with Rayment in the book's opening lines underscores the latter's view of the event on Magill Road as an adverse stroke of fate, a misadventure. In his attempt to defend Blanka against the charge of shoplifting, Rayment demonstrates a breadth of empathy he fails to show towards Wayne Blight. The name of the store, 'Happenstance,' supports the lighter view Rayment takes of Blanka's alleged theft, although there is no evidence to suggest that Blanka is any less thoughtless or careless an individual than Wayne Blight. Where Blight's action directly impairs Rayment's body and life, through

defending Blanka Rayment seeks to win Marijana's favour, if not also to at some level indebt her to him. *Blight, happenstance, joke*: the novel registers grades of seriousness with which historical events can be interpreted. On a broader view, Rayment's accident is an abrupt and violent manifestation of the force of circumstances in dictating certain of the terms and constraints of one's history. As Attwell notes, this is a consistent premise of Coetzee's writing: 'you do not choose your history; it chooses *you*. The given historical situation is a confinement: one exercises restricted options and longs to be able to exercise others' ('Coetzee's Estrangements' 232). It is in this light that one can understand the metafictional dimension of *Slow Man* and Coetzee's novels more generally as a recasting in terms of language and narrative of an individual's experience of history as an interplay of determinism and desire, freedom and constraint. Fiction, here, emerges not as an evasion or 'way out' of history so much as a means of recalibrating and re-inflecting it in terms of an individual's relationships with other individuals.

The events hinging on Drago's forgery-joke illustrate a few key points about Rayment, which are among the novel's major concerns. First, it points up his preoccupation with authenticity. This stems primarily from Costello's presence in his life, who causes him to doubt that his agency is his own and that he has a non-fictional existence. His arguments with Costello and Marijana about the comparative status of copies and originals in the realm of photography elaborate directly though in different terms his abiding concern about his status as a fictional character. His suspicion that he is a character-pawn in a narrative dictated by her informs his reluctance to accept that he has been permanently severed from the life and body he had prior to his accident and that his new condition as an amputee calls for compromises on his part: in particular, admitting he is no longer fully in control of his life, but must rely on a walking aid and professional carers. Further, as Dominic Head notes, the forgery-joke reveals that Rayment's egotistical desire to be identified as author of his Fauchery collection is at odds with his ostensible aim of making them public property and his 'idealistic and reverent notion of shared history of migrancy' (Head 87), a history he would like to believe he shares with Drago and the immigrants in his Fauchery prints.

It is notable too that Rayment makes only passing mention of Fauchery himself ('He died young, otherwise he might have become one of the great photographers' (48)); through the bulk of the narrative the photographer's name serves as shorthand for the images he produced ('the Faucherys'). The omission of further details about Fauchery's life, specifically the circumstances surrounding the record he produced of life in mid-nineteenth century Victoria, seems odd considering Rayment's and Fauchery's shared French origins and interest in photography and the historical record. The significance of the omission emerges when one appreciates their divergent sense of national identity: Rayment is concerned with securing a place for himself in the Australian

historical narrative, whereas Fauchery produced his literary and photographic record of life in Victoria with a European eye, for a European audience.

Born in France in 1823, Fauchery flirted with careers in architecture, wood-engraving, painting, and literature, fraternising with the Parisian bohemians Henry Mürger, Gérard Nerval, and Charles Baudelaire, before sailing for Australia in 1852 (Reilly 299-300). During the first period he lived in Victoria (1852-6), he worked as a miner for 22 months, opened a café in Melbourne for non-British foreigners, worked as a storekeeper, and kept a written record of his impressions as a European of life on the goldfields. This text he published in Paris in 1857 as *Lettres d'un Mineur en Australie* ('Letters from a Miner in Australia') (Reilly 304-6). The record of his second period of residence in Victoria took the form of a collection of photographs, published as *Sun Pictures of Victoria*, on which he collaborated with the English geologist Richard Daintree (Reilly 307). One of the images in this collection, 'A Group of Diggers,' portrays a huddle of twelve men standing in ankle-deep water in carefully posed attitudes of dynamic interest around a man sifting for gold. This photograph recurs in orthodox histories of Australia as an emblematic image of men at work on the mid-nineteenth century Australian goldfields,<sup>17</sup> and thus can be said to represent the sort of secure placement in the discourse of history Rayment aspires to achieve by making a bequest of the Faucherys. On the one hand, the canonisation of an image like 'A Group of Diggers' in orthodox histories of Australia, an image produced by a Frenchman for a European audience, is understandably a model for Rayment's ambition as an emigrant to secure a similar niche for his name. On the other hand, the canonisation of this image bears out the unpredictable selection of material that eventually constitute national histories. In the light of this last point, Dominic Head is correct to point out that via Drago's forgery the novel sounds a 'cautionary note about the willed writing of history' by representing how 'the full significance of migrant experience' forces Rayment to 'relinquish the notion of stability in which his own niche in the national life might be preserved' (90). This 'cautionary note,' registered by the multiple narrative frames and mutually qualifying voices of *Slow Man*, applies equally to the work of conventional autobiography.

## Emigration and Writing

What interests me in this final section of the chapter is how Rayment's preoccupation with the Fauchery photographs ramifies into Coetzee's concerns as a writer recently emigrated to Australia.

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<sup>17</sup> For instance, it is included in Rickard, *Australia: A Cultural History* (1988), p. 35; McCalman, et al, *Gold: Forgotten Histories and Lost Objects of Australia* (2001), p. 313; Keneally, *Australians: Origins to Eureka* (2009); and Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia* (2009), p. 88.

In the manner of Edward Said's valorisation of exile as a metaphor of the ideal precondition of detachment for the public intellectual's interventions in sociocultural and political affairs,<sup>18</sup> one might expect the figure of the emigrant – particularly since his own emigration to Australia in 2002 – to hold a special appeal for Coetzee as a figure of writing: a mobile figure in whom disparate histories cross and cultural influences mingle, whose identity changes to suit new situations.<sup>19</sup> But in this respect Rayment hardly recommends himself as a suitable vehicle for this idea: compared to the adaptable Marijana, he is someone who resists change (hence the title 'Slow Man') and who longs for the stability and security of affiliation. In this he is something of an exception among the protagonists of Coetzee's previous novels, whose lives and voices touch those of their historical collectives at an idiosyncratic tangent: one thinks of Magda, Michael K, Mrs Curren, Dostoevsky, and David Lurie. In the foregoing sections of this chapter I discussed how the novel shows up Rayment's naive conception of the stability of history through Drago's 'forgery;' in this final section I emphasise how the lesson he reluctantly learns is placed within the destabilising frame of Costello's act of writing, which returns the focus to Coetzee and the status of this novel as a meditation on the making of history and a self-conscious, carefully qualified account of Coetzee's own emigrancy. The autobiographical turn of *Slow Man*, I suggest, becomes more legible in the intersection of Rayment's conception of language with Costello's of writing.

In comparison to Marijana, Rayment appears to be at ease in the English language, his command of idiom sure. However, this is an ease he disavows. Rayment recalls that he was six when he left France for Australia with his mother and stepfather; after university he returned to France for an unspecified period before returning to Australia permanently. His exposure as a child to French language and culture seems to have left very little trace on his thought and speech. Occasionally a French word or phrase turns up in his thoughts or conversation, but these are either phrases assimilated to English, such as *joie de vivre* (41), or rather woodenly-supplied equivalents of an English expression: 'a seahorse, *cheval marin*' (120), 'a heart case, *un cardiaque*' (165). The oddest interpolation of French occurs early in the novel when Rayment dubs his leg *le jambon*, a

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<sup>18</sup> In *Representations of the Intellectual* (1993) Said treats exile as a metaphorical condition to describe the ideal intellectual, without losing sight of it as a disruptive and distressing historical experience: 'Exile for the intellectual in this metaphysical sense is restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled, and unsettling others. You cannot go back to some earlier and perhaps more stable condition of being at home; and, alas, you can never fully arrive, be at one with your new home or situation. ... the intellectual as exile tends to be happy with the idea of unhappiness, so that dissatisfaction bordering on dyspepsia, a kind of curmudgeonly disagreeableness, can become not only a style of thought, but also a new, if temporary, habitation' (53). In *Representations of the Intellectual* Said points to Jonathan Swift, V.S. Naipaul, and Theodor Adorno as models of the condition he describes (53-60); in *Reflections on Exile* (2002) he sees Erich Auerbach, among others, as an exemplary figure.

<sup>19</sup> Graham Huggan has critiqued the metaphorisation of migration in contemporary literary and culture theory on the grounds that it overlooks 'often conspicuously hierarchical attitudes towards different migrant groups' (138). See his essay, 'Unsettled Settlers: Postcolonialism, Travelling Theory and the New Migrant Aesthetics' (2007).

term he feels keeps it ‘at a nice, contemptuous distance’ (29). His distaste for what his leg has become is understandable, but is it plausible that Rayment should draw on his first (if not his ‘native’) language to alienate his leg from himself given that there is no evidence to suggest he has or had a vexed relationship with France and the French?

It is not his attitude to France or the French that motivates this gesture but a more general scepticism about being native to a language at all. In interactions with extended family in France he recalls feeling the ‘odd one out,’ the ‘stranger in the corner;’ to them he was ‘*l’Anglais*’ (196). (This memory resonates with the representation of John in *Summertime*, notably in Margot’s account of his awkward use of Afrikaans in his interactions with the extended Coetzee family on a visit to the family farm (*Summertime* 93-95).) Yet Rayment expresses a similar reservation towards English: he is too ‘diffident’ to pronounce the word ‘care’ to Marijana because he believes it to be ‘[t]oo much an English word, an insider’s word’ (165). But, tellingly, he is prepared to *write* it in a letter to her. Costello’s observation that English is not Rayment’s ‘true language’ (230) is based on her sense that he meticulously and self-consciously selects his words each time he speaks, rather than speaking spontaneously, ‘from the heart’ (230).

I would even say that English is a disguise for you, or a mask, part of your tortoiseshell armour. As you speak I swear I can hear words being selected, one after the other, from the word-box you carry around with you, and slotted into place. That is not how a true native speaks, one who is born into the language. (230-1)

In Costello’s view a native speaker is someone whose speech is fulsome as song: ‘Words well up within and he sings them, sings along with them’ (231). She visualises a native speaker as someone in whom a language pulses like blood, according to an involuntary rhythm. In her estimation, Rayment (like Coetzee’s other over-literary characters Eugene Dawn and Magda)<sup>20</sup> ‘speaks like a book’ (231). There is more going on here than simply an evaluation of Rayment’s aptitude as a speaker of English. He reminds Costello that his three relocations imprinted ‘the immigrant experience’ on him ‘quite deeply’ (192).<sup>21</sup> But even as an emigrant, his experience of being foreign to a place and culture does not cover his sense of being *fundamentally* foreign to language. He phrases this latter conviction in terms that directly recall Costello’s description of herself in ‘At the Gate’ as a ‘secretary of the invisible:’ ‘“Privately I have always felt myself to be a kind of

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<sup>20</sup> Dawn: ‘I was a bookish child. I grew out of books’ (*Dusklands* 30). Magda: ‘My learning has the reek of print, not the resonance of the full human voice telling its stories’ (*In the Heart of the Country* 51).

<sup>21</sup> Though nominally responsible for Rayment as his author, Costello claims to be ignorant of details of his biography – for instance, that he returned to France (*Slow Man* 192).

ventriloquist's dummy. It is not I who speak the language, it is the language that is spoken through me. It does not come from my core, *mon coeur*." He hesitates, checks himself. *I am hollow at the core*' (*Slow Man* 196-7).

My priority here is not to demonstrate agreement with the rather esoteric idea that the writer has less agency in respect of language or a character than language or a character has over the one who writes. While this may be true of the cusp of an act of writing – embarking on a sentence, beginning to articulate a thought, pursuing the shadow of a character – revision is integral to writing, as Costello concedes when she speaks of it as the art of second thoughts (*Slow Man* 228). Rather, my point is that Rayment's sense of inauthenticity ('a kind of ventriloquist's dummy') as a speaker of language is as much a function of his status as an emigrant who has moved between languages as it is as a character directed by Costello's hand, and that this phrase connects Rayment's compounded sense of inauthenticity with Costello's conception of herself as a writer. In short, I am arguing that in *Slow Man* the idea of the indeterminacy of writing, of being-ignorant-of-what-follows, which in *Elizabeth Costello* Costello elaborates into a principle and Coetzee elsewhere goes some way toward affirming as a literary credo,<sup>22</sup> links Rayment's late circumscribed situation of being halt, unaffiliated, and uncertain where next to turn, through Costello's writing of this turn of events, to the inward turn of Coetzee's writing on the stranger shores of Australia. This 'inward turn' is evident in incidental details embedded in *Slow Man* drawn from Coetzee's biography and other fictions, but more obviously in the novel's self-reflexive structure.

These details range from the incursion of Costello, through the intratextuality of characters' names, to specifics of Rayment's history and temperament. These last details include his 'Dutchman' father (Coetzee's father was Afrikaans), his distance towards his 'native' tongue (French in Rayment's case, Afrikaans in Coetzee's), his coldness (a personality trait emphasised in the representation of John in *Youth* and *Summertime*), and above all his sense of apartness or difference from others wherever he lives. Evidence in support of this last point can be found in the 'Retrospect' in *Doubling the Point* (391-95), where Coetzee enlarges on his experience as a child, adolescent, and young man of feeling alien in various environments. Conditioned by his temperament as a bookish, introspective individual, it is a feeling Coetzee traces to his childhood sense of culpability speaking English at home and attending English-medium classes in rural Worcester at a time of rampant Afrikaner nationalism. He describes how the feeling stays with him as a Protestant attending a Catholic high school in Cape Town, is consolidated in his distaste as a

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<sup>22</sup> Coetzee speaks about writing in this light in interviews in *Doubling the Point* (18, 246). He gives literary expression to it in, among other places, *The Master of Petersburg*, where Dostoevsky finds himself yielding to the dance of the pen, 'At the Gate' in *Elizabeth Costello*, and, as I discussed in Chapter 3, 'He and His Man.'

student for the polarising rhetoric of politics, and recurs in the period he spends in Britain and the United States in the 1960s, where he feels not homesick, 'merely' alien (*Doubling the Point* 394).

While there is clearly significance in the biographical resonances between Rayment and Coetzee, I want to focus on how these resonances emerge from the alignment between Rayment and Costello within the narrative. Though Costello is marked as the author of Rayment's story, in the economy of *Slow Man* she is as much a character as he and Marijana. Because she slips the moorings that fix her as protagonist in her native text of *Elizabeth Costello* she too, though nominally an 'Australian' writer, can be viewed as an emigrant of sorts, a transtextual author-figure or -function. In *Slow Man* the author-impresario Coetzee casts a long shadow in the character of Costello, but there are finer traces of Coetzee's presence in the names of some of his characters. The initials of Coetzee's first two names – 'J.M.' – are embedded in 'Marijana' and reversed in the initials of her and her husband's first name and surname ('Marijana Jokić,' 'Miroslav Jokić'). As I noted in Chapter 2, 'Costello' roughly reconstellates 'Coetzee'<sup>23</sup> and is cast from the same initials and life-stage as the protagonist of *Age of Iron*. In *Slow Man* there is a further resonance between the name of Rayment's physiotherapist, Madeleine Martin, and the name of Eugene Dawn's wife and son, Marilyn and Martin, in *Dusklands*. That this resonance is deliberate becomes clear in *Summertime* when these and other names from Coetzee's earlier novels are once again recycled. What, then, is the effect and significance of these autotextual links and echoes? What purpose do they serve?

Coetzee's habit of leaving authorial fingerprints in his fictions by way of parts or allotropes of his name – 'Coetzee,' 'John,' 'J.M.,' 'M.J.,' 'JC,' 'Costello' – in the first place has the effect of foregrounding Coetzee's implication in the stories he writes. As false coin, Coetzee's name-fragments function less as signature than imprimatur or watermark, a questionable authentication. It is the nature of print culture to make of the printed book a commodity and the author's name a brand or trademark. In this way the author's name becomes shorthand for the work: thus we speak of reading Coetzee, doing a course in Coetzee. Planted in the fiction, the author's name functions in the manner of a caption to a photograph: to frame or anchor the representation but not to exhaust it. By leaving trace of his names in his fiction, by recycling certain of his characters' names, and by exporting Costello wholesale from one book to another, Coetzee textualises the idea of the author and implies that his fictions are less discrete units than interwoven parts of a larger text that we habitually summon with the name 'Coetzee.' By working aspects of his fictions into each other Coetzee problematises the idea that the writer's life and work track separate trajectories. The

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<sup>23</sup> Wicomb has also noted this point (13).

autotextual traces in the later fiction bear out Coetzee's remark in his 2003 interview with Attwell that fiction offers a form of *living out* aspects of his history and the discontinuities of his identity ('An Exclusive Interview').

In sum, Costello's sponsorial interest in Rayment duplicates Rayment's interest in Marijana's family: in seeking to affiliate himself to Marijana and her children by investing in their futures and observing them living out that investment, he resembles Costello who seeks to *see out* a speculative investment in her character Rayment. A detail that clinches the complementarity of Costello and Rayment is their attitude to the word 'home.' Speaking as an emigrant, Rayment hesitates to use this word at all, preferring to speak of 'domicile' or 'residence,' the physical site of his location, free of connotations of security and domesticity: 'This flat,' he says. 'This city. This country. Home is too mystical for me' (196). For Costello, speaking as a writer, the word has that deeper reach Rayment prefers to avoid; she uses it to understand the process of literary creativity. Whereas Rayment feels a stranger among his own kind ('I am not the *we* of anyone,' he remarks (193)), for Costello, being at home is a matter of being with or feeling with a character through writing, even if this character is a multiple emigrant and believes himself to be a permanent outsider: 'When I am with you I am at home,' she says, 'when I am not with you I am homeless' (159). For all the tension and conflict of purpose that comes out in the dialogue between these two characters, Rayment's sense of unbelonging as an emigrant is answered by Costello's understanding of writing as a form of affiliating and situating herself in relation to others. Between them, through their dialogue, Coetzee traces the implications of his emigrant history for himself as a writer. As we will see in the next chapter, the full weight of these implications becomes clear in *Diary of a Bad Year*, where Coetzee more boldly takes responsibility for the character who seems to speak in his name to the question of what it means for a government to speak and act in the name of the people whose interests it claims to represent.

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## Chapter 5

### The Location of Complicity: *Diary of a Bad Year*

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Whereas *Slow Man* centres on Paul Rayment's desire to affiliate himself to others, *Diary of a Bad Year* puts in focus JC's anxieties about affiliation – or, to use the focal term of this chapter, his anxiety about *complicity*. This word derives from the Latin verb *complicare* (*com-* 'together' + *plicare* 'to fold'): to be 'complicit' is to be 'folded together' with others. The term specifically denotes an individual's involvement with others in an illegal activity (*OED*) – a sense of the word I will pick up on later in the chapter with reference to JC's sense of implication in the political actions of governments. I will begin by using the term to describe the way in which the author Coetzee is interfolded with his protagonist in this prose fiction. The anchor-character of *Diary of a Bad Year*, JC, is a writer of international acclaim, in outward respects a near duplicate of Coetzee himself. Minor details indicate their divergence – indeed divergence is a key theme in the book, illustrated in the characters' conversations as much as in the way the narrative is structured. Yet JC's congruence with Coetzee is a vital component of the book's meaning, for it is on the strength of JC's reputation, his *name*, that he offers his opinions on current world affairs and a variety of other topics.

While the initials 'JC' entice a reading of this character's opinions as Coetzee's, I argue in this chapter that this abbreviation of the author's name supports the book's focus on what it means to speak or act in the name of others, or to be held accountable for actions others have taken in the name of a set of interests to which one subscribes or a group to which one belongs. JC's sense of complicity ranges from his past experience as a reluctant beneficiary of apartheid during the period he lived in South Africa to his current situation as a citizen of a country in league with the United States in their 'war on terror.' His fatalistic attitude to his entanglement<sup>1</sup> in these communal histories is counterpointed by his secretary Anya's more modern, individualistic view of how to deal with the shame of traumatic experience.

In the opening two sections of this chapter I examine how the slippery index of the name

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Nuttall (2009) uses the term 'entanglement,' which carries a sense of the random and the circumstantial, in the context of a discussion of post-apartheid literature and culture to describe the unexpected entwining of identities, spaces, and histories once thought to be separate (11). In her Introduction to *Entanglement* Nuttall provides a useful survey of how the term has been used by other literary and cultural theorists (1-11). In this chapter I prefer the term 'complicity' over 'entanglement,' because the former registers more clearly the artful interfolding of the author with his protagonist in this book, along with the sense of interfolding personal and collective histories that Mark Sanders develops in his use of the term in *Complicities* (2002). I refer more fully to Sanders's work later in this chapter.

and the principle of critical counterpoint inform the narrative structure of *Diary of a Bad Year*. I go on to elaborate how the dialogue and fall-out between JC and Anya focus the question of personal and collective shame. Via the idea of ‘inner emigration’ I move into a discussion of the question of the role of the writer as public intellectual: here I draw on the work of Edward Said and Mark Sanders in considering the writer as a symbolic figure in society and a conception of ‘responsibility-in-complicity’ that is neither political nor legal but moral. To illustrate these ideas I interpret JC’s Opinions in relation to Harold Pinter’s Nobel Lecture. In the concluding two sections I evaluate what JC’s Opinions amount to as public utterances by examining shame as a social condition and confessional currency, and conclude by discussing the checked confessional impulse of this text and the role implied for the reader-as-witness to JC’s late-life disclosures. JC asks the question: how does one negotiate undesired associations and historical complicities that it is not in one’s power to disavow? I maintain in this chapter that Coetzee answers this question through his partial alignment with JC and the layout of the narrative, which forces one to become conscious of the choices one makes and the positions one takes as much as a reader as a citizen.

### Streams of Consciousness

As I noted in Chapter 2 and Chapter 4, a trait of Coetzee’s fictional practice is to leave trace of his names in the fabric of his narratives.<sup>2</sup> Examples that spring to mind include the multiple Coetzees of *Dusklands*, the initials ‘M.J.’ on the chest in Foe’s attic in *Foe*, Bheki’s friend John in *Age of Iron*, and the permutations of authorial names and name fragments in *Elizabeth Costello*. *Dusklands* opens, and opens Coetzee’s oeuvre, with Dawn’s resigned admission that his name has connotations that he cannot control: ‘My name is Eugene Dawn. I cannot help that’ (1). The ‘problem of names,’ as Dawn later puts it (*Dusklands* 36), is a thread that runs through the second part of *Dusklands* and on into Coetzee’s other novels, notably sponsoring the doubling of Mrs Curren’s initials ‘E.C.’ in the serviceable construction Elizabeth Costello. Having performed a bridging function in *Elizabeth Costello* – registering Coetzee’s status as an acclaimed writer and his emigration to Australia – Costello makes way for Coetzee’s apparently franker self-projection in JC in *Diary of a Bad Year*.

References scattered through *Diary of a Bad Year* indicate that the author of the Opinions<sup>3</sup> corresponds if not in age (he is born in 1934) and his lack of children, then in most biographical

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<sup>2</sup> In a footnote to his chapter on *Age of Iron*, Attridge highlights the need for more work on names in Coetzee’s fiction by noting some of the confusion about Coetzee’s own names and the ambiguities of his characters’ names (*J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* 94-5, fn. 3). Clarkson goes some way toward redressing this lack by devoting a chapter of her recent book on Coetzee to the subject of names (see Clarkson, *J.M. Coetzee* 133-52).

<sup>3</sup> To distinguish them from JC’s casual thoughts recorded in his diary-stream, I will henceforth refer to the mini-essays as his ‘Opinions.’

particulars to J.M. Coetzee (who was born in 1940 and has fathered two children). Anya declines to call him by his given name, preferring to call him Señor C or C (*‘Señor or perhaps Senior,’* muses JC (60)), while Allan refers to him as Juan (165). Identified by Anya as a renowned writer and critic, he refers to himself as a white South African (44, 103), he speaks of his city of origin Cape Town (104), and mentions his novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* (171) and a book of essays on censorship (22).<sup>4</sup> We can say, then, that in JC we find a semblance of J.M. Coetzee, an image but not fully a faithful image of the author.<sup>5</sup> To be more specific, there is a nominal congruence between the author of *Diary of a Bad Year* and the author of the Opinions. That the congruence is *nominal* is important, since it is through his literary output that JC has acquired an international reputation, a *name*; and it is on the strength of his name that he presents his Opinions.

In Chapter 2 I invoked Foucault on the author-function as offering a way of understanding Elizabeth Costello’s unstable identity in Coetzee’s 2003 book. Here it is worth recalling Foucault’s phrasing: the ‘author-function’ denotes neither the writer nor the fictional narrator but what ‘arises out of their scission – in the division and distance of the two’ (Foucault 129). In this light, one can understand the name ‘JC’ in *Diary of a Bad Year* as a node of tension between ‘complicity’ and ‘scission.’ This congruence and cleavage in the first place pertains to Coetzee and his protagonist, but in a larger sense opens onto the question of how a citizen should respond to the shame that derives from crimes committed by others in the name of his interests or the group to which he or she belongs.

Congruence and divergence can be seen to animate the structure of *Diary of a Bad Year*. The Opinions form the static ceiling of the text, while the narrative properly flows in the dialogue and disclosures recorded in the two diary-streams on the lower part of each page. As James Wood puts it, ‘the lower parts of the page function as the rebellious downstairs of this intellectual mansion’ (*‘Squall Lines’*). In places there are glancing resonances between themes or keywords in an Opinion and JC’s diary-stream on a single page, but these correspondences-in-alignment are not consistent through the book.<sup>6</sup> There is sustained dialogue *about* the Opinions recorded in JC’s and

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<sup>4</sup> Coetzee’s book on censorship is *Giving Offense* (1996).

<sup>5</sup> I use the word ‘semblance’ advisedly: I have in mind Coetzee’s use of it in his 1974 essay on Nabokov. Coetzee’s interest in strategies of authorship in prose fiction can be tracked particularly well through his engagement with the work of Defoe, Beckett, and Nabokov: the scholarly apparatus and authorial ruses of *Dusklands* recall *Pale Fire*, *In the Heart of the Country* is filled with echoes of and borrowings from Beckett, while *Foe* is an explicit response to *Robinson Crusoe*. As for Coetzee’s essays on these three writers, questions of authorship are prominent in ‘Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* and the Primacy of Art,’ ‘The Comedy of Point of View in Beckett’s *Murphy*’ (*Doubling the Point* 31-38), and Coetzee’s essay on *Robinson Crusoe*.

<sup>6</sup> Examples of thematic echoes from early in the book include the emphasis on gambling on page 19; the mention of a ‘cultural reflex’ in the Opinion on guidance systems and JC’s observation in his diary-stream that spellcheck ‘has no mind of its own’ (27); JC’s comment in his diary-stream on translating into German and his reference in the Opinion on guidance systems to suicide bombers’ hopeful fate of being ‘translated to paradise’ at the moment of their

Anya's diary-streams, which interweave more intimately with each other than each does respectively with the Opinions. The distance and tension between the Opinions overhead and the conversations and events narrated in the lower diary-streams are focused in JC's recurrent interest in the compromise between an idea of how things should be in the world and the actual behaviour its reality elicits from people. Head notes how the structure of the novel allows 'the apparent certainties of an argument to be loosened,' in the process bringing to light 'different kinds of counterpoint' (Head 93). JC's interest in the counterpoint of ideal and reality, or idea and necessary practice, is made explicit in his Opinion on Machiavelli, where he notes that 'necessity ... is Machiavelli's guiding principle' (17). He suggests that this principle holds for most ordinary civilians, who recognise that human choices are in general ruled less by 'some abstract moral code' than by force of necessity (18). JC invokes Machiavelli in the context of a debate about whether state rulers are justified in using torture on detainees that a government deems a threat to state security. On the argument from Machiavelli, 'infringing the moral law is justified when it is necessary' (17). For contrast, JC sets the Machiavellian argument against Harold Pinter's denunciation in his 2005 Nobel Prize Lecture of Tony Blair's alliance with the US in the latter's war in Iraq. While JC admires the courage of Pinter's act, he has reservations about its effect as a rhetorical gesture:

When one speaks in one's own person – that is, not through one's art – to denounce some politician or other, using the rhetoric of the agora, one embarks on a contest which one is likely to lose because it takes place on ground where one's opponent is far more practised and adept. 'Of course Mr Pinter is entitled to his point of view,' it will be replied. 'After all, he enjoys the freedoms of a democratic society, freedoms which we are this moment endeavouring to protect against extremists.' (127)

Part of the significance of this observation emerges in the context of JC's foregoing Opinion on Tony Blair, in which he extends the thread of thought he began in 'On Machiavelli' by characterising politics as 'the art of the possible,' 'uncongenial ... to the practice of telling the truth under all circumstances' (125). In this Opinion on Blair he speaks of the 'reality principle' that politicians like Blair invoke to justify the compromises they make with moral principles or the truth (126). The writer emerges in this account less in contrast than continuity with the politician for his truck with rhetoric and curiosity about 'the psychology of the lie' (126).

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annihilation (28); JC's thoughts on paedophilia and his question to Anya about whether she intends having children (53).

The extract quoted above has a further significance in respect of JC's function as an avatar of Coetzee in a novel structured around a series of 'strong opinions' published on the strength of his reputation as a successful writer. As we have seen, biographical details in the text indicate that JC overlaps but is not coterminous with Coetzee. Even if the biographical fit between character and author were seamless, it would remain the case that the design of *Diary of a Bad Year* and the rationale for *Strong Opinions* lays JC's Opinions open to conjecture and dispute. Thus it is by design that JC's reflections on the question of how the editors of *Strong Opinions* will translate 'opinion' into German begin in the diary-strip situated below the Opinion on Tony Blair, are pursued on the following pages to the question the publisher envisages to be the nub of the book's interest ('how can we be sure how firmly wedded each writer is to his opinions' (131)), and in this way underwrite the passage quoted above from the entry on Pinter in which speaking 'in one's own person' is at issue. Whereas the German publisher of *Strong Opinions* envisages the contributors' offerings as thoughts subject to changes of mood ('*meinungen*'), JC prefers the idea of submitting more definite ('firmer, more thought out') opinions ('*ansichten*') (127, 129). The extent to which JC's opinions actually dictate how he behaves in private life is the open question of *Strong Opinions*; his exchanges with Anya in *Diary of a Bad Year* are more revealing. Anya tests JC's opinions by challenging them with her pragmatic, resolutely individualistic outlook.

### **Counterpoint**

The pronounced differences between JC and Anya in age, temperament, outlook, and domestic situation bring into relief the counterpoint between the realm of ideas and the compromises of 'necessary' practice formalised in the structure of the book. The idealistic grain in JC's views finds a contrast in Anya's more pragmatic approach to life. The layout of Opinions and diary-streams on each page foregrounds this temperamental difference: JC's high-brow Opinions above, JC's diary-stream in the mediating position between, Anya's diary-stream at the page-foot. The page layout inverts the spatial relationship of their respective flats in Sydenham Towers: while the eminent JC lives alone in a dim ground floor flat, the ordinary gal Anya and her frankly materialistic partner Allan occupy a 'prime unit,' with a sun porch and a view of the harbour, on the top floor of the North Tower (32). It is through his conversations with Anya that JC comes to believe some of his Opinions outdated and in need of revision (134). His Opinion on national shame, for instance, turns on the rather fixed idea that shame is less an accusation than a condition one inherits and must endure. While in his Opinion on Blair (and elsewhere) JC is concerned with politicians' compromises with the truth or with moral ideals, with Anya he is himself pressed to compromise by

her disagreement with his views and her subsequent withdrawal from him.

The issue that divides JC and Anya is the question of what constitutes an appropriate response to the implication of shame. JC conceives of shame as a form of dishonour that, to the extent that it is genuinely felt, cannot be ‘washed’ or ‘wished’ away (108). For JC, one does not have to be the perpetrator of a shameful act to be tainted by shame: it is equally possible to be shamed by the actions of people whom, willingly or not, one is affiliated to. JC is less interested in the isolated instance of one’s individual’s treatment of another individual than the condition of trans-individual or collective shame: that is, shame through complicity with others. In contrast, Anya maintains that shame attaches solely to the perpetrator and immediate accomplices of a shameful act – not to the victim or others one might be affiliated with. Anya insists on this individualistic interpretation in the face of the scepticism of the police captain who took her statement after she was raped by three young American men, and in the face too of JC’s suggestion that, though he has never met them and likely never will, as a fellow male he is disgraced by her rapists’ actions.

Certainly Anya’s rape by three opportunistic males is a different order of abuse to the systematized, collective crimes of apartheid and the US ‘war on terror’ on which JC bases his views of shame. However, that her rapists are Americans encourages a comparison of the isolated assault of which she was the victim and at least one of the complicities JC speaks of – the US ‘war on terror.’ A further parallel could be drawn between the spontaneous nature of Anya’s rape – from one point of view, an accident of her circumstances – and the contingent but no less intractable fact of JC’s having entered into complicity with apartheid by having been born with a white skin in South Africa in 1934. The disparity between their experiences is nonetheless instructive in pointing up divergent interpretations of the relation between collective and personal history. Their difference in attitude towards shame recalls the conflicting perspectives on rape in *Disgrace*. While David Lurie denies that his affair with Melanie Isaacs has overtones of a ‘long history’ of gender inequality and ‘exploitation,’ he sees a colonial history of subjugation ‘speaking through’ the three black African men who rape his daughter Lucy on her Eastern Cape farm (*Disgrace* 53, 156).

JC’s sense of shame derives from a less immediately violent act than Anya’s, yet it exerts a greater weight on his thinking and feeling. Here is the relevant passage from JC’s Opinion on national shame:

The generation of white South Africans to which I belong, and the next generation, and perhaps the generation after that too, will go bowed under the shame of the crimes that were committed in their name. Those among them who endeavour to salvage personal pride by

pointedly refusing to bow before the judgment of the world suffer from a burning resentment, a bristling anger at being condemned without adequate hearing, that in psychic terms may turn out to be an equally heavy burden. (44)

This shame-through-complicity, the shame that arises from others committing crimes *in the name of* a group to which one belongs, is not exactly a function of citizenship but rather historical affiliation: JC makes this declaration as an emigrant to Australia who also admits to feeling tainted by the Australian government's involvement in the United States's war in the Middle East. His use of the passive voice here ties in with his subsequent remarks about how later generations can be *subject to* the curse of their forebears' actions. But, as we will see shortly, the seeming passivity or apathy in JC's understanding of shame-through-complicity is the condition of an active form of historical conscience that involves acknowledging the reach of collective history into one's private life. It is also notable that the passive voice in the above extract casts JC's admission less as a confession than an illustration of his argument. This is not to deny that a confessional element is present here, but instead to observe that the complicities of citizens in general – not just JC's complicities – are at issue in this instance. To put this point another way, that JC's Opinions have traction in Coetzee's history does not diminish JC's status in this text as an *example*, like Costello, of the writer assuming while questioning the role of the public intellectual.

It is apt that the Opinion on the curse follows the entry on national shame, for in both JC asks how an individual can go about lifting the stigma that attaches to him through the criminal actions of his forebears or countryfolk. His thoughts on national shame are prompted by the 'shamelessness' (39) of the Bush administration's 'legal illegality'<sup>7</sup> in effectively disregarding 'the longstanding normative injunction against torture embedded in international law and US constitutional law' (Lenta 71). As Bruce Robbins reminds us, pride and shame are both an index of attachment to the country one lives in (14). Kwame Anthony Appiah makes the same point when he writes that 'the patriot is surely also the first to suffer his or her country's shame: it is the patriot who suffers when the country elects the wrong leaders, or when those leaders prevaricate, bluster, pantomime, betray "our" principles' (95). JC can certainly not be called a patriot of either South Africa or Australia. On the one hand, suspicious of politics, his views are characterised by scepticism and critical distance (one recalls his thoughts on whether a 'supra-political discourse' is possible (9)). On the other hand, his sense of his life interfolding with the lives of others extends beyond the imagined community of his nation to a wider bond with citizens of other nations. Proof

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<sup>7</sup> I draw this phrase from Patrick Lenta's interesting article, "'Legal Illegality': *Waiting for the Barbarians* after September 11.'

of this emerges towards the end of his entry on national shame when he reflects on the ‘large, swelling emotion’ aroused in him by Sibelius’s fifth symphony, and contrasts this feeling with the disgust he imagines the spectre of Guantanamo Bay evokes in Americans:

What would it have been like, I wondered, to be a Finn in the audience at the first performance of the symphony in Helsinki nearly a century ago, and feel that swell overtake one? The answer: one would have felt proud, proud that *one of us* could have put together such sounds, proud that out of nothing we human beings can make such stuff. Contrast with that one’s feelings of shame that *we, our people*, have made Guantanamo.

(*Diary of a Bad Year* 45; Coetzee’s italics)

The shift here from the first person pronoun through identification with the imagined Finn to ‘one’s feelings’ about Guantanamo, reveals the widening circles of JC’s sympathy. His response to Sibelius is *akin* to what he imagines a Finn, distant in time and space from himself, might have felt, just as the shame he continues to feel as a South African once implicated in apartheid conditions his sense of how Americans feel about Guantanamo and the US war in the Middle East.

### **Inner Emigration**

Though he no longer lives in South Africa, JC continues to feel and accept his former affiliations as a member of the ‘master-caste’<sup>8</sup> institutionalised by apartheid. This feeling is founded on an understanding that no person lives in isolation, including those who respond to politics by following the quietistic course of ‘inner emigration.’ JC uses this term in his *Opinion on anarchy* early in the book. Whereas Etienne de la Boétie suggests servitude and revolt against servitude as two possible responses open to a citizen of the state, JC adds a third alternative that he describes as ‘quietism, willed obscurity, inner emigration’ (12). The term ‘inner emigration’ originally gained currency in the 1930s in the context of those who fled or remained in Germany during the rise of National Socialism under Hitler. After the war, some German writers who had remained in the country glorified the idea of the inner emigrant and used it to discredit German writers and scholars who had lived in exile during the war (Neubauer 17). As John Neubauer observes, just ‘as many Frenchmen claimed after the war to have participated in the resistance movement, many German

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<sup>8</sup> In his Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech (*Doubling the Point* 96-99) Coetzee refers to white South Africans under apartheid as a ‘master-caste’ on the grounds that South African society is historically one of masters and slaves (96).

writers who stayed at home constructed a self-image via “inner emigration” that prettified their often less than admirable attitude under the Nazi regime’ (18). A particularly prominent instance of this was Frank Thiess’s tarnishing of Thomas Mann, who since 1941 had lived in California. The public spat that ensued between these writers subsequently debouched onto arguments about the comparative value of the exile and home literature (Neubauer 17). This original context for the term ‘inner emigration’ is important to bear in mind because it brings together the role of the writer in times of historical crisis and the question of historical guilt. JC’s ‘Strong Opinions’ are after all due to be published in Germany. He touches on the issue of young Germans’ guilt for the war and the Holocaust in his Opinion on the curse, where he maintains, in a similar fashion to his discussion of national shame in the United States, that the psychic burden of historical guilt falls to those not immediately culpable for the original crime (50).

The subjective experience of shame-through-complicity is one that Coetzee has treated in his earlier novels, most notably *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Age of Iron*. In the former novel, as in *Diary of a Bad Year*, Coetzee treats shame as it arises in relation to the act of torture. The Magistrate’s descent from a higher civil servant to an ‘enemy’ of the Empire begins when he investigates Colonel Joll’s interrogation techniques and reaches a climax when he is tortured publicly. Towards the end of the novel, when he has regained some of his former stature in the eyes of the townsfolk, he remembers finding a ‘specious consolation’ in the thought that the shame of his office consisted in diligently administering the law while being conscious that the law is a poor approximation of the idea of justice: ““When some men suffer unjustly,” I said to myself, “it is the fate of those who witness their suffering to suffer the shame of it”” (139).<sup>9</sup> In *Age of Iron* Mrs Curren’s long letter is outwardly an appeal to her daughter in America to return and bring her comfort in her dying days, but inwardly an attempt to come to terms with her ensnaring physical condition and the apparent obsolescence of her standard of values. She early recognizes that her writing is deviously circuitous in its address: though she has her daughter in mind, she recognises that *I* and *you* are internal voices in dialogue with each other: ‘To whom this writing then? The answer: to you but not to you; to me; to you in me’ (*Age of Iron* 6). To the reticent vagrant Vercueil, who squats on her property and is without attachments and fidelities, she explains that shame has always been for her a touchstone of good conduct: ‘I strove always for honor, for a private honor,

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<sup>9</sup> In *Doubling the Point* Coetzee links justice with truth by putting *Waiting for the Barbarians* in touch with his pivotal essay on confession: ‘Why does one choose the side of justice when it is not in one’s material interest to do so? The Magistrate gives the rather Platonic answer: because we are born with the idea of justice. The essay, if only implicitly, asks the question: Why should I be interested in the truth about myself when the truth may not be in my interest? To which, I suppose, I continue to give a Platonic answer: because we are born with the idea of the truth’ (394-5).

using shame as my guide' (165). She thinks of shame as mortification, a form of death in life, an inveigling conviction that cannot easily be shrugged off (86, 119). Like JC, Mrs Curren's ethical sensitivity is sharpened by an acute awareness of her mortality. JC's state of health is not as dire as Mrs Curren's, but he echoes her laments about the body in decline ('All old folk become Cartesians,' he writes (181)). The prospect of death sharpens the confessional edge of both characters' accounts and their concern with how the gaze of history will evaluate the record they leave behind.

But in contrast to the voluble Mrs Curren, whose words carry no weight at all with those who hear them, JC speaks on the authority of his reputation as an internationally respected writer. His stature is evident from Anya's mention of an award certificate hanging on a wall of his bedroom (47), his reference to himself as an *eminence grise* (21), and the fact that his Opinions are assured an audience in Germany. Anya comically fails to recognise the precise nature of the award framed in his room (she suspects it is a writing license), but her passing description of it as 'a framed scroll in some foreign language (Latin?) with his name in fancy lettering with lots of curlicues and a big red wax seal in the corner' (47) indicates that it is an award of some austerity and prestige. Given the signs within the narrative of JC's international stature and given the declaration 'WINNER OF THE NOBEL PRIZE FOR LITERATURE' displayed in bold print on the cover of the Harvill Secker edition of *Diary of a Bad Year*, how do we interpret Coetzee's subversion of JC's authority through Anya's and Allan's critique? What remains of the idea of the writer as public intellectual after this subversion?

### **The Writer as Public Intellectual**

An important difference between Elizabeth Costello and JC as writers who have latterly taken on roles as public intellectuals is that the general emphasis of Costello's lectures is literary-philosophical whereas the majority of JC's 'Strong Opinions' concern current political affairs. (The dates 12 September 2005–31 May 2006, which preface the first part of *Diary of a Bad Year*, provide temporal anchorage.) The dominant tone of these Opinions is reflective rather than polemical or adversarial. JC's critiques (for instance, of the Bush administration) are trenchant but delivered with a strong measure of scepticism, which keeps him from advocating a single course of action or aligning his interests with a particular group or organisation. He skirts the self-interested vein of confession and, while remaining suspicious of political discourse, decries criminal acts that particularly disturb him. In these respects, the example JC sets in his 'Strong Opinions' closely answers the ideal image of the public intellectual Edward Said outlines in his 1993 Reith lectures.

For Said,

the intellectual is an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy, opinion to, as well as for, a public. And this role has an edge to it, and cannot be played without a sense of being someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them), to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations, whose *raison d'être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug. The intellectual does so on the basis of universal principles: that all human beings are entitled to expect decent standards of behavior concerning freedom and justice from worldly powers or nations, and that deliberate or inadvertent violations of these standards need to be testified [to] and fought against courageously. (*Representations of the Intellectual* 11-12)

JC satisfies the criterion of speaking 'to, as well as for, a public' especially well on the question of how an individual like himself might go about dealing with a sense of shame derived through the complicities of citizenship. More accurately, he speaks not *for* a public but *as a citizen of* a public. He does not agitate for a cause but scrutinises the status quo and raises questions about it that are coloured with the pathos of his own implication. For Said, the 'personal inflection and the private sensibility' give a vital persuasive weight to the ideal intellectual's representations (*Representations* 12). But, Said insists, while status qualifies and ego accents the intellectual's interventions, the personality ought not to deflect attention from the representations, which for Said are the '*activity itself*, dependent on a kind of consciousness that is skeptical, engaged, unremittingly devoted to rational investigation and moral judgment; and this puts the individual on the record and on the line' (*Representations* 20; Said's italics). It is particularly the quality of 'athletic rational energy' (*Representations* 23), which Said attributes to the ideal intellectual, that stands out in JC. For Coetzee himself, 'idealism' is integral to how intellectuals conceive their role in society.

People function as intellectuals in social discourse insofar as they relate our present and our future to our past. Their discourse, to put it roughly, has a certain historical breadth. More than that, intellectuals tend to see themselves as ultimately answerable to history, that is, to a future from which they will be seen as belonging to the past.

('Critic and Citizen: A Response' 109)

The words to isolate in this extract are ‘relate,’ ‘historical breadth,’ and ‘answerable,’ which together underline the element of responsibility entailed in interpreting the status quo under the aspect of history, or, to put this point differently, the responsibility of *relativising* the present. In *Giving Offense* Coetzee presents this point with more detail and emphasis. He finds this relativising function of the intellectual quintessential of the ‘project of rationality:’ for Coetzee as for Said, the intellectual is an unstintingly rational creature. Here is Coetzee’s sketch of the intellectual as tireless sceptic:

... intellectuals of the kind I describe, pointing to the Apollonian “Know yourself,” criticize and encourage criticism of the foundations of their own belief systems. Such is their confidence that they may even welcome attacks on themselves, smiling when they are caricatured and insulted, responding with the keenest appreciation to the most probing, most perceptive thrusts. They particularly welcome accounts of their enterprise that attempt to relativize it, read it within a cultural framework. They welcome such accounts and at once set about framing them in turn within the project of rationality, that is, set about recuperating them. (*Giving Offense* 4)

As we have seen, this recuperative impulse is an emphatic feature of Coetzee’s later fiction (as indeed of his earlier fiction too).. Coetzee goes on to identify himself as an intellectual of the kind he describes here and traces the consequences of the intellectual’s rigorous rational faculty for the experience of taking-offense. While noting that he is ‘not incapable of being offended (for instance, at being called a [colonial] settler),’ Coetzee adds that he ‘does not particularly respect his own being-offended, does not take it seriously, particularly as a basis for action’ (*Giving Offense* 5).<sup>10</sup>

Implicit in Said’s account given above is the assumption that the intellectual has a ‘moral responsibility’ to speak out against injustice in the manner of Émile Zola in 1898 on behalf of Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish artillery officer in the French army unjustly accused of treason. ‘Moral responsibility’ is a phrase Mark Sanders quotes from volume 1 of the Report of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (*Complicities* 3). This form of responsibility, the Report stipulates, ‘goes deeper than legal and political responsibility’ and implicates each individual citizen: ‘it is only by recognising the potential for evil in each one of us that we can take full responsibility for ensuring that such evil [as apartheid] will never be repeated’ (qtd. in Sanders,

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<sup>10</sup> Recall Coetzee’s response in the interview on *Giving Offense* in which he distinguishes between himself as an individual taking offense at a particular issue and whether as an intellectual he respects the *motion* of taking offense in general. See Chapter 2 of this thesis, page 59.

*Complicities* 3). For Sanders, the intellectual is pre-eminently a figure of ‘responsibility-in-complicity,’ whose task is to affirm ‘a basic human foldedness’ with others (*Complicities* 11, 138, 174). Sanders elaborates his argument in the context of apartheid, that ‘exemplary project of apartness’ (*Complicities* 19). To reinforce his point that complicity among citizens is general, he invokes Hannah Arendt’s notion of the ‘banality of evil’ and Karl Jaspers’s idea of ‘metaphysical guilt’ to highlight how particular political loyalties often bar the way to affirming a larger “‘foldedness” in human-being’ (*Complicities* 6). For Jaspers in *The Question of German Guilt* (1946), ‘there exists a solidarity among men as human beings that makes each co-responsible for every wrong and every injustice in the world, especially for crimes committed in his presence or with his knowledge’ (qtd. in *Complicities* 6). My point here is that in respect of citizens in general and the intellectual in particular, knowledge is an implicating quantity. (One thinks here of the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* whose complicity consists in knowing ‘somewhat too much’ about the Third Bureau’s coercive activities in his imperial outpost (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 21)).<sup>11</sup> For Sanders, the intellectual is an ‘ethical figure’ insofar as to be an intellectual is to lay oneself open to ‘the makings of an imperative: one is always already occupied by another; and as an intellectual one is called upon to act out of this being-occupied’ (*Complicities* 209). This point has a special pertinence to writers of imaginative literature, whose work, as I argued in Chapter 2 with reference to Costello, involves embedding themselves in the minds and lives of other individuals.

Although I have noted how *Diary of a Bad Year* qualifies the link between Coetzee and JC, one is justified in asking with reference to the character JC as much as his author Coetzee: what does this book, this *representation* (in Said’s sense), *Diary of a Bad Year*, amount to as a public intervention? It must be remembered that JC acts in the role of a public intellectual by offering his ‘strong opinions’ for publication on the strength of his achievement as a literary critic and novelist. Said suggests that writers of imaginative literature (novelists, poets, dramatists) have a ‘separate, perhaps even more honorific’ status to intellectuals who are not primarily creative writers: ‘the aura of creativity and an almost sanctified capacity for originality (often vatic in its scope and quality) accrues to them as it doesn’t at all to intellectuals, who with regard to literature belong to the slightly debased and parasitic class of critics’ (‘The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals’ 24-5). Said goes on to speak of the ‘special symbolic role of the writer as an intellectual testifying to a

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<sup>11</sup> In ‘Remembering Texas’ (1984) Coetzee recalls the unease he felt about apartheid as much as the American war in Vietnam while working at the University of Texas. In this piece he speaks of complicity as ‘far too advanced a notion’ for him at the time: the more immediate ‘problem was with knowing what was being done. It was not obvious where one went to escape knowledge’ (*Doubling the Point* 51).

country's or region's experience, thereby giving that experience a public identity forever inscribed in the global discursive agenda' ('The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals' 25).

I want to take up this idea of the writer's 'symbolic role' and the practice of testimony by turning to Pinter's example. For JC, 'saving one's honour' is in part a matter of 'keeping one's self-respect' and in part 'a matter of not having to appear with soiled hands before the judgment of history' (41), that is to say, a matter of giving an account of one's shame, putting it on record. As an ageing writer increasingly aware of his mortality, it is not surprising that JC should be preoccupied with the record; but he mentions it with specific reference to the Bush administration's diligence in disposing of evidence that might incriminate them (41). The record incriminates, can be doctored, can be disposed of. Machiavellian necessity figures large in JC's account of the discourse of politics, but I would add that there is another word that in his observations on politics JC circles around but does not light on (for example, that 'politics is the art of the possible' (125)) – *expediency*. It is in a spirit of expediency that the Bush administration manipulates 'laws and conventions proscribing torture' (39).<sup>12</sup>

In contrast, it is in a spirit of outrage that his name is being sullied through his very citizenship that Harold Pinter speaks out as he does in his 2005 Nobel Lecture. For JC, in Pinter's case speaking out has the effect of a physical intervention. Pinter's statement is an example of what Sanders calls 'actively assumed complicity' (*Complicities* 4). Sanders traces this kind of intervention to Émile Zola's 'J'accuse' (1898), a public defence, in the form of an open letter to the French president, of Alfred Dreyfus. Sanders explains that 'actively assumed complicity' is a matter of 'affirming one's complicity in order to assume responsibility for what is done in one's name without simply distancing oneself from the deed' (*Complicities* 4-5). For Pinter, the phrase 'the American people' functions as 'a truly voluptuous cushion of reassurance' ('Art, Truth, & Politics') to the American nation that their leaders fundamentally have their interests at heart. In his Nobel Lecture Pinter forcefully appeals to individual citizens to recognise that such bold, inclusive rhetorical gestures justify politicians' abuse of power, and that such rhetoric should be vigorously and publicly protested against. He agitates for a return of *conscience* – 'conscience to do not only with our own acts but to do with our shared responsibility in the acts of others' ('Art, Truth, & Politics').

To return for a moment to the contrast in outlook between JC and Anya: the difference in their views on shame is in part attributable to their different temperaments and in part to their respective experiences. Anya's temperament emerges most clearly in the wake of her break-up with

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<sup>12</sup> The *OED* defines *expedient* as an action that is 'convenient and practical though possibly improper or immoral.'

Allan. '[I]f I am into something,' she writes in a letter to JC, 'I am wholly in, but if it doesn't work out, I put it behind me, it is finished, it doesn't exist any more. That way I can remain positive, that way I can look to the future' (213). There is an optimism here, but also an element of straight-thinking pragmatism. Her sense of responsibility is resolutely individualistic in not allowing herself to be burdened by concerns not strictly her own. For JC, in contrast, the past structures his sense of the present. A strong sense of his temperamental disposition is conveyed in the political credo he suggests for himself – some permutation of '*pessimistic anarchistic quietism*' (203; Coetzee's italics).

What appears to be apathy in JC's political credo is in fact an acute form of historical consciousness: one might even go so far as to call it *historical conscience*. In his Opinion on raiding he outlines his understanding of history as a process of becoming conscious of the depth of one's affiliations and contexts, and of taking responsibility for them. In this Opinion he recalls how, during the period he lived in Cape Town his knowledge of the history of that place conditioned his understanding of it as his home more than the fact that he'd been born there. 'History has no life unless you give it a home in your consciousness,' he writes, 'it is a load no free person can be forced to take on' (104). There is a clear consistency between the attitude that gives rise to this remark on history and JC's attitude to shame. Both attitudes suggest that there is a responsibility entailed in knowing one's history – a responsibility to actively recognise the forces and circumstances that have shaped one's present situation and point of view. If there is an element of fatalism in JC's attitudes to history and shame, this element is the condition of taking responsibility for one's complicities with others. In other words, JC's position implies that one is *necessarily* and at all times complicit with others, even though one might not intimately know these others. In this, JC is consistent with Pinter's gloss of conscience as 'our shared responsibility in the acts of others.'

As I discussed in Chapter 3, Coetzee's Nobel Lecture has a very different performative effect to Pinter's lecture. *Diary of a Bad Year* absorbs Pinter's outspoken critique of Bush and Blair into the fabric of its narrative, and while JC remains sceptical about where such an impassioned public intervention as Pinter's might lead, nonetheless he affirms that in certain contexts speech carries the force of a physical act (127). Pinter speaks out against injustice: in doing so, he 'identifies in order to disidentify' (Sanders, *Complicities* 3) with the perpetrators of the acts he believes to be unjust. In a different way, Coetzee identifies with JC in order to disidentify: the power of Coetzee's book does not rest on the fidelity with which he projects himself in JC. On the contrary, as I will elaborate in a moment, JC serves as an *example* of some of the pitfalls of universalistic formulations about, for instance, the appropriate response to collective shame.

## Shame as Condition and Currency

Shame is a particularly useful index of the range of an individual's sense of community with others. It is a social condition insofar as it emerges from one's consciousness of the gaze of others, one's anticipatory sense that others perceive one as guilty. Lear notes that whereas guilt 'is more associated' with a judging voice,<sup>13</sup> shame 'requires a gaze' (84). Or, as McMahan puts it, 'shame is the public face of guilt' (90). In thinking about the focus on shame in *Diary of a Bad Year* it is helpful to recall Coetzee's remarks in the introductory chapter of *Giving Offense*, where he explains that the experience of taking offense is no less meaningful or acutely felt for the fact that what is impugned is a structure of ideas.

Affronts to the innocence of our children or to the dignity of our persons are attacks not upon our essential being but upon constructs – constructs by which we live, but constructs nevertheless. This is not to say that affronts to innocence or dignity are not real affronts, or that the outrage with which we respond to them is not real, in the sense of not being sincerely felt. The infringements are real; what is infringed, however, is not our essence but 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. (*Giving Offense* 14)

The key term here is 'foundational fiction.' It is immediately helpful in understanding shame as a condition in which one's consciousness of how others perceive one is realised affectively through the body. The idea of a 'foundational fiction' also provides a further way of appreciating the functional coherence of Coetzee with JC. By foregrounding his nominal congruence with JC, Coetzee invokes his personal history as a credible pretext for JC's Opinions and makes an earnest gesture towards what is at stake in JC's thoughts on shame, without making *Diary of a Bad Year* the scene of confession or testimony.

However, JC's late stage in life and the thematic emphasis on shame in the book invoke and

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<sup>13</sup> And Kafka, Lear adds, 'is at his most powerful when he isolates the voice of judgment – "You are guilty!" – from any embedding' (84).

flirt with the genre of the confession. In 'Truth in Autobiography' (1984) Coetzee uses the example of Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782) to speak about about shame as a confessional currency. He argues that Rousseau's account of how he prefers to steal rather than buy a five-sou cake functions as an element in an 'economy of confession' in which Rousseau's desires have a value that goes beyond what can be satisfied with the desired objects Rousseau refers to, in this case a five-sou cake. Coetzee describes how Rousseau would prefer to steal a cake than buy it because he does not want to participate in the public display of exchanging his desire-for-a-cake for a five-sou cake and thus allow his private desire to be equalised with others' desires on a public scale of desire ('Truth in Autobiography' 2). For Rousseau, to buy a five-sou cake is to risk the discomfort of others observing how his desire has been trivialised by being so easily priced: his desire becomes a 'mere five-sou desire' ('Truth in Autobiography' 3). Coetzee argues that this explanation may be what Rousseau is *saying* but it does not go to the heart of what Rousseau is *doing* in the *Confessions*:

Rousseau would not have stolen the cake (our reasoning goes) if his desire had been a mere five-sou desire, satisfiable by a five-sou cake; the cake must *stand for* something we do not know; the cake must be not only a cake but a sign, a clue to the truth. So the cake is stolen and eaten *and* the value of the desire for it (if not the desire itself) is retained. It is retained as a resource which, to the degree that it is mysterious, fascinating, illicit, shameful, can be exchanged for words in the economy of confession. The system of exchange rejected by Rousseau is one in which desire is exchanged for a money equivalent which is then exchanged for the object. There is no need, indeed no way (and this is the trouble with them) of feeling shameful about these public exchanges. *In the economy of confession, on the other hand, everything shameful is valuable: every secret or shameful appetite is confessable currency.* ('Truth in Autobiography' 3; Coetzee's italics, except final sentence)

In *Diary of a Bad Year* the shame JC professes to feel is, no less than Rousseau's desire for a five-sou cake, 'confessable currency.' The cause of shame in the case of JC and Rousseau is certainly very different, and JC commits himself to thinking critically about how the problem of collective shame might be negotiated. Yet, as in the Costello lessons, the critical element of JC's Opinions is throughout inflected and unsettled by the emotional key of the conversations and thoughts disclosed in the two lower streams.

For James Wood, a note of personal anguish lingers in this narrative despite the 'postmodern noises' that qualify JC's disclosures as 'not a confession but only the staging of a confession' ('Squall Lines'). Wood attributes the moral energy of Coetzee's fictions to a 'besotted relationship

to an older, Dostoyevskian tradition, in which we feel the desperate impress of the confessing author, however recessed and veiled' ('Squall Lines'). But as Patrick Hayes has shown, Coetzee's debt to Dostoevsky is more 'complex and critical' than Wood's adjective 'besotted' implies (Hayes 224, fn. 1).<sup>14</sup> In *J.M. Coetzee and the Novel* Hayes argues that Coetzee does not 'discountenance the notion of cultural criticism' in *Diary of a Bad Year*, but instead fashions 'the *Kulturkritik*<sup>15</sup> stance into something more amenable to his distinctively Beckettian mode of truth-telling' (247). For Hayes, as I've already noted in earlier chapters, the chief characteristics of this Beckettian mode are speaking from a position of creative weakness and in a tone that oscillates between the comic and the serious. In *Diary of a Bad Year* Anya's frivolity plays a key role in destabilising the self-assured tone of JC's mini-essays. As Hayes notes, Anya adds a "'gender" complication' to JC's revival of the honour ethic, a complication symptomatic of the broader effect of the book's tripartite narrative structure:

For every attempt made by the voice at the top of the page to homogenize, diagnose, and denounce modernity in general as instrumental, valueless, and Machiavellian, there is a countervoice at the bottom holding it back ... complicating its diagnosis, diverting its denunciation, and reminding us of the heterogeneity of values within "the political" that metacultural discourse is inclined to overlook. (Hayes 243)

Importantly, too, JC's emotional involvement with Anya leads him to concede in private that his views have limited relevance to others. The horizontal page divisions hold apart JC's public thought from the scenes of his private life, but at the same time belie JC's composed critical register with the discomposing energies of his emotional life. This, then, is a further instance of that alternating current of scission and complicity we earlier observed between author and character in the name 'JC.' The structure of the narrative, as I explain below, has the further effect of drawing attention to the reader's agency in facilitating the slippage of focus from the authorial persona to the countervoices of Anya and Allan.

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<sup>14</sup> See Chapters 4 and 6 of Hayes's book on Coetzee.

<sup>15</sup> Hayes draws on Francis Mulhern's definition of the German term *kulturkritik* ('cultural criticism') in outlining his argument about Coetzee's 'Australian fiction: ' *Kulturkritik*, in its classic European form, took shape in the later eighteenth century as a critical, normally negative discourse on the emerging symbolic universe of capitalism, democracy and enlightenment – on the values of a condition and process of social life for which a recent French coinage furnished the essential term: *civilisation*. Germany was the continental heartland of this discourse' (Hayes 229).

## The Reader

The section-titles ‘Strong Opinions’ and ‘Second Diary’ loosely cleave the book in two but do not compromise the integrity of the Opinions or interrupt the rhythm of the diary-streams. In the event of reading, the cleavage they impose is less decisive than the division of the narrative on each page into bands that oblige the reader to choose a narrative trajectory to follow. At moments the interest of an Opinion or the momentum of a diary-stream is greater than a band of text on the same page and one is swept downstream, as it were, later to paddle back to the point in the book from which one was swept off. Alternatively, one stoically reads each page vertically through, tractoring through the Opinions so as to pedal the more leisurely through the lower two streams. But to do this is to read *across* rather than *with* the separate rhythms of the streams and thus to dislocate the three text-bands into narrative fragments.<sup>16</sup>

Jonathan Lear provides a useful description of the dynamic involved in navigating the partitions of the book. He observes that in reading the Opinions we are confronted with ‘the *dialectic of responsibility*’ by which ‘we are presented with (and entangled in) argument,’ while ‘when we read vertically, downward, we encounter a *spectacle of embedding*. That is, we see how the moral stances that are officially to be presented in book form are embedded in the fantasies, happenings, musings, and struggles of the author’s day-to-day life. It is *that from which* a normal book of moral essays would be cut off’ (Lear 70; Lear’s italics).

It is not explicitly stated in *Diary of a Bad Year* for whom or why the recorded year should be judged bad,<sup>17</sup> the book’s title, as much as the sequence of JC’s Opinions on which the narrative hangs, foregrounds the subjective point of view. The diary, letter, and journal are literary forms that Coetzee uses in his earlier novels to foreground the emotional density of a character’s thought and experience. One thinks of Jacobus Coetzee’s travelogue, the Medical Officer’s journal, Susan Barton’s letters to Foe, Mrs Curren’s letter to her daughter, as well as other instances where the tone of the writing is intensely personal although its generic status ambiguous: Eugene Dawn’s and Magda’s diary-like disclosures, the Magistrate’s record of settlement in an outpost of Empire. An ‘opinion’ is necessarily subjective, open to being contested. The notion and experience of being *subject to* manipulation or control, by state or author, is broached for us, whether we think of

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<sup>16</sup> The partitioned structure of *Diary of a Bad Year* recalls the fragmented narrative organisation of *In the Heart of the Country*, where the story unfolds as a sequence of numbered units that unsettle the conventions of prose realism. Coetzee has spoken about the *nouveau roman*, photography, and film – particularly the montage effects of modernist film – as important influences on the design of his 1977 novel (*Doubling the Point* 59-60).

<sup>17</sup> In a notebook extract situated towards the end of *Summertime* we read that ‘bad year’ is John’s verdict on a succession of days in his life (260).

ourselves as citizens or readers, in the book's first two pages. Just as JC's Opinions prove to be subject to revision, a first reading of the book is necessarily multiple insofar as one is following through on different narrative trajectories. This point holds even if one reads the book by reading each page from top to bottom before turning the page, for in this way one allows each trajectory to interrupt or intercut the next. A reading, then, or matter of *reading through*, that is multiple and multiply punctuated, multiply qualified: indeed a reading in which qualification is a constitutive element.<sup>18</sup> More explicitly than the fictions discussed in the previous chapters, the reader of *Diary of a Bad Year* emerges with the countervoices of the other characters as the agent of this qualification.

There is no single, neutral point above or beyond the perspectives of JC and Anya and Allan that a conventional omniscient narrator might occupy, a figure whose voice convenes<sup>19</sup> or reconciles the conflicting points of view in the book – that is, excepting the figure of the reader. Clarkson concurs, but with a different emphasis: 'The juxtaposition, without overarching evaluative narrative comment, of voices realised in writing that leaves different tracks, means that the writer does not occupy an authoritative position neutrally independent of each track' (*J.M. Coetzee* 99). The narrative structure of *Diary of a Bad Year* forces the reader to become conscious of the book as a material quantity, an artefact, and to recognise the activity of reading it as a matter *choosing* to follow through on a particular narrative trajectory. This heightened awareness leads to a realisation that as the reader one is a vital component in the dynamic of this text: a provisional focal-point. While this realisation seems to endow the reader's point of view with the finality of a destination, this destination is singularly provisional because merely one among myriad in a community of readers. As we will see in the next chapter, the primacy of the reader's point of view and the bias of his or her history is more assertively foregrounded in *Summertime*, where the author's voice becomes wholly textual.

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'Fiction,' writes Mark Sanders in *Ambiguities of Witnessing: Law and Literature in the Time of a Truth Commission* (2007), 'produces the margin at which autobiography shades into history – at

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<sup>18</sup> In this sense, Beckettian qualification informs the structure of the book.

<sup>19</sup> In the spirit of the conventional, one tends to overlook the verb 'convene' embedded in the adjective 'conventional': both words derive from the Latin verb *convenire*: 'bring together' (*con-* + *venire*) (*OED*). A convention is an agreement about or an acceptance of the way something shall be done, but as the structure of so many of Coetzee's books attest, and as JC in his first Opinion on the origins of the state reminds us (*Diary* 3-9), there was a time before an agreement was settled on about how things should be done, a time when other choices might have been made and another reality brought into being.

which, to put things another way, it becomes testimony' (172). Sanders makes this point in the context of his discussion of *Disgrace* as a novel that works through the problems involved in coming to terms with or coming to a point of closure on traumatic events in the past through a quasi-judicial public body such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The choice of preposition here is important. In Sanders's reading, *Disgrace* is a novel that works *through* rather than works *out* these problems – where 'work out' carries the various senses of 'solve,' 'complete,' and 'erase' (as in: erase a stain).<sup>20</sup> Sanders argues that *Disgrace* resists closure through its very syntax (*Ambiguities of Witnessing* 174, 177, 180-3). However, Sanders's formulation that fiction provides the conditions for autobiography to merge into history by becoming testimony is misleading in failing to preserve the acute individual emotional cost at stake in testimony: while a scene or text of testimony may be represented in prose fiction, as a first person account of an historical event staged in a public context such as the TRC, testimony is emphatically *not* fiction. Yet, perhaps even more than *Disgrace*, *Diary of a Bad Year* serves as a good example of Sanders's point that fiction is able to produce a margin where a particular individual's life (here JC's) becomes the seedbed for a critical engagement with what it means to take responsibility for one's ideas and one's history in public. To bring these observations into line with my larger argument: JC is not the terminal focus of this text: he occasions a contest of opinion to which the reader becomes conscious of actively bearing witness.

One can imagine a reader familiar with Coetzee's other fictions losing patience with what he is doing in *Diary of a Bad Year* and, in the spirit of Nadine Gordimer's critique of *Life & Times of Michael K*,<sup>21</sup> faulting Coetzee for not putting his concerns about politics in a more strident key or explicitly aligning himself with one or another active political party or cause. But as we have seen, JC makes his politics plain by formulating it in a three-word credo (203). "But!," one can imagine this impatient reader continuing, "why does Coetzee have to misalign himself with his protagonist? Why can he not for once *commit* himself completely to the views his character expresses?" An impatience of this kind would doubtless be heightened by JC's Opinions on the body (59-61) and the mother tongue (195-7), where he suggests that one's sense of self is multiple insofar as it arises from the imbrication of body and language: neither the physical organism nor the pronoun 'I' exhausts the self.

I have shown in this chapter how the form of *Diary of a Bad Year* reveals Coetzee's notion

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<sup>20</sup> This feature of *Disgrace* is familiar to us from my discussion of *Elizabeth Costello* in Chapter 2.

<sup>21</sup> In 'The Idea of Gardening' (1984) Gordimer takes Coetzee to task for devoting a novel to a character who seeks to escape the touch of politics. Gordimer criticises Coetzee for failing (if not refusing) to 'recognize what the victims [of apartheid], seeing themselves as victims no longer, have done, are doing, and believe they must do for themselves' (6).

that writing offers a way of living out the discontinuities of his identity – as a writer and as a citizen, between a personal and a collective history, between a public image and private sense of self. Much of the poignancy of Coetzee’s representation of JC arises from the disjuncture between JC’s cultural authority as a distinguished author and as a man who feels acutely the mutability of his body and its desires. I have argued that the structure of the novel reflects a principle of critical counterpoint, but, more than this, that the book’s force does not depend on a perfect congruence of JC with Coetzee, since JC does not represent Coetzee so much as a citizen who grapples with what it means to accept the ‘moral responsibility’ of being affiliated to and sharing a history with others.

In JC’s final Opinion on Dostoevsky, he recounts how reading a passage from *The Brothers Karamazov* causes an upwelling of emotion in him. ‘Far more powerful than the substance of his [Ivan’s] argument,’ JC writes, ‘which is not strong, are the accents of anguish, the personal anguish of a soul unable to bear the horrors of this world. It is the voice of Ivan, as realized by Dostoevsky, not his reasoning, that sweeps me along’ (226). JC goes on to ask: ‘Are those tones of anguish real? Does Ivan “really” feel as he claims to feel, and does the reader in consequence “really” share Ivan’s feelings?’ (227). These questions are carefully placed for readers of *Diary of a Bad Year* to ask of themselves in relation to JC. Reading *Diary of a Bad Year* implicates one in JC’s psychological life and his struggles of conscience as a citizen. To read this book at all is to become conscious of choosing, as a reader and as a citizen, to be subject to and a subject in a particular narrative. In this light, reading too emerges as a form of complicity.

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## Chapter 6

### Return to the Scenes of Writing: *Summertime*

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In the foregoing chapters I have argued that the conventional understanding of autobiography as a genre governed by a singular authorial point of view and purpose is repeatedly undermined in Coetzee's later fiction. The form of these fictions privileges dialogue and dispute between the authorial figures and characters, anticipating the interpretation the fictions elicit from readers. In *Youth*, *Elizabeth Costello*, and *Diary of a Bad Year* the representation of the authorial figures' fallibility, their emotional insecurity and self-doubt, provides the opening for this dialogue. The prominence given to portrayals of the writer as a personality is juxtaposed with instances of their work: Costello's lectures and public exchanges, JC's opinions, John's notebooks in *Summertime*. Where the essayistic element is not present, the transparency of narration is destabilised by other kinds of formal reflexivity: the ambivalent status of questions in *Youth*, the allegorisation of interpretation in 'He and His Man,' the metafictional key of Costello's and Rayment's conversations in *Slow Man*. Within those narratives where an author-figure and his or her utterances are represented, a contest of point of view is dramatised between the author-figure, modelled on Coetzee, and other characters, with the utterance serving as hinge and grist for this contestation. Concurrently, the *person* of the author increasingly becomes subject to others' scrutinising gaze and interpretation. In *Elizabeth Costello*, *Diary of a Bad Year*, and *Summertime*, a shift or shading occurs in the status of the authorial self of Costello, JC, and John from an immediate animating presence to an absent subject, a text to be contested and overwritten by others. Thus we have seen how Costello's status as an author-function and text is implied by the slippages in her identity, and how in *Slow Man* Rayment struggles to escape from Costello's fictional text into Australian history; we recall too that in the latter part of *Diary of a Bad Year* the living individual JC slips from view behind his remaining Opinions and Anya's and Allan's opinions in the two lower narrative streams. In *Summertime*, as we will see in the present chapter, John's presence is effectively textual. The tracings of names and echoes from Coetzee's novels in the later fiction, and particularly *Summertime*, do more than highlight the artifice of these narratives: they signal Coetzee's preoccupation with *literary* biography, that is, an account of the writer's life that does justice to its interpenetration in and by what he has written.

In the previous chapter I detailed how the issue of historical and political complicity is

brought into sharp focus through the nominal alignment of the author Coetzee with his character JC. Speaking in Coetzee's name and on the authority of his reputation, JC takes responsibility for crimes committed in the name of groups to which he belongs and values to which he subscribes by acknowledging them in the Opinions destined for publication in Germany. I drew attention to how this publication context, taken with the idea of 'inner emigration,' amplifies the question that preoccupies JC about the acclaimed writer's complicity with historical crimes on the scale of apartheid. Fresh in the reader's mind from *Diary of a Bad Year*, the issue of the stain or 'filth' of complicity in apartheid is raised early in *Summertime* in one of the extracts drawn from John's 1970s notebooks.

The autobiographical turn in *Summertime* is far from Coetzee's simple backward look over episodes from a period in his life, a straightforward art of memory of the kind practised, for example, by Nabokov in *Speak, Memory*. (I will have more to say about Nabokov in this chapter.) Rather, the autobiographical turn here consists of a deflection or deferral of point of view to characters whose accounts of John's part in their lives are coloured and complicated by the circumstances in which they came to know him. The complex structure of this book produces disjunctive angles of vision. This is evident as much in the third person narrative mode of John's notebook entries, which attests to his desire to distance himself from his place and time, as in the range of the interviewees' points of view, who, bar Margot, reflect on their contact with John in South Africa in the 1970s from a distance in time and in space as emigrants themselves.

I begin this chapter by examining the implications of the premise of *Summertime* that the author John Coetzee is dead. Drawing on Barthes's essay 'The Death of the Author' and his book about himself, *Roland Barthes*, I ask if the author is not always already dead or late, out of joint with the interpretation of his writing. I focus on this essay and book by Barthes because they provide a valuable approach to considering Coetzee's procedure in *Summertime* and the autobiographical turn in his later fiction more broadly. I argue that in *Summertime* John emerges less as a discrete character than a text constituted and interpreted by others, ranging through the interviewees to the biographer Vincent. Extending this line of argument, I trace the textualisation of the author at a different level by suggesting that the autotextual traces in *Summertime* support the idea that the writer's identity is constituted equally by his work, a consideration that highlights the problem with Vincent's aim of producing a biography of Coetzee that focuses on the man to the exclusion of his work. I dwell on how the entanglement of physical acts of flight from and return to South Africa, and the interviewees' imaginative acts of recollection of sites and scenes involving John in South Africa in the 1970s, foregrounds the relationship to *place* as an integral element in Coetzee's sense of autobiography as a narrative drawn of the self at particular *times* of his life. I

expand this point by discussing how the interviewees' relationships to South Africa inflect the perspectives they offer on John and drawing out the significance of acts of translation in the text.

In the final section of the chapter I focus on Margot's account of John's feeling for the family farm Voëlfontein and the surrounding Karoo landscape, and his attitude to this feeling. I suggest that John's attitude of qualified attachment to the farm is symptomatic of his attitude towards living in South Africa at all, and integral too to his sense of his vocation as a writer. In sum, this chapter argues that, more clearly than Coetzee's other later fictions, *Summertime* presents John Coetzee as an *unsettled* figure in two senses: first, as an uneasy resident in and of South Africa; second, as a figure whose life and work unite as a text which, by circulating across national borders and languages, cannot be definitively fixed or settled by virtue of the different contexts in which it is interpreted.

### **The Death of the Author**

For a novelist as consistently formally inventive as Coetzee, who in his later fiction develops fresh ways of refracting aspects of his self and life into narrative, premising a book on the fact that he is no longer alive seems a radical gesture, but is in a sense redundant. It is redundant because *Summertime* is no less about 'this person, this subject, my subject,' as Coetzee refers to himself in the 'Retrospect' of *Doubling the Point* (394), than *Boyhood*, *Youth*, or *Diary of a Bad Year*. The difference is that in *Summertime* John is less a discrete character than an embodied memory,<sup>1</sup> a composite textual figure shuffled together from John's entries in his notebooks and the remarks of the five individuals interviewed by the biographer Mr Vincent. Casting 'John Coetzee' as deceased in *Summertime* Coetzee seems to iterate Roland Barthes's argument in 'The Death of the Author' (1968) that where interpretation of a literary text is concerned the author is not a supervisory limit to it but an absence and a silence, always already dead insofar as it is the reader who inherits the text to determine its meaning.

In this seminal essay Barthes rejects the view of the author as a sacred source of opinion, a figure entitled to the first and final word on the work he has produced. 'The *explanation* of a work,' writes Barthes, 'is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the

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<sup>1</sup> 'Embodied memory' is a phrase I borrow from Jacob Dlamini, who uses it in his book *Native Nostalgia* (2009) in an effort to overturn the persistent image of South African townships as 'sites of struggle.' For Dlamini, recalling his childhood in Katlehong, the phrase 'sites of struggle' flattens and homogenises what were and are vibrant, various, unique lifeworlds (153-4).

author “confiding” in us’ (‘The Death of the Author’ 143; Barthes’s italics). Instead of prioritising the *person* of the author – an approach that informs most literary biographies and interviews with authors – Barthes suggests that the writer be viewed as an entity or energy born and dispersed in the text, coterminous with it. On this view, writing is ‘that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing’ (142). As Barthes makes clear in the following passage, the roots of this view lie in the linguistic sciences, in particular the work of Emile Benveniste:<sup>2</sup>

Linguistically, the author is never more than the instance writing, just as *I* is nothing more than the instance saying *I*; language knows a ‘subject,’ not a ‘person,’ and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language ‘hold together,’ suffices, that is to say, to exhaust it. (‘The Death of the Author’ 145)

Following Benveniste, Barthes asserts that that the idiosyncrasy of the author’s personality dissolves to the extent that it is normalised in the linguistic forms available for self-expression. In his apparent attempt to void the author from the text, or displace the author *with* the text, Barthes emphasises the agency and subjectivity of the reader. If there seems to be something absolute about the terms in which Barthes states his argument, this is due to the mythic status he attributes to the author and the consequent Oedipal parricide that issues in the ‘birth of the reader.’ This mythic status, evident in his capitalisation of the ‘Author’ throughout the essay, becomes explicit in the essay’s closing line: ‘we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author’ (148).

In *The Death and Return of the Author* (1993) Séan Burke offers a fascinating and trenchant critique of anti-authorial discourses as theorised by the luminaries of the poststructuralist movement: Paul de Man, Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida. He argues that their various attempts to practice a criticism without recourse to the author’s biography are belied by slippages in their writing through which the authorial subject returns to enhance and destabilise aspects of their work (7). He claims, in short, that ‘the concept of the author is never more alive than when pronounced dead’ (7). Burke writes of Barthes’s essay

that Barthes himself, in seeking to dethrone the author, is led to an apotheosis of authorship

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<sup>2</sup> Barthes elaborates these ideas in more technical linguistic terms in his essay “‘To Write’: An Intransitive Verb?,” in which he signals his debt to Benveniste’s *Problèmes de la linguistique générale* (1966).

that vastly outpaces anything to be found in the critical history he takes arms against. Furthermore, and in collusion with this mis-representation, Barthes's entire polemic is grounded in the false assumption that if a magisterial status is denied the author, then the very concept of the author becomes otiose. ...That the author can only be conceived as a manifestation of the Absolute Subject, this is the root message of every authocide. One must, at base, be deeply *auterist* to call for the Death of the Author. The Author in 'The Death of the Author' only seems ready for death precisely because he never existed in the first place. Like the reader whom Barthes would instate in his stead – the 'reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted' – Barthes's Author is a metaphysical abstraction, a Platonic type, a fiction of the absolute. (Burke 27)

Notwithstanding the grand flourish with which Barthes appears to dispose of the idea of the author in his essay, his recourse to linguistics in arguing for a criticism that attends to the surface of writing marks out an important aspect of Coetzee's interest in Barthes, and structuralism and poststructuralism more generally. Coetzee's sympathy with the notion, forcefully expressed by Barthes above, that the author's post-facto opinions should not dictate interpretation of the text he has produced, is evident (among other forms) in his reluctance to offer his own interpretation of his novels too readily in interviews.<sup>3</sup>

In the preceding chapters I have emphasised how in Coetzee's later fiction the voice and views of the authorial figures are destabilised and deflected either by the narrator or other characters. In *Elizabeth Costello* and *Diary of a Bad Year* this process pivots on Costello's and JC's public utterances: and I have throughout drawn attention to Coetzee's more or less overt representation of the seam between the writer's life and work, the question of to what extent each accommodates and interpenetrates the other. This question is at the heart of Barthes's own book about himself, *Roland Barthes* (1975), in which he offers insights into his life and work by drawing about himself, or the idea of himself, a 'circle of fragments' (*Roland Barthes* 92). In these fragments Barthes oscillates between referring to himself as 'he' and 'I.' A book of fragments, then, or a book of oscillations in which Barthes alternates between description and analysis of an idea or some aspect of his personality and work. The effect is of Barthes coming to or at himself *aslant* in

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, *Doubling the Point* 205-206 and his exchange with Tony Morphet in a 1987 interview (Coetzee, 'Two Interviews' 464).

the process of writing about his body and the writing that that body has produced.<sup>4</sup> *Roland Barthes* is thus not so much about Barthes himself (there is scant anecdotal material) as about the process of self-writing and the problems that bedevil it: narcissism, the confessional impulse, sincerity, the hubris of assessing oneself with finality. I quote two passages below to give a sense of Barthes's effort to qualify by bringing critical distance to the self-images and ideas he reflects on in the book:

Though consisting apparently of a series of 'ideas,' this book is not the book of his ideas; it is the book of the Self, the book of my resistances to my own ideas; it is a *recessive* book (which falls back, but which may also gain perspective thereby).

(from a fragment titled 'The Book of the Self,' *Roland Barthes* 119; Barthes's italics)

This book is not a book of 'confessions;' not that it is insincere, but because we have a different knowledge today than yesterday; such knowledge can be summarized as follows: what I write about myself is never *the last word*: the more 'sincere' I am, the more interpretable I am, under the eye of other examples than those of the old authors, who believed they were required to submit themselves to but one law: *authenticity*. Such examples are History, Ideology, the Unconscious. Open (and how could they be otherwise?) to these different futures, my texts are disjointed, no one of them caps any other; the latter is nothing but a *further* text, the last of the series, not the ultimate in meaning ...

(from a fragment titled 'Lucidity,' *Roland Barthes* 120; Barthes's italics)

These passages share an emphasis on the provisionality of the author's interpretation of his personality and work. The author is only ever, if always already 'dead' to the extent that the reader's word will always supervene upon the author's. Barthes offers a tempered paraphrase of the idea of the author's demise in the preface to his *Critical Essays*: 'Writing must go hand in hand with silence,' he writes;

to write is in a sense to become 'still as death,' to become someone to whom the last word is denied; to write is to offer others, from the start, that last word. For the meaning of a

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<sup>4</sup> For Barthes, the word 'aslant,' which titles one of the fragments, summarises the manner of his writing, the significance of which lies 'in the margins, the interpolations, the parentheses, *aslant*' (73). See Andrew Brown for an intriguing study of the 'figures of writing' that characterise Barthes's work. In the preface to his biography of Barthes, Louis-Jean Calvet quotes two of Barthes's remarks on the genre of biography: that biography is 'the history of a *body* and what it has *produced*' and that every 'biography is a novel that dares not admit it' (xiii; Barthes's italics).

work (or of a text) cannot be created by the work alone; the author never produces anything but presumptions of meaning, forms, and it is the world which fills them. (xi)

The sentence in Barthes's handwriting that serves as the epigraph to *Roland Barthes* registers the same point in a way that returns us to the case of Coetzee's later fiction: 'It must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel' (*Roland Barthes* 1). Both Barthes and Coetzee recognise this point in their respective attempts to grapple with the limitations and deceptions of self-writing, taking themselves and their work as points of reference. Sceptical of the teleological pretensions of biography, Barthes favoured what he called the 'biographeme,' the fragment or shard of a glancing insight into the personality or work.<sup>5</sup> The fragmentary quality of the narrative in *Summertime* attests to Coetzee's similar resistance to the idea of biography and autobiography as forms of a settled and seamless history of the individual. Instead, in *Summertime*, dead or 'dead,' the authorial self remains in motion with the interpretation of his writing.

### **Palimpsests of text and self**

The matt photograph reproduced on the rear dustcover of the Harvill Secker edition of *Summertime* (London, 2009) shows an adult man with dark wavy hair, a dark beard and moustache, the left half of his face in complete shadow. The shadow gives a brooding air to this photograph of J.M. Coetzee, which previously appeared on the dustcover of the 1983 Penguin edition of *Life & Times of Michael K*. The half-observed face in this photograph can be taken as a visual caveat that the versions of Coetzee that surface in *Summertime*, as much as his other later fictions I have discussed in this thesis, are partial and questionable. The versions of John that emerge from the interviewees' accounts raise the question of what is involved in writing the biography of a writer like Coetzee, so many of whose novels focus on the folds between a writer's intimate private experience and the stories he or she writes, the tension between the inner repertoire of self-images and the public persona.

*Summertime* consists of a selection of materials towards a biography of John Coetzee that an English academic, Mr Vincent, is in the process of preparing. The book begins and ends with fragments drawn from John's notebooks in the 1970s. From Vincent we learn that the brief notes at the foot of each notebook fragment were added by Coetzee in 1999 or 2000 when he was working

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<sup>5</sup> As Calvet points out, this preference for the biographeme, 'the short note, the brief sketch' (Calvet 189), is continuous with Barthes's practice of writing by means of index cards. Nabokov too wrote this way: see *Strong Opinions* (31-32) for Nabokov's description of how he experiences the process of writing.

on a book he intended as a further instalment in the series of autobiographical fictions so far constituted by *Boyhood* and *Youth*. Lodged between the two sets of notebook fragments, the body of *Summertime* consists of transcripts of five interviews conducted by Vincent between September 2007 and June 2008 with individuals whose lives intersected John's in the 1970s. *Youth*, as I detailed in Chapter 1, narrates scenes from John's life in the period leading up to and following his flight to England in 1960; *Summertime* juxtaposes images of John from a similar threshold period of his life, marked out by his return to South Africa from the United States in 1971 and his first public recognition as a writer in 1977. In the earlier fiction John's sense of unsettlement, of dislocation or 'unbelonging,'<sup>6</sup> is limited to his feeling that he does not fully belong among his kinfolk in South Africa nor in the literary metropolis of London; in the later novel 'unsettled' takes on a new meaning as John comes more clearly into view as a textualised figure subject to interpretation. At one level, focalised in the third person by the interviewees and in his own notebooks, John emerges as a man who has returned to South Africa against his will to resume an uneasy residence in the country of his birth; in the eyes of his extended family he is a failed emigrant. But at another level, because he is dead (though he need not be for this point to hold), the acclaimed author John Coetzee is the unsettled quantity in *Summertime*, the story of his life an unfinalised account, variously narrated and narratable by others, including himself. Thus *Summertime* is as much about the textualised figure John Coetzee as it is a critique of the assumptions and procedures of conventional biography and autobiography.

In a typical memoir<sup>7</sup> the narrator is presumed to be continuous with the author in recollecting personal experiences from his or her life. *Summertime* is emphatically not a memoir in this tradition. In the one place in the fiction where one would expect to find John's disclosures about himself in the first person – the notebooks – 'John' represents himself as 'he.' John's notebooks emerge as a space where his personal experience becomes readable as if it were another's. If there is a distinction to be drawn between a diary and a notebook, John's notebooks blur it. Whereas a diary typically contains first-person reflections on the diarist's personal experience (for instance JC and Anya's diary entries in *Diary of a Bad Year*), a notebook generally accommodates material (such as sketches and extracts) to other ends than the spontaneous personal

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<sup>6</sup> I borrow this evocative word from Sarah Brouillette, who uses it in the title of her chapter on Salman Rushdie ('Salman Rushdie's "Unbelonging:" Authorship and "The East"') in *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace*.

<sup>7</sup> A recent example of memoir by one of Coetzee's coevals is André Brink's *A Fork in the Road: A Memoir* (2009). *Encounters with André Brink* (Human & Rousseau, 2010), a collection of tributes to Brink by friends, family, and colleagues (including Coetzee), provides a good measure, by contrast, of the inventiveness of Coetzee's approach to life-writing in *Summertime*.

record.<sup>8</sup> By rendering his thoughts and experiences in the notebooks in the third person and present tense, John allays the discomfort of his embeddedness in South Africa by separating out the historical self who is undergoing the history and the authorial self who reflects upon it in writing, as if it were not wholly his own experience he is writing about or as if he were assuming the point of view of a stranger in narrating that experience.

In *Boyhood* and *Youth*, as we saw in Chapter 1, Coetzee avoids the first person mode of narration in favour of the third person and the present tense, which positions John in the contingent midst of his history rather than at a reflective distance from it. In an interview conducted in 2002, Coetzee agrees with Attwell's claim that 'all autobiography is *autre*-biography' to the extent that there will always be a discontinuity between one's historical self and the remembered self one projects in writing (Coetzee, 'All Autobiography is *Autre*-biography' 216). In *Summertime*, the self-estrangement evident in the manner in which John represents his thoughts and experiences in his notebooks finds a logical extension in Vincent's interviewees talking about John from the point of view of their own experience – that is, with the perspective of actual intersubjective distance from him.

In the interviewees' accounts John is the *topic*, not strictly the *subject*: this role is reserved for the person recollecting the ways in which John figured in his or her life. For Julia this is an important point as it forces the biographer to qualify the insights she offers into John. She insists that in the story she tells she is the protagonist and John a minor character, and hence that 'a quick manipulation of perspective' by the biographer who seeks to turn her story into a vignette about her role in John's life, would be a 'grave error' (44).<sup>9</sup> 'John Coetzee' is squarely the subject of Vincent's biography, but Vincent's project is in turn an occasion for Coetzee to police his literary legacy by questioning the assumptions underpinning the idea of a Life of the Writer and foregrounding some of the difficulties Coetzee would expect his own biographers to address in composing his Life.

The consistencies among the five interviewees' recollections of John sit within a compartmentalised narrative structure that stresses the *multiplicity* of perspectives on him. Vincent's priority is not to present a definitive interpretation of Coetzee and his work, but to tell the

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<sup>8</sup> Whether the correct English translation of the texts Robert Musil called *Hefte* is 'notebook' or 'diary' is a detail Coetzee reflects on in his essay on Musil's *Diaries* (*Stranger Shores* 107).

<sup>9</sup> Julia's concern here about point of view is framed by the larger issue of who controls the story – who, finally, writes the story and publishes it imprinted with the stamp of their name as author. Her point recalls a moment in *Foe* when Susan Barton objects to Daniel Foe setting, for 'novelty' (117), the story of her time on the island with Cruso and Friday as the second part of the middle of a larger story about a mother's and daughter's quest for each other. 'The story I desire to be known by,' insists Barton, 'is the story of the island. You call it an episode, but I call it a story in its own right' (*Foe* 121).

story of a period of his life from the point of view of several individuals who knew him at the time (217). It strikes John's former academic colleague Martin as strange that Vincent should be constructing a biography out of individuals' recollections and opinions of John, while 'ignoring his writing' (216). This observation is one of many scattered through the interviews that put in question the method, aims, and ethics of the project of biography in general and the biography of a writer in particular. These observations are especially significant given that they concern a writer whose fictions consistently raise the question of what of the writer's life goes into the writing.

In the economy of *Summertime* 'John Coetzee' emerges less as an autonomous character than a textual field, a palimpsest. In the interviewees' accounts, John circulates as an energy of character; in the notebooks he is the written and the writing subject; the more prominent author-figure in *Summertime* is the biographer Vincent, whose method, it becomes clear from his second interview with Margot, involves more than simply editing the interview material and notebook extracts, but weaving them into a coherent narrative about John. There is an element of vertiginous self-reflexivity in John's third person notebook entries in the 1970s being accompanied with endnotes by John in 1999/2000 towards a nominally uncompleted autobiographical book that effectively surfaces as *Summertime*. Self-reflexivity is a distinctive feature of Coetzee's early novels: Joshua Billings suggests that 'deferred self-reflexivity' characterises Coetzee's late style. Billings writes that Coetzee's later novels 'hesitate on the brink of narrative, unwilling – or unable – to cohere. ... The problem is not that he cannot speak coherently, but that he can, and all too well; his authorial power has become too strong, shaping the world around him into a reflection of himself' (Billings, 'Puppet and Puppet-master'). I have argued through this thesis that, conscious of the gravity that has accrued to his name and work, in his later fiction Coetzee decentres the word and undercuts the certainties of the characters whose experience and opinions tempt alignment with his own. In *Summertime* he achieves the effect of 'deferred self-reflexivity' by dividing the narration of scenes from his life among different characters and by blurring the distinction between the human individual John and the textual field 'Coetzee.'

*Summertime* is nominally a biography in progress but in effect a fragmented portrait of the artist. The fragments of John that emerge from the interviews are refracted through the ideas and histories of the interviewees and the priorities of the biographer Vincent, who poses the questions that direct the shape and emphasis of the interviewees' responses. At a deeper level, John's life is further refracted by the traces of scenes and characters from Coetzee's other novels that are embedded in the names of characters in *Summertime* and in the interviewees' narratives.

The more obvious traces are evident in the characters' names. Martin turns out to have the

same initials as Margot Jonker's, which are Coetzee's reversed: M.J.<sup>10</sup> The name 'Martin' is recycled from *Dusklands*, where it is given to Eugene Dawn's son. Margot's sister Carol, glad emigrant to America, lives in a town in Florida called St Petersburg – an echo of the title of Coetzee's 1994 novel. Events in *Summertime* that echo moments in Coetzee's other novels include the following: Julia Frankl's husband Mark absconds with their child – an act that recalls Dawn's abduction of his son Martin in the first part of *Dusklands*; John and Margot's return to Voëlfontein following their misadventure in a donkey-cart driven by Hendrik recalls Magda's narration of two scenes in *In the Heart of the Country* involving the arrival at the farm of first her father and later Hendrik, each with his new wife; the scene Margot imagines of John sitting on the stoep of his Merweville house composing poems on his banjo recalls David Lurie doing the same in *Disgrace* (212). I re-ask the question I posed in Chapter 4: what is the effect of these resonances?

In his 1974 review of Deirdre Bair's *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (1978), Coetzee faults Bair's book for its 'reductive psychologizing,' which in Coetzee's view arises from Bair's failure to demonstrate the interfolding between Beckett's work and life. Coetzee poses a question that can be seen to underpin his own forays in autobiographical fiction:

By what evasions, what achievements, and above all what paradoxical motions does the heroic opus emerge from the unheroic life? Until he has explored this question to its depths, Beckett's biographer has produced only the life of a man who wrote books, not the life of the books and the man in each other. (Coetzee, Rev. of *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* 87)

In my previous chapters I drew attention to how Coetzee brings the 'unheroic life' of the author clearly into view in such characters as John in *Youth*, Elizabeth Costello, and JC. Attridge has noted how Coetzee's unflattering self-portrait in *Youth* is in this respect indebted to Tolstoy's book of the same title (*J.M. Coetzee* 156, fn. 21). But whereas in *Youth* John is focalised through the critical eye of the narrator whose perspective is implicitly continuous with that of the mature Coetzee, in *Summertime* John has the shifting status of a person and a text; furthermore, the perspectives offered on him come from multiple points of view and reveal just as much about John as about those who recall him.

In his essay 'Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and the Primacy of Art' (1974), Coetzee provides a deft synopsis of the 'planes of reality' of Nabokov's novel and the ways they interrelate.<sup>11</sup> He notes that

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<sup>10</sup> In *Foe* Susan Barton discovers these initials inscribed on a trunk in Foe's attic (*Foe* 93).

<sup>11</sup> The phrase 'planes of reality' recalls Italo Calvino's essay 'Levels of Reality in Literature,' in which he discusses 'the successive layers of subjectivity and feigning that we can discern underneath the author's name, and the various

Nabokov's novel does not 'escape history' but pre-empts it by incorporating within its structure two stages of its own interpretation. In Coetzee's reading, *Pale Fire* anticipates the 'endless exegesis of the meta-myth we call history' ('Nabokov's *Pale Fire*' 7). But whereas in the case of Nabokov's novel the imbrication of the character Charles Kinbote's life with his work on the poem 'Pale Fire' takes place within the pages of a single novel, *Pale Fire*,<sup>12</sup> in *Summertime* the imbrication involves the wider field of Coetzee's fiction. This imbrication gives an eerie precedence to those of Coetzee's novels echoed in *Summertime*, as if the facts of John's life, as it is reconstructed in *Summertime*, lie interred there. From one point of view, the episodes from John's life in the 1970s recalled by the interviewees have the status of the germinating experience which John will transmute into scenes in the novels he will later come to write. From another point of view, these 'seminal' scenes stitch the interviewees' narratives about John back into the larger corpus of Coetzee's fiction, compelling an interpretation of John's life in terms of Coetzee's fiction. In this way, *Summertime* foregrounds the interpenetrating relationship between John's life and Coetzee's fictional work, highlighting problems in Mr Vincent's approach of focusing on the man alone.

### **Emigration and Translation: the Interviewees**

I have so far demonstrated that what emerges of John's personality in *Summertime* is underwritten by his status as a text to be written and overwritten by others. Although these others – the interviewees and Mr Vincent – primarily seek to interpret the man 'John Coetzee,' their scattered locations and the role of translation in the novel reinforce a fact about reading the work of a writer like Coetzee today, namely that his work and the name 'Coetzee' as shorthand for the work have a transnational life. The interviewees expand amply on John's uneasy relationship to South African politics and society, but it becomes clear that each interviewee's relationship to South Africa, measured in emotion and space, colours the perspectives they offer on John. Of the five individuals Vincent interviews, Margot Jonker is the only one who still lives in South Africa. At the time of their interviews, the other four interview subjects live much further afield: Julia in Kingston, Ontario; Adriana in São Paulo, Brazil; Martin in Sheffield, England; Sophie in Paris. In the case of these four characters, the retrospective quality of their accounts is reinforced by the fact of their

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"T's that go to make up the "I" who is writing' (Calvino 111).

<sup>12</sup> What exactly the nature of the relationship is between the poem 'Pale Fire,' written by John Shade, and Kinbote's commentary, and between the conjunctive worlds of Shade's and Kinbote's lived and imagined experience, is a topic that has teased out a great deal of criticism. In his essay 'The Near-Tyranny of the Author: *Pale Fire*,' Maurice Couturier provides a useful synopsis of interpretations of the novel and proposes a lucid reading of his own.

distance in space from the sites of the scenes they recall. In this section I amplify this point by focusing on Adriana, Martin, and Mr Vincent.

Of the five interviewees, Adriana is the most vociferous and bitter on the topic of South Africa. Her experience of it causes her to view it as an alien place inimical to life: ‘this strange country’ (158), ‘this cruel land’ (179), ‘this atrocious earth of South Africa’ (179). Her dislike of the place derives from the attack on her husband Mario, which leaves him disfigured and comatose for months before his eventual death. His death leads to the difficulties she experiences as a single mother of two children, in mourning for her husband, forced to struggle with bureaucratic impediments to get compensation for his death and secure her daughter Joana’s identity papers. The loss of her husband accentuates her sense of abandonment in a society where speaking Brazilian Portuguese further complicates her affairs. Adriana’s circumstances reinforce her disaffection for South Africa. She attests to the painful irony of bearing the stigma of others’ prejudice towards her as a refugee ‘in that country of theirs,’ when, she says, ‘all I desired was to escape from it’ (188). Because or in spite of this discomfiting irony, her judgement of John’s relation to his country’s people and politics is similarly unnuanced. The main detail about John that gives her pause is the Afrikaner strain in him (161). To the principal of her daughter’s school she flatly pronounces: ‘he is not even English, he is a Boer’ (187). This statement carries the weight of Adriana’s accusation of Afrikaners for generating through apartheid the conditions that have made her experience of South Africa so painful. In using the term ‘boer’ pejoratively she means to stress not simply John’s unsuitability as a teacher of English but his culpability as a member of the ‘master-caste’ of white Afrikaners (*Doubling the Point* 96). Her low opinion of John as a teacher is based on a similarly superficial appreciation of his qualifications and what the teaching of English involves: she believes her daughter Maria Regina should learn to speak with an English accent (161) and it bothers her that John lacks a teaching diploma (175). Describing herself as ‘a practical person’ (194), she is nothing but suspicious of John’s explanation of his teaching method (163), which she takes to be a roundabout way of seducing her daughter. Her estimation of John as an individual and writer is above all literal-minded. Thus she fails to appreciate the distinction John draws between doing a job (teaching) and pursuing a vocation (writing) (163); to her mind, a ‘great writer’ must also be a ‘great man’ (195); John’s ineptness as a dancer, his lack of rhythm (‘[d]ance is incarnation’), strikes her as a key deficiency in one who presumes to embody characters in writing (198-9).

The other interviewees’ accounts contain nothing like the strength of negative feeling evident in Adriana’s. Set between the interviews with Martin and Margot, both born white South Africans, Adriana stands out as someone whose perspective on John reflects her antipathy towards South Africa, a feeling borne out of her experience of losing her husband to crime and out of her

powerlessness there as a foreigner.

The only male among the interviewees, Martin's account of John is characterised by reserve, which contrasts with the impassioned quality of Adriana's. Whereas Adriana suspects that Vincent may be using the biography as a pretext for taking liberties in asking her certain questions about her emotional life (170), Martin is sceptical of many of the assumptions underpinning Vincent's project. Where Margot conveys the intimacy and strength of her own and John's feeling for the Karoo landscape, Martin's remarks on John's attitude towards South Africa have the balance of sensible judgement and the perspective of a longer historical view. He tells how he shared with John the opinion that their presence as whites in Africa was 'legal but illegitimate:' 'We had an abstract right to be there, a birthright, but the basis of that right was fraudulent. Our presence was grounded in a crime, namely colonial conquest, perpetuated by apartheid' (20). This view is very much in line with John's in *Youth*, who feels that he and his friend Paul, 'with their pianos and violins, are on this earth, the earth of South Africa, on the shakiest of pretexts' (*Youth* 17). Martin goes on to define by antithesis his and John's identity – in fact more a feeling – as white South Africans: 'Whatever the opposite is of *native* or *rooted*, that was what we felt ourselves to be. We thought of ourselves as sojourners, temporary residents, and to that extent without a home, without a homeland' (210). 'Provisionality' is the word Martin uses to describe the way he and John negotiated their feelings of attachment toward South Africa: 'We were reluctant to invest too deeply in the country, since sooner or later our ties to it would have to be cut, our investment in it annulled' (211). As with the other interviewees, bar Margot, Martin's subsequent emigration from South Africa is a key detail that underwrites his account, here giving weight to the views he expresses about lacking a place to comfortably call his native home.

The Englishman Vincent relies on a colleague to translate the Afrikaans words in Margot's account into English and uses a professional translator of Brazilian Portuguese ('Senhora Gross') to assist him in his interview with Adriana. His relative youthfulness is suggested by Julia Frankl's remark that he is 'too young' to understand how in her day one did not hesitate to give a stranger a lift in one's car (22). I have already noted a handful of instances where an interviewee takes a sceptical view of Vincent's method or assumptions, but perhaps the most striking insight into Vincent's procedure comes when he tries to downplay his authorial intervention in turning Margot's interview remarks into fluent narrative. 'I have not rewritten it,' Vincent assures Margot, referring to the written version of their interview, 'I have simply recast it as narrative. Changing the form should have no effect on the content' (91). Margot's discomfort with Vincent's narrativised account of their interview conversation derives chiefly from his decision to narrate the account in the third person, replacing Margot's 'I' with 'she.' 'The *she* I use is like *I* but is not *I*,' explains Vincent.

In conversation with Attwell, Coetzee agrees that ‘all autobiography is *autre*-biography,’ and he follows this up by saying that to ‘rewrite *Boyhood* or *Youth* with *I* substituted for *he* throughout would leave you with two books only remotely related to their originals’ (216). Clarkson picks up on this point and tests it with a carefully chosen passage from each novel. Drawing on Jacobson’s and Benveniste’s insights into the role of deictics in setting up relationships in space, time, and subjectivity in discourse, Clarkson demonstrates how in both extracts Coetzee’s unusual combination of the third person ‘he’ and the present tense establishes ‘two different time frames’ and a subtle distance between the narrated and narrating consciousnesses, ‘without the intervention of retrospective adult commentary’ (*J.M. Coetzee* 24-28). In the case of Margot’s account in *Summertime*, the effect is somewhat different. The third person narration of her account elides the framing remarks of the interview situation and dispossesses Margot’s voice of narratorial authority. Rather than emphasising her status as a surviving custodian of memories that she verbalises at Vincent’s prompting, Vincent’s choice of third person narration relegates her to the role of a supporting character spurring John’s conversation in a past time-frame.

Contrary to Vincent’s claim, his modification of first to third person certainly does have a significant effect on the way Margot’s account is interpreted. It is possible to argue that the flat simplicity of Vincent’s comment that ‘[c]hanging the form should have no effect on the content’ is due less to his intellectual naivety than his desire to put to rest Margot’s concerns about his trustworthiness as a biographer. Nevertheless it strikes a dissonant note both in the context of the other acts of language-translation involved in Vincent’s project and in the broader context of Coetzee’s literary criticism, which is marked by Coetzee’s scrupulous attention to the linguistic aspect of narrative, particularly in the act of translating between languages.<sup>13</sup> Coetzee ends his essay on Gerrit Achterberg’s sonnet sequence ‘Ballade van de Gasfitter’<sup>14</sup> with the observation that ‘all reading is translation, just as all translation is criticism’ (*Doubling the Point* 90). This statement informs many of the essays in which Coetzee writes about the challenges of translating between languages. In ‘Roads to Translation’ (2005), in which he reflects on the translations to which his own novels have been subjected, Coetzee distinguishes between, on the one hand, a reader’s idea of what a particular word or phrase in one of his books means or refers to, and, on the other, what he as the author intended the same word or phrase to signify or evoke (144). While the author ‘cannot

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<sup>13</sup> In his PhD on Samuel Beckett’s English fiction, Coetzee goes beyond the question of the comparative expressive capabilities of English and French, which provides the starting point for his discussion, to consider the more fundamental matter of the relationship between thought and language. Stephen Kellman traces the extent to which Coetzee’s interest in Beckett’s experience of living and writing between two languages reflects Coetzee’s own experience as a ‘translingual’ writer. See Kellman, ‘J.M. Coetzee and Samuel Beckett: The Translingual Link’ (1996).

<sup>14</sup> ‘Achterberg’s “Ballade van de Gasfitter”’: The Mystery of I and You’ (1977) (*Doubling the Point* 69-90).

control the associations [his words] awaken' in the reader, the translator, in contrast, effectively interprets the source material in selecting viable alternative formulations in the target language (Coetzee, 'Roads to Translation' 144). For Coetzee, reading is a form of translation to the extent that it involves interpreting isolated moments in the narrative and local features of language and syntax in the light of an overall evaluation of the work's meaning.

Similarly, the interviewees' recollections of John situate him firmly in the context of their individual histories and in the midst of their personal passions and prejudices. That four of the five interviewees recall John's part in their life with the perspective of distance from the sites of those scenes, foregrounds South Africa as the crucible of John's formation even as it reminds one how his emigrations have structured his relationship to the country of his birth. The four interviewees' distance from South Africa also reminds one how, on the strength of his reputation as a writer, Coetzee's work – a transnational commodity – necessarily finds multiple, foreign contexts of reception.

### **Significant Soil<sup>15</sup>**

The title 'Summertime' is ironic when read in the light of John's notebook extracts, where a tone of dejection, punctuated with moments of chagrin, predominates. It is ironic to the extent that John's bleak, gloomy tone is at odds with the notion of him enjoying in his thirties the 'summertime' of his adult life. However, the title loses its irony when it is read with reference to Margot's recollection, narrativised by Vincent, of a particular visit by herself and John to the family farm Voëlfontein during the 1970s and their conversation about their auratic childhood experiences there. The book's title can thus be read at once at an ironic tangent to John's adult reserve about his attachment to South Africa and, more directly, to the deeply felt pleasure of his December experiences on the farm as a child. The subtitle 'Scenes from Provincial Life' sets *Summertime* in sequence with *Boyhood* and *Youth* and implies a metropolitan perspective that is as much the author Coetzee's, writing for a wider than South African audience, as it is his international readership's. Coetzee's emigration to Australia in 2002 adds a further inflection to this choice of subtitle, for it suggests that Coetzee's writing of *Summertime* itself marks a return of sorts to the site of an earlier return in his life. In this final part of the chapter I dwell on Margot's account of John's feeling for the family farm and its

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<sup>15</sup> I draw the phrase 'significant soil' from the closing section of Eliot's *The Dry Salvages* (1941), a poem that forms the third part of the *Four Quartets*. The echo is apt as it is in *The Dry Salvages* that Eliot returns to the two locales of his boyhood, Missouri and Massachusetts. Born in St. Louis, Missouri, it is the 'strong brown god' of the Mississippi river that Eliot recalls in this poem, along with the other resonant waterscape of his early experience – the sea off Cape Ann, New England, where his family owned a house where they summered (Sigg 14, 23-5).

Karoo locality, and his attitude towards this feeling. I want to suggest that Margot's narration of one of John's visits to the farm in the 1970s sets up a critical tension between the views John expresses on this visit and the use Coetzee makes of this visit in *Summertime*.

The record of the interview with Margot Jonker is the fullest account in the novel of John's relation to his wider family circle. Reconstructed by Vincent from their interview dialogue, Margot's account takes the form of a third person, present tense narrative in which she is the focalising consciousness. In Margot's account there is evidence to suggest that John's attitude to the family farm is in vital respects synechdochic of his attitude to living in South Africa as a whole. At the centre of Margot's narrative is the family farm, Voëlfontein, where the extended Coetzee family annually congregate to celebrate Christmas. Margot and her sister Carol provide counterpoints by which to measure John's stance towards the farm. Though during the week she is absent from it, for Margot home is the farm she and her husband Lukas own outside the town of Middelpos in the Northern Cape. With Lukas she is committed to that patch of land and supporting the labourers who work it. In contrast, Carol has 'broken from her roots' (101) by marrying Klaus Müller and integrating herself in his social circle of Swiss and German expatriates. For Carol, being 'properly settled' means living in the United States, to which she and her husband subsequently emigrate (100). John and Margot are similarly affected by the barren landscape of the 'Koup' region where Voëlfontein is located. The empty landscape, the isolation, the silence and depth of sky, evokes in John a mood of melancholy (97, 129). By way of a reference to Eugène Marais's *The Soul of the Ape* (1969), John confesses to Margot how since childhood this experience of melancholy has more than tinged his outlook: it has corrupted it. 'This place wrenches my heart,' he says. 'It spoils me for life' (97). In the following passage taken from later in Margot's interview, the implications of John's attitude to the farm are made explicit.

*Best to cut yourself free of what you love, he had said during their walk – cut yourself free and hope the wound heals. She understands him exactly. That is what they share above all: not just love of this farm, this kontrei, this Karoo, but an understanding that goes with the love, an understanding that love can be too much. To him and to her it was granted to spend their childhood summers in a sacred space. That glory can never be regained; best not to haunt old sites and come away from them mourning what is for ever gone.*

(134; Coetzee's italics)

Characterised as a 'sacred space,' the farm is here associated with the plenitude of summer and

what Tony Tanner has called the ‘reign of wonder’<sup>16</sup> of childhood. The festive spirit of the December holiday period swells the nostalgic appeal of John’s association of the farm with childhood as an invigorating imaginative space. While the focus here is on this particular farm, the association with childhood as an irretrievable *place* suggests that John’s relationship to the farm is more than a relationship to the physical hectares of fenced-in land: it is both a homesite and a space symbolic of the unselfconscious or naive pleasure of his childhood experience in general. The range of the farm’s significance to John is suggested in the successive phrases of the clause: ‘this farm, this *kontrei*, this Karoo.’ The Afrikaans word ‘kontrei’ denotes a region intimately known and cherished, a country of the heart.<sup>17</sup> It is this particular South African landscape, ‘the desert of the Great Karoo ... the country of his heart,’ that in *Youth* fires John’s desire to write a book about South Africa as he sits in the British Museum poring over the travel accounts written by Burchell and other European travellers to southern Africa (*Youth* 137). At this moment in *Youth*, as at the moment I have just referred to in Margot’s account in *Summertime*, it is in answer to the tension between John’s inordinate love for the region and his resolution to hold himself at a distance from the country of which it is an inseparable part, that writing presents itself as a compromise solution, a qualified form of attachment.

It must be remembered that John’s comment that it is ‘*best to cut yourself free of what you love*’ is made on a visit to the farm after his return to South Africa from the United States. It is as a ‘failed emigrant’ (141) that he prescribes this brave course of action, which in failing to decisively emigrate he has signally failed to see through. Among his family members he has a reputation as one who stands apart, an ‘*alleenloper*’ (133). The assertion of independence that led him to leave South Africa for England, primarily to avoid compulsory military service, is perceived by the extended Coetzee family as an act of disowning ‘his country, his family, his very parents’ (131). John’s recognition that his love for the family farm and the structure of feeling it represents ‘can be too much,’ entails accepting that the attachment he feels for it is traced through with incipient nostalgia. It is an untenable feeling because it is supported by no practical investment in the land, as exemplified by Margot’s husband Lukas, who runs a sheep-farm. It is a feeling that runs the risk of being purely sentimental.

In *Boyhood* John modulates his feeling for the same farm in a way that avoids implying a presumptuous and exclusive claim to ownership of the land. He rationalises the feeling by

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<sup>16</sup> Tony Tanner uses this phrase in the title of his book on the figure of the child in American literature, *The Reign of Wonder: Naivety and Realism in American Literature* (1965).

<sup>17</sup> However, when the word is set in the phrase *kontrei kuns*, it carries the negative connotation of the narrowly parochial or provincial. My thanks to Joan Hambidge for clarity on the nuances of this word’s meaning.

reversing the terms of the relationship so that the farm is no longer an object to be claimed by himself as a human agent but a province of experience of which he recognises himself a subject. And even this gesture he recognises as fatuous.

The farm will never belong to him, he will never be more than a visitor: he accepts that. The thought of actually living on Voëlfontein, of calling the great old house his home, of no longer having to ask permission to do what he wants to do, turns him giddy; he thrusts it away. *I belong to the farm*: that is the furthest he is prepared to go, even in his most secret heart. But in his secret heart he knows what the farm in its own way knows too: that Voëlfontein belongs to no one. (*Boyhood* 96; Coetzee's italics)

Even as John in *Boyhood* recognises that the farm 'belongs to no one' and John in Margot's account in *Summertime* speaks about the need to check an impulse to romanticise his bond to the farm, the emphasis Coetzee gives to these moments of recognition in the two books nonetheless *affirms* and consolidates Voëlfontein as a place of special significance to Coetzee and an index of his ambivalent attitude towards living in South Africa.

John's comment about cutting himself loose of the object of his love has about it the air of resignation, linked to the admission of a failure, that hangs over his notebook entries: a failure to have permanently 'escaped' South Africa on his first emigration, a failure to have cut himself loose too of his family (since he continues to live with his father in a dilapidated house in Tokai). Though there is a gathering resolution of purpose in the final notebook extract of *Summertime*, the note on which the book ends is no less gloomy and pessimistic than the conclusion of *Youth*. The line with which *Summertime* closes – 'One or the other: there is no third way' (266) – reveals a habit of binary thinking familiar from the portrayal of John in *Boyhood* and *Youth*. The oppressive imperative John feels in these three books to choose between one thing and another, to take sides, to be for or against something, encompasses his stance vis-à-vis the farm (Barnard, 'Coetzee in/and Afrikaans' 93).

The phrase that closes *Summertime* strikes a different note in *Diary of a Bad Year* in the context of JC's thoughts on how to reconcile oneself to being a citizen of a state whose government's actions one objects to. From Chapter 5 we recall that whereas Etienne de la Boétie saw servitude and revolt against servitude as the only two responses open to a state citizen, JC adds a 'third way,' which he describes as 'quietism, willed obscurity, inner emigration' (*Diary of a Bad Year* 12). In the context of political action, inner emigration denotes the decidedly negative value of non-involvement or passivity. This sense of the term is borne out in Stephen Watson's use of it in

his essay 'A Version of Melancholy' (1989), where he draws attention to the 'politics of melancholy' in the work of such white English-speaking expatriate writers from South Africa as Dan Jacobson and Christopher Hope. Watson writes that this melancholy derives from an 'impotence experienced by those of liberal inclinations caught, in South Africa, in the no-man's-land of vehement, competing nationalisms. Theirs is the melancholia of the inner émigré, of those who know they have lost and will always lose in the battle to shape the kind of South Africa they would prefer to live in' (178). The melancholia Watson refers to here can be applied with some justice to John to the extent that he too is not deeply enough invested in a political position or indeed in the agonistic field of politics in general to want to stake a claim to the land in the name of a national or ethnic identity. This aspect of John's character is highlighted in *Summertime* by Sophie, who sees a dialogical relation between John's aversion to political activism and his 'innate fatalism' and passivity (240). (JC's 'anti-political' credo of some version of '*pessimistic anarchistic quietism*' (*Diary of a Bad Year* 203) also springs to mind here.) Watson's idea of the 'inner émigré' is a useful one for appreciating the ambivalence of John's feelings for the farm and more broadly his attitude towards the wide matrix of experience narrowly summarised by the words 'South Africa.' Where Watson uses the term 'inner émigré' it signifies a resignation to being politically powerless or a disillusionment about politics. Where John is concerned, the term 'inner émigré' includes these meanings but captures too his sense of not fully belonging, or more accurately, *not feeling justified in claiming to belong, not wanting to claim to belong*, to a place where he feels most at home – the farm, but also South Africa.

Thus in Coetzee's fiction this particular Karoo farm emerges as something of an 'imaginary homeland,' which gathers significance in the face of the writer's distance from it in time and space. For Salman Rushdie, to recollect the past is inevitably to fictionalise it, but he suggests that this is an especially poignant fate for writers like himself who have left their country of birth and made their life and living elsewhere:

It may be argued that the past is a country from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity. Which seems to me self-evidently true; but I suggest that the writer who is out-of-country and even out-of-language may experience this loss in an intensified form. It is made more concrete for him by the physical fact of discontinuity, of his present being in a different place from his past, of his being 'elsewhere.' This may enable him to speak properly and concretely on a subject of universal significance and appeal. (Rushdie, 'Imaginary Homelands' 12)

In Rushdie's view, detachment from a place sharpens one's perception of it. As a displacement into the new and strange, emigration is for him an amplified version of movement in time, and it is narrative that offers a way of redeeming this slippage by arresting it and giving it shape and meaning. Speaking of the country of his birth, Rushdie writes of emigrant writers like himself that 'physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind' ('Imaginary Homelands' 10).

In thinking through Coetzee's merging of migrancy and memory in *Summertime* it is helpful to consider too the example of Vladimir Nabokov, who, despite Coetzee's assertions to the contrary in *Doubling the Point*, remains a pervasive presence in Coetzee's later fiction.<sup>18</sup> Compared to Rushdie, so many of whose novels are set on the Indian subcontinent and play palimpsestically with Indian history,<sup>19</sup> Nabokov's emigration from Russia to America in 1940 marks a more decisive moment in his literary career, for it was in this period that he switched from writing his novels in Russian to writing them in English.<sup>20</sup> In an interview in *Doubling the Point* Coetzee claims he no longer relates to Nabokov's work, citing as the primary reason Nabokov's failure to confront 'the nature of his loss in its historical fullness' (28). Nabokov's nostalgia for the 'departed world' of Old World Russia is largely due to his association of it with the wonder-years of his childhood. In Coetzee's view, Nabokov's approach to the reality of this loss was itself 'sometimes ... childish' and not 'responsible' to the extent that it did not recognise with adult maturity the ways in which politics conditioned the privileged circumstances of his early years (*Doubling the Point* 28). Attwell takes up Coetzee's point that Nabokov 'balked at facing the nature of his loss in its historical fullness,'<sup>21</sup> noting that there is a paradoxical dimension to the ideal of 'historical fullness'

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<sup>18</sup> There is a direct echo of Nabokov in the title of the book in which JC's opinions in *Diary of a Bad Year* are due to be published in Germany – *Strong Opinions* – which is the title of a collection of interviews with Nabokov and a selection of his occasional pieces. The thematic emphasis on literary biography in and the autotextuality of Coetzee's later fiction finds a particularly strong precursor in Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1945), *Pale Fire* (1962), and *Look at the Harlequins* (1974). *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* recounts the efforts of a first person narrator, V., to write a juster biography of his half-brother, Sebastian Knight, than the existing standard account. By the end of the novel V. finds he has identified so closely with his subject that he cannot extricate his own personality from Sebastian Knight's. *Pale Fire*, as I mentioned earlier in this chapter, is a notable precursor text to *Summertime* (and *Dusklands*) in its dramatisation of the interpenetrating relationship between the writer's life and work. Nabokov's art of self-quotation is most pronounced in *Look at the Harlequins*, which the narrator describes as an 'oblique autobiography – oblique, because dealing mainly not with pedestrian history but with the mirages of romantic and literary matters' (85), a description that could well hold for *Summertime*.

<sup>19</sup> See Coetzee's essay on Rushdie in *Stranger Shores* (200-211).

<sup>20</sup> In 1935 and 1937 Nabokov translated two of his novels into English – respectively, *Otchaianie (Despair)* and *Kamera obscura (Laughter in the Dark)*. In December 1938 through January 1939 he composed his first novel in English, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (Connolly 10, fn. 3).

<sup>21</sup> Coetzee writes of Nabokov that 'he sometimes approached it [his past] in a quite childish way, as though the Bolsheviks were to blame for robbing him of his childhood.' It is likely Coetzee had in mind a moment in the memoir *Speak, Memory* where Nabokov interrupts his narrative to point out that 'My old quarrel with the Soviet dictatorship is wholly unrelated to any question of property. My contempt for the émigré de Kickovski, who "hates

insofar as ‘the more complete and irreversible the loss, the more searching will be – or ought to be – the writing that comes in its wake’ (*Doubling the Point* 28-29). The question Attwell goes on to ask is nominally about how Coetzee conceives loss – specifically of his childhood – within the context of his personal history as a white South African, but if one bears in mind Nabokov’s emigration to America and Coetzee’s to Australia, the question of how to ‘approach’ and work through the loss of a body of personal experience based in a distant country takes on fresh significance when read in the light of John’s disclosures to Margot in *Summertime*: indeed with reference to *Summertime* as a whole.

For Coetzee, ‘forgivingness but also unflinchingness’ (*Doubling the Point* 29) are essential elements in a responsible attitude to representing one’s childhood in writing. An element of ‘unflinchingness’ is certainly present in the passage quoted above where John speaks about disowning his feeling for the family farm, but I stress that this resolution is belied by Coetzee’s repeated recursion to this particular homesite in his fictions. Margot tells how it is the ‘great, desolate’ (129) Karoo landscape, apparently bare of signs of human life and economic activity, that moves John. This quality of pregnant absence similarly informs his interest in the languages of the Khoi. As he explains to Margot, he does not speak Xhosa because it is daily spoken by millions of others, whereas knowing Khoi, according to John, allows one to converse with ‘the dead’ (104). He hints at a corollary to this in his more prosaic explanation for his knowledge of the Khoi root of the word ‘Koup’: ‘I am interested in the things we have lost, not the things we have kept’ (104). That is to say, he is interested in the *trace* of ‘the things we have lost’ (as I noted in Chapter 4, we find a similar inclination in the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*). The experience as much as the idea of loss (loss of childhood, loss of the farm) has a rich value for John as someone who deals in the traces of the living and dead through language – that is to say, as a writer.

The significance to Coetzee of Voëlfontein is evident from his evocation of it in *Life & Times of Michael K* and *Boyhood*. Peter Anderson argues that the very close correspondence between the terms of Coetzee’s description of aspects of the farm in these two books indicates that in *Boyhood* – and now in *Summertime* too – Coetzee seeks to ‘school his novels, to “doctor” them, to bring them back under the authority of the authorial history’ (200). Anderson writes that Michael K

repeats Coetzee’s desire for the Karoo farm, as Coetzee later repeats K’s words (that were

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the Reds” because they “stole” his money and land, is complete. The nostalgia I have been cherishing all these years is a hypertrophied sense of lost childhood, not sorrow for lost banknotes’ (47). The implication here is that the ‘Reds’ are equally to blame for Nabokov’s loss of childhood, which prompts Coetzee’s aside: ‘(wouldn’t he have grown up anyway?)’ (*Doubling the Point* 28).

his before). The two recycle each other, or, better, follow each other's footprints in a meandering orbit around the idea of the farm. In this, the authorial reverie, the quest for the lost domain, Coetzee adopts the habit of the vagrant, carrying a hoard of words, repeating his traces, never quite arriving. (201)

The recurrence of the Coetzee family farm as a resonant site in *Michael K*, *Boyhood*, and *Summertime* compels the conclusion that if John/Coetzee ever resolved to sever his attachment to it, as Margot's account suggests, this severance was provisional. In itself, Margot's account of the episode contradicts John's resolution not to haunt old sites – for (and here the character John merges with Coetzee the author of *Summertime*) this is precisely what Coetzee has done in the novels mentioned above and is doing again here. The Karoo family farm remains for Coetzee the emblematic homesite to which he qualifies his attachment, for it is after all as a visitor to the farm that he makes the declaration narrated by Margot, and at the same moment it is as the writer of *Summertime* who, revisiting this site in words doubly displaced through Margot and Vincent, reneges once more.

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At the outset of this chapter I proposed 'unsettled' as the key word that would link the two skeins of my discussion: on the one hand, John's discomfort about his footing in South Africa; on the other, the authorial subject John Coetzee as a tricky textual admixture of what he has lived and what he has written, avid of interpretation. Via Barthes I explained how the fragmented structure of *Summertime* and the echoes from Coetzee's earlier novels undermine the idea of a coherent authorial subject, presenting instead an image of the author as a textualised entity refracted through other histories than his own personal history. The prominent role played by the interviewees in speaking for John in *Summertime* is consistent with Coetzee's reluctance, registered in different ways in his later fiction, to speak squarely for himself and his work in the public sphere or write about his experiences in the first person. This reluctance is justified by John's lateness in *Summertime* – his absence in death formalising the textuality of the author's life, its openness to interpretation. I detailed how the perspective gained through emigration from South Africa colours four of the five interviewees' accounts of John and how this detail, considered alongside the acts of translation in the novel, underlines Coetzee's own present distance from South Africa as a resident of Australia and the necessarily multiple, foreign contexts in which the text 'Coetzee' – the imbrication of his personality, life, and work – is interpreted. By focusing on the family farm in the

final section of the chapter I clarified how John's attitude towards his feeling for Voëlfontein is emblematic of his vexed feeling about living in South Africa at all. Returning vicariously through Margot's narration to the farm, a site to which his characters gravitate in earlier novels, Coetzee finds a way of sustaining an untenable attachment to a place where he was never more than a transient.

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## Conclusion

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‘Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry,’ wrote W.H. Auden in his elegy on Yeats.<sup>1</sup> Substitute ‘South Africa’ for ‘Ireland’ and ‘prose’ for ‘poetry,’ and this sentiment could well hold for Coetzee. Or one thinks of Edward Said’s observation that Joyce chose exile ‘to give force to his artistic vocation:’ ‘Joyce picked a quarrel with Ireland and kept it alive so as to sustain the strictest opposition to what was familiar’ (*Reflections on Exile* 182). One of my leading claims in this thesis has been that Coetzee’s experience of South Africa continues to assert itself in the fiction he has produced since emigrating to Australia. Even in those fictions where the author’s relationship to South Africa is not overtly at issue – *Elizabeth Costello*, ‘He and His Man,’ and *Slow Man* – the metafictional turn of the narrative insistently, if equivocally stakes questions about the relation between personal and collective history, the self who writes and the self who is written, and fiction and public speech, on Coetzee’s history as an emigrant from South Africa and on his status as an acclaimed writer.

I have argued through this thesis that Coetzee’s self-representations in his later fiction turn on an intimate negotiation of his relationship to South Africa, specifically an abiding sense of complicity with apartheid and the obligations he has felt as an acclaimed writer to speak *in propria persona* for a group or to a cause. I have contended that Coetzee uses his international acclaim as a novelist and his emigration from South Africa to Britain and Australia as points of leverage in narratives that appear exclusively self-involved but increasingly deflect or defer the focus from Coetzee’s avatars to the one who brings the bias of his or her history to the text to contest the authorial utterance. I traced this gesture from the rhetorical questions in *Youth* to the challenges levelled by other characters at Costello in *Elizabeth Costello* and *Slow Man*, and JC in *Diary of a Bad Year*. The rise of these critical voices in Coetzee’s later fiction is given clearest expression in *Summertime*, where John’s person and history is enclosed within the interviewees’ accounts, which are marked with their pronounced individual bias towards John and South Africa.

One of the main consistencies I have drawn attention to among these six fictions is their ambiguous generic status. ‘He and His Man’ and *Elizabeth Costello*, in particular, resist definition and interpretive closure by prefiguring the critical dialogue the author’s public utterances elicit. Similarly, the dialogue in *Slow Man* between Costello and Rayment about the course of the story in which Rayment is the chief character, the contest of opinion in *Diary of a Bad Year* between JC and

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<sup>1</sup> Auden, ‘In Memory of W.B. Yeats’ (1940).

Anya over the currency of JC's opinions, and Vincent's conversations with his interviewees about John in *Summertime* and the procedures of biography, subordinate 'John Coetzee' and his fictional incarnations to pretexts for a critical exploration of forms of self-disclosure that forgo claims to finality. What emerges instead of a coherent autobiographical subject is a constellation of views on the acclaimed writer that jostle for priority without coalescing into a stable narrative of the history of an individual writer's body and the writing that that body has produced.

De-privileged through these fictions to the point of being physically removed from view and speaking only through fragments of notebook-text and other characters' voices in *Summertime*, the idea of 'Coetzee' nonetheless remains tenaciously visible, indeed is consolidated in this later work, to the point of acquiring a mythic status. In this light, *Summertime* can be seen to come full circle from *Dusklands*, where Coetzee deploys the surname 'Coetzee' to inscribe the writing of Eugene Dawn's account and Jacobus Coetzee's travel narrative (and its reception) – which together underscore the political convenience of the mythologising impulse in the writing of colonial history – within the circumstances of Coetzee's personal history. With precisely this aspect of *Dusklands* in mind, Jonathan Dee has observed of *Summertime* that Coetzee's 'impulse to metafictionalise himself' is nothing new (Dee, 'A Disembodied Man').

In Chapter 6 I quoted Billings's observation that in Coetzee's later fiction there is a crisis not of speech but of the speaker: the problem 'is not that he cannot speak coherently, but that he can, and all too well; his authorial power has become too strong' (Billings, 'Puppet and Puppet-master').<sup>2</sup> This view chimes with my assertion in the Introduction that whereas in Coetzee's earlier novels, haunted by apartheid, history is presented as a totalising discursive force, a 'transcendental subject,' as Attwell puts it (*J.M. Coetzee* 5), in the later fiction the authority of Coetzee himself is targeted for subversion in the characters made in his image. Yet despite the displacement of points of view and interpretive indirection, there remains a degree of narcissism and limitation, or better: circumscription, in Coetzee's gamesome self-exposure and self-qualification in these works.

For some commentators, like Delia Falconer,<sup>3</sup> Coetzee's self-portraiture in *Boyhood*, *Youth*, and *Summertime* 'can hardly be accused of egotism' because the image that emerges of the writer in these narratives is consistently unflattering: 'gloomy, withholding, cold, cowardly, even dishonest' (Falconer, 'Just Passing Through'). But, as Attridge notes of the depiction of John in *Youth* (Attridge 161), the tendency to exaggerate one's failings, the confessional impulse towards self-abasement, is not without a certain self-congratulatory and thus egotistical element. For Dee, the

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<sup>2</sup> See page 142 of this thesis.

<sup>3</sup> Falconer's review of *Summertime* is written in the third person, a game attempt to distance herself from her critical response to Coetzee's book. However, this strategy in fact makes her response more, rather than less personal.

'Scenes from Provincial Life' trilogy is a 'fundamentally narcissistic project' ('Just Passing Through'). Narcissism and prolixity are two points on which Coetzee has reservations about the self-writing in Breytenbach's prose works, reservations at once 'aesthetic and moral' (*Doubling the Point* 341). The fragmentation and multiplicity of point of view in Coetzee's later fiction can be read as an attempt to escape the charge of overt self-interest and self-indulgence that all self-writing courts. As I have argued through this thesis, Coetzee's authorial personas in the later fiction are not the terminal focus of these narratives but a means of focalising broader questions about affiliation and complicity, life-writing, and the public life of ideas. But even as one credits Coetzee's recasting of the terms of autobiography, it remains the case that these fictions draw mileage from Coetzee's reputation as a Nobel laureate and famously private individual. The movement in these works is thus both centrifugal and centripetal: centrifugal in shifting the focus from the gravitational centre of protagonist/authorial persona to circumjacent critical voices; centripetal in forcing into coherence such disparate occasional pieces as the lecture-fictions of *Elizabeth Costello*. Both movements are a function of literary celebrity: in variable measure subversive and exploitative of that consecrated status.

One could defend the ascendancy of ideas over plot and characterisation in these fictions, and their associated metafictional tricksiness, on the grounds that Coetzee has earned the right to write in this key – that is, one could mount this defence if Coetzee had not already done so himself in *Diary of a Bad Year*. The Opinion in question concerns the waning of the writer's powers of evocation, or if not powers then *appetite* for producing 'passages of dense description' (*Diary of a Bad Year* 192). The words with which Coetzee ends his 2003 essay on Gordimer are also relevant here:<sup>4</sup>

If the writing tends to be somewhat bodiless, somewhat sketchy by comparison with the writing of her major period, if the devotion to the texture of the real that characterises her best work is now only intermittent, if she is sometimes content to gesture toward what she means rather than pinning it down exactly in words, that is, one senses, because she has already proved herself, does not need to perform those Herculean labours anew.

(Coetzee, *Inner Workings* 256)

Coetzee's later fictions are studded with observations that steal criticism from the mouth of readers about the authorial personas and the work, and at an implicit level about the interpenetration of

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<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Hedley Twidle for reminding me of this passage.

persona, man, and work summarised in the name ‘Coetzee.’ In *Summertime*, Sophie’s sense that in John’s fictions – ironically only up to *Disgrace* – the ‘control of the elements is too tight’ perhaps best sums up the guarded, conservative, introverted structure of Coetzee’s later fiction. The self-critical manoeuvres I have traced in these works are carefully measured to diminish, even sully, the image of the man Coetzee but in a way that consistently redounds to the dexterity of the writer in the man.

I agree with Billings that ‘deferred self-reflexivity’ characterises Coetzee’s late style, resulting in novels that ‘hesitate on the brink of narrative, unwilling – or unable – to cohere’ (‘Puppet and Puppet-master’). ‘Unable’ speaks of a loss of faith in harmonious pattern, a grim embrace of ‘intransigence, difficulty and unresolved contradictions’ (7), which are the qualities that interest Said in the late work of Ibsen, Beethoven, and Adorno in his uncompleted *On Late Style* (2006). ‘Unwilling’ suggests a *semblance* of disparity and incoherence, the author-function still firmly in control.<sup>5</sup> I believe the latter holds more strongly in the case of Coetzee’s later fiction, which continues to witness the interfusion of inventiveness with a sharp measure of self-vigilance.<sup>6</sup> The shift in these works from the authorial persona as a fully embodied individual to a textual trace, the deflection or deferral of point of view to critical voices ranged against the authorial persona and utterance, the focalisation of ideas and questions through manqué autobiographical subjects – these features make elegant work of quarrying at the nexus of personality, personal history, and literary work held in tension in the name ‘Coetzee,’ but the dispersive energies of these fictions are in the final analysis mere gestures at release from the reputation of a writer firmly in the grip of himself.

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<sup>5</sup> Conversation with Hedley Twidle, 31 Jan. 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Strauss’s description of Coetzee’s style in a 1984 essay remains apt: ‘that style forever on guard against itself’ (Strauss 128).

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