COETZEE, BLANCHOT, AND THE WORK OF WRITING: THE IMPERSONALITY OF CHILDHOOD

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“All families invent their parents and children, give them each a story, character, fate and even language […] yet the overriding sensation I had was of always being out of place.”

—Edward Said (Out of Place 3)

In his “Gloss on Personality” from Critical Models, published first in 1963 as Eingriffe: Neun kritische Modelle, Theodor Adorno briefly considers some recent etymological changes reshaping the word personality, taking a special interest in this particular change of circumstances: whereas we once might have spoken of a person having a personality, at some point we came instead to think and to speak of a person being a personality. The state of ‘being’ a ‘personality’ appears to confer upon someone the strength, power, and related attributes associated with distinctive status. The OED first links the English form of this word to Anglo Norman and Latin roots (personalité, personalitas), when “personality” still described the three persons of God; from this departure point the word in the seventeenth century came to mean the quality of being a person (as opposed to an animal). The eighteenth century witnessed the emergence of personality as relating to the individual and often admirable characteristics that a person might possess, whereas the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries oversaw the change that Adorno calls out above, whereby personality typically comes to designate a powerful person whose very identity is put in service to the “bourgeois religion of success” (Adorno 163).

And so, struggling against the hegemony of conformity in his own time, a time not unlike our own in this respect, Adorno traces the history of the notion of personality from Kant’s idea that people can have—but not be—a personality, to the ‘personalities’ of the early twentieth century who capitalize, often financially, on their status as celebrity personalities. The revised meaning
of personality connotes strength and power and is subsumed by “individual persons who, according to Kant’s own distinction, define themselves more by their price than by their dignity” (Adorno 162). The force of Adorno’s “Gloss,” however, comes from its identification of the even more recent disinterest in personality based on individual, even eccentric, characteristics. Adorno recalls how being called “quite a character” is no longer in any way a compliment, but a derogatory jab at “those who resist the omnipresent mechanisms of conformity,” those who “are no longer considered to be the more capable persons” (163). To restore as principal denotation for the word “personality” the most common sense of personality from the late eighteenth-century—a person’s individual and distinctive character—is no doubt a lost cause. However, Adorno urges the reader that something of this formerly-common sense of the word must be saved: the “critical consciousness” of personality’s “intrinsic force of I.” Adorno defines this “intrinsic force” as “the strength of the individual not to entrust himself to what blindly sweeps down upon him,” the will of the individual to resist “blindly” coming to “resemble” the wave that sweeps down (165).\(^1\) Taken to idiosyncratic extreme, this “force of I” runs the risk of becoming blindly entrenched in the personal and taking on a relentless, potentially solipsistic self-expression that in its idiolect enables, but also limits, stylistic play. The impersonal by contrast forces one outside of oneself, to a sort of ‘out of place-ness,’ a notion to which my essay will return.

This essay considers how the recent novels of J.M. Coetzee preserve a critical consciousness of personhood, selfhood, and personality by means of an impersonal aesthetic that negotiates a middle ground between the extremes of the personal and impersonal, the person and personality. By positioning Coetzee’s writing alongside that of French literary theorist and novelist Maurice Blanchot, I examine how several of Coetzee’s isolated characters

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\(^1\) In his recently published book of correspondence with American novelist Paul Auster, J.M. Coetzee illustrates this preservation of the ‘force of I’ that must resist what so easily and blindly sweeps down upon us: “I too have, willy-nilly, become a twenty-first century person, yet I write books in which people write (and mail) paper letters, books in which the most up-to-date means of communication employed is (now and again) the telephone, which happens to be a nineteenth-century invention” (219). This is no small resistance, as he goes on to describe, since the presence of cell phones in his fiction, for instance, would effect substantive changes throughout the novels, determining how characters communicate, of course, but also their vulnerability to contact, tracking, or tapping at any given time of the day. The satellite culture of a tele-and-inter-connected world moves, unlike the work of writing, quickly and with little patience. See Blanchot’s “Kafka and the Work’s Demand” in *The Space of Literature* and Brian Macaskill’s “Authority, the Newspaper, and Other Media, including J.M. Coetzee’s *Summertime*” for a more extended exploration of impatience and communication as it relates to the work of writing.
mirror the isolation of the work that has produced the texts in which these characters appear. I contend that the movement of persons, personalities, and the impersonal written in Coetzee texts illuminates the burdens of writing and the circular self-hiding that distinguish authors like Kafka, Joyce, Beckett, Stein, and Coetzee from authors more interested in personal expression as their primary work, writers who, in an attempt to become ‘personalities,’ write “in anticipation of what would be said about them at their gravesides” (Adorno 161). The isolated and impersonal nature of the work of art and its artist—which tends to eschew the increasingly popular and institutionally forceful demands for ‘collaborative’ everything—works to foreground the unavoidably autobiographical, and therefore personal, nature of writing, including the ways in which Coetzee’s writing often impersonally engages the difficulties of personality, the isolation of writing, and the ‘childhood’ of the work of writing.

The topic of impersonality and writing has garnered much critical attention since the emergence of modernism, particularly in the poetry and criticism of T.S. Eliot. Writing in his often quoted and anthologized 1919 essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot urges the artist to experience a “continual surrender of himself” and “a continual extinction of personality” (6–7). When the judicious author moves beyond self-expression as the goal of writing, she realizes that writing depends less on her possession of a stronger or more interesting personality, and more on her capacity to engage with and to submit to “a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways” (9). The work of art demands this personal surrender, which does not in any way abolish the affective qualities present in the work. The fiction that moves its readers results from a cœnaesthesis of language, an effect—even perhaps a childlike effect (imaginative, magical, peculiar)—whose origin cannot simply be a result of the author’s personal pathos.

In a lecture titled “What is a Classic?” Coetzee suggests that while Eliot’s nonfiction had the effect of “importing the yardstick of impersonality into criticism,” his poetry maintains a personal and provincial aspect of a rootless wandering author attempting to create a new identity through writing. Rooted in South Africa, Coetzee also very much experiences the alienation and homelessness of provincial (although not exactly colonial) life and writing. This new identity, however, appears not necessarily as a result of Eliot (or Coetzee) consciously creating a new self-identity in writing; identity in its variations also surfaces as the unconscious by-product of surrendering oneself to the work that infuses itself with part of the author. I shall call the process and effect of such surrender the autobiographical-function of writing.
In the middle section of his tripartite lecture on the classic, Coetzee begins with an autobiographical anecdote recalling his adolescent self coming into contact for the first time with a recording of J.S. Bach’s The Well-tempered Clavier. Speaking of the event as “a revelation” and a “key event in my formation,” Coetzee wonders in retrospect if the experience was indeed what he had taken it to be, “a disinterested and in a sense impersonal aesthetic experience” (9), before proceeding in the lecture to complicate this articulation of the experience without entirely discounting its language. In Diary of a Bad Year, the ageing protagonist Señor C—a character who shares many similarities with Coetzee (both are ageing authors, winners of the Nobel Prize in Literature, admirers of Bach, and persons concerned with the lives of animals)—writes that “the best proof we have that life is good, and therefore that there may perhaps be a God after all who has our welfare at heart, is that to each of us, on the day we are born, comes the music of Johann Sebastian Bach” (221). Coetzee’s own experience with Bach was both personal—insofar as the music powerfully moved him as a youth, influencing his formation—and impersonal, to the extent that the adult Coetzee would come to understand Bach’s work as classic in its ability to survive century after century of criticism. The capacity of Bach’s music to prove itself against such perennial testing, Coetzee argues, is precisely what comes to certify Bach as classic; Señor C from Diary puts it this way: “The classic: the perduring” (190). To perdure is to persist and so to survive; it is to make the common uncommon, the personal impersonal.

To some degree, writing is always paradoxically personal and impersonal. In an interview with David Attwell, Coetzee says that “in a larger sense all writing is autobiography: everything you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it” (Doubling 17). The omnipresent autobiography-function occurs automatically in writing, lurking in the shadows of the text as a remnant of the author’s forsaken self that must forfeit itself for the work of writing to emerge. The other side of this coin appears in decisions writers make about how they conceive of themselves and the work of writing. If Señor C has a double in Coetzee’s body of writing, it would be Elizabeth Costello, the ageing novelist and outspoken animal rights advocate. Costello describes her writing self as one who works as a “secretary of the invisible, one of many secretaries over the ages” whose vocation requires a continual surrender of oneself to the work (Elizabeth 199); but not all authors surrender, and Coetzee registers this idea in Costello’s use of the word “many” instead of alternatives like “innumerable.” In this meta-narrative moment, Coetzee alludes to Eliot’s commentary on the relation between the artist and tradition as well as the need to set oneself aside for the work of art to emerge. When Costello is questioned about whether she is saying she possesses no beliefs, an essentially
inhuman state of dwelling, she responds, “When I claim to be a secretary clean of belief I refer to my ideal self, a self capable of holding opinions and prejudices at bay while the word which it is her function to conduct passes through her” (200). The origin of the work of writing owes itself to the isolation entered into willingly, although not without difficulty, not, perhaps, without suffering even.

This ‘passing through’ interests not only Eliot and Coetzee, but also Maurice Blanchot in *The Space of Literature*, originally published as *L’Espace littéraire* in 1955. Blanchot investigates the essential solitude that occupies the space of writing, first in general and then more specifically in Mallarmé, Kafka, and Rilke. Like these last-mentioned writers and no doubt any person carefully engaged in the act of writing, Coetzee writes the same thing over and over again; Blanchot characterizes this recursivity as the only reality for the writer, a demand “that he always come back to the same point, pass again over the same paths, persevere in starting over what for him never starts” (24). Similarly, isolated characters arise in Coetzee’s texts, not by Deleuzean repetition, nor even perhaps by conscious decision. Coetzee’s narrative work emerges out of a disconnect between author and text, intent and meaning: as Coetzee dies into the text, to borrow a well-known phrase from Roland Barthes, the work emerges. This work exists in solitude, and its author persists in unknowing solitude (Blanchot 21–22). How fitting then that Coetzee, in his more overt ‘memoirs,’ *Boyhood* and *Youth*, substitutes the traditional first person narrative voice for the third person—to the critical attention of Derek Attridge, Margaret Lenta, and others; the substitution speaks to the isolation of the author on account of the work. In Blanchot’s words, “The third person is myself become no one, my interlocutor turned alien; it is my no longer being able, where I am, to address myself and the inability of whoever addresses me to say ‘I’; it is his not being himself” (28). Coetzee’s autobiographies, *Summertime* included, depict an isolated Coetzee—alienated from family, schoolmates, culture, lovers, and himself—yet this isolated personality goes beyond self-estrangement and functions to foreground the isolation of the work itself that comes as a result of the author willing to write as medium, to pursue his collected thoughts, sights, smells, words, and sounds as an-Other.

Each of Coetzee’s autobiographies engages, from the opening words, an aesthetic of isolation. *Summertime* constitutes a pseudo-biography of the late John Coetzee made up of dated fragments from John’s ficto-journal, a series of transcripts from interviews of people who knew John (including Julia, Margot,
Adriana, Martin, and Sophie), and a series of undated journal fragments. Summertime—announced as “Fiction” in its U.S. editions—begins (after the dated journal entries) with Julia’s memories of Cape Town, specifically of the old Tokai Road, along which travelled “vans crammed with prisoners on their way to Pollsmoor” (19). Coetzee lived on Tokai Road in the early 1970s, but with his wife and two children (rather than alone with his father, as the account in Summertime would have it); this is one of many details in the novel that boldly subverts the biographical tradition (Kannemeyer 607). The “biography” predicated upon interviews conducted by the fictional Vincent and selective journal fragments begins, therefore, with an ever so brief mention of Pollsmoor, an internationally-known prison containing, as prisons will do, persons physically isolated from the outside world. As John comments in his journal dated 3 June 1975, “no one bothers to call it Pollsmoor Prison” (15; my emphasis). This entry, positioned as the final dated entry before the transcript of Julia’s interview, is followed by John’s gloss to himself to continue with “the Prisons Service vans that pass along Tokai Road on their way from the courts” (16). Then, immediately, Julia is questioned in a way that leads her to talk about these vans. After Vincent makes a mistake of historical detail concerning when exactly Nelson Mandela was detained at Pollsmoor, the dialogue turns to what one would more likely expect from a biography: how the biographee related to those close to him. But still, these prisoners, conveyed down Tokai Road to a prison already surrounded by suburban development and so with its “high walls and barbed wire and watch towers” already “the anomaly in the landscape” (15) in a sense preside over the text as one sign of the times, the 1970s, which Julia reminds us constituted “the heyday of apartheid,” itself an anomaly on the world stage. Insofar as he still resembles a scrawny, bearded hippie wearing “horn-rimmed glasses and sandals,” John strikes Julia on first notice as an anomaly also, out of time, “out of place” (21).

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2 To avoid ambiguity, I will use “John” or “John Coetzee” to refer to the semi-fictional author in Summertime and “Coetzee” in reference to the actual author of the memoir-novel.

3 Throughout Summertime, Coetzee repeatedly points the reader to some inherent problems of biography. On the first page of the interview with Julia, the biographer runs into a startling historical tangle by forgetting that Nelson Mandela was not moved to Pollsmoor prison until after 1975; previously, Mandela was still incarcerated on Robben Island (19). Coetzee commences this main part of the text (the five interviews) by discrediting Vincent (who has never met John) and his grasp of South African history. The interviewees, many of whom struggle with Vincent’s project for disparate reasons, continue to complicate the nature of biography as a genre. The issue of the historical accuracy of biography pointedly comes into question in Julia’s account where Vincent often ‘answers’ with silence. Guilty of fictional transpositions throughout his “biographical” account, Vincent periodically finds himself with no recourse other than silence.
As the novel-memoir continues, the construction of John as an outsider becomes more harmonious; he neither does nor wants to fit in with those around him. Julia says that John “did not love anybody,” that “he was not built for love” (48); John (Margot remembers) says of living with his father, “I am a difficult person to live with. My difficulty consists in not wanting to live with other people” (133); to Adriana, he is “Solitary. Not made for conjugal life. Not made for the company of women” (171); to Martin, John and Martin himself were “sojourners […] without a home, without a homeland” (210); and Sophie recalls, “I think he was happiest in the role of outsider. He was not a joiner” (239). But the text resists emphasizing a solipsistic isolation: the semi-fictional John Coetzee is dead; to that end, it is not the self that exists, but only the language of the self, told through the disparate voices of people in whose lives John mostly acted as a “minor character” (44). While Coetzee’s works all include characters in isolation, they operate neither according to some Thoreauvian or Sartrean view of separation from others, nor even in an individualistic narcissistic way. Instead, the space opened up between characters—space topologically organized across five edited transcripts of interviews framed by journal fragments in Summertime—enables these characters to move, to play. In John’s case, the movement is also clearly between worlds, private and public, personal and impersonal.

In each biographical account, John is constructed by a narrative movement between interviewer and interviewee, a movement seen even in the shift of typeface between the participating contributions. Vincent’s words throughout the interviews are rendered in italic type in all sections with the lone exception of Margot’s. Even the journal fragments create a similar movement between voices marked by the regular font of the youngish John who wrote the journal entries and the italicized memos he presumably wrote many years later in retrospective response to each dated fragment. In Margot’s account, which comes to the reader in the form of a transcript of her answers being read back to her, Vincent is the main speaker at the centre of the text. This centre, like the whole book, resists being dominated by any one voice. The structure of the book undermines John’s authority—he is after all “dead,” denied ficto-ontology and even the existential authority of a stranger like Camus’s outsider—threatens the interviewees’ authority through their explicit failures of memory or invention of details, and subverts Vincent’s authority as biographer, given that Vincent makes mistakes and takes liberties with ‘the facts.’ Even the fragments resist the certainty of the author’s authority. As Brian Macaskill points out regarding the misdated news report from Botswana mentioned in the first dated journal entry:
But once again the cognitive political detail, convincing enough at first glance, becomes subject to a politics of compositional performance: to begin with (and the first journal entry undertakes a performance of yet another beginning), the twenty-second of August, 1972 was a Tuesday and not a Monday, not a day after the Sunday Times would have been published. (“Authority” 22)

From the very beginning, the authority of all the internally authorial voices, including John’s—troubled as this is at least by an error of date—is eroded, made subject to incredulity. That which is “convincing enough at first glance” is undermined, as is each subsequent ‘authority’ on John’s life in the text. The act of reading opens up meaning and resists the totalization of any single voice, an idea Coetzee explores metanarratively by strategically displaying errors, inaccuracies, and—overtly so in the Margot interview—embellishments.

The author, once he writes a work or body of work that may perhaps be perceived as a work of art, must also consider the prospect of the biography written upon his death. Blanchot states that writers “are lodged in a theatrical obviousness and, beginning with their very life, are grappling with a future biographer against whom they defend themselves weakly” (Faux Pas 99). It seems that Coetzee here not only anticipates his own biography—the authorized version of which just recently appeared in 2012: J.M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing by the late J.C. Kannemeyer—but writes Summertime to rethink the biographical tradition as well as proffer semi-fictional details of his life that would defeat, from the inside out, any possibility of posthumous revelations about an author who, like Blanchot, is generally considered an intensely private person. The reader of biography often, like a voyeur, desires the unpleasant details, the kinky fetish, or the secrets of a person who kept to himself. By publishing his own biography of sorts, Coetzee circumvents the future difficulty of submitting himself to another biographer with whom he cannot communicate. In this sense, Summertime is Coetzee’s first authorized biography, more author-ized even than J.M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing, in the construction of which, by interview and correspondence, Coetzee had a considerable hand; unbeknownst to Kannemeyer at the time, Coetzee was well beyond the early stages of composing Summertime (2005–2009) when the biographer first contacted him in June, 2008 to enquire about the possibility of producing a biography (Kannemeyer 615).

In Youth, as we move backwards in Coetzee’s fictionalized life-story, isolation is intimated from the first, opening words: “He lives in a one-room flat near Mowbray railway station, for which he pays eleven guineas a month” (1). Having asserted his independence from his parents, at least partially, he lives
alone; and then later he moves to London and again is alone (47), and lonely. This isolation provides an opportunity for him to come into himself as a person. His newfound independence removes the shackles of conformity against which he struggles in Boyhood. Youth could even be seen as the memoir on personality. Coetzee sketches his younger self as a new individual, freshly delivered from the constraints of family and country, and gifted with a burgeoning identity. He is of course not entirely free: strings still attach him to his past from which he nevertheless feels liberated. But despite the liberating promise of his new job in London, “a proper job” with its properly attendant salary, “he finds himself more and more miserable” (47). In time, however, he comes into his own, even into the beginnings of his own artistic personality, the one brought to fruition in Summertime. This personality, of course, cannot easily be accommodated as that of ‘the expatriate artist’ nor by any means as that of the ‘bestselling author’ (he has, after all, at this stage produced neither art nor any commercial product). Instead, the would-be artist is crafting a personality demonstrative of his otherness, indicative of a would-be author still “out of place,” even with regard to himself as an Afrikaner who doesn’t belong, and so also even in relation to the English which is his first language (though not the English of London): a first language that serves as one indication of his ineligibility to belong as an Afrikaner (Doubling 341–342). Coetzee crafts his younger self as a cultural outsider, one who resists the ways of the world: a man who prefers Pope and Chaucer to Shakespeare (21). As a young man, John discovers Beckett’s plays and novels, which teach him a great deal. He realizes his failure, in his own words, “as a writer” and “as a lover” (166), and Youth ends on a note of uncertainty concerning his future—how else would a memoir of a twenty-four year old end?

Even as a child, John learns to accept that he is “not normal,” always a difficult idea for a young person to come to terms with. Boyhood’s opening moment, in the first instance, places the reader out of place in its description of one of John’s childhood homes on the outskirts of Worcester (where Coetzee moved at the age of nine, and where he would for the first time in his life “be exposed to a predominantly Afrikaans-speaking community” [Kannemeyer 51]):

[The Coetzees] live on a housing estate outside the town of Worcester, between the railway line and the National Road. The streets of the estate have tree-names but no trees yet […]. All the houses on the estate are new and identical. They are set in large plots of red clay earth where nothing grows, separated by wire fences. In each back yard stands a small block consisting of a room and a lavatory. Though they have no
servant, they refer to these as “the servant’s room” and “the servant’s lavatory.” (1)

The peculiarity of designating a room and lavatory as “the servant’s” despite the absence of any servant calls the reader’s attention to a language that is “out of place” with itself; this language!fits but also does not fit the social configurations of South African existence in decades around the 1950s. The (English) linguistic identity of the designation also again points towards the not so usual circumstance of a young Coetzee whose mother tongue is English, not Afrikaans.4 There are still more complications: despite speaking English at home and having in his extended family various Anglophiles and even some Anglophones, Coetzee’s ancestry is not British, which excludes him from being an “English South African” by his own estimation, leaving him as “one of the many people in this country who have become detached from their ethnic roots […] and have joined a pool of no recognizable ethnos whose language of exchange is English” (Doubling 342). Out of place from the beginning, the young Coetzee finds himself partial to his mother, and with mixed feelings about his father (Kannemeyer 39).

When John’s mother decides to learn to ride a bicycle—saying “I will not be a prisoner in this house”—John’s first thought is that his mother riding a bicycle is a “splendid” idea. His father’s declaration that “Women do not ride bicycles,” however, begins to influence him: “But now, as he listens to his father’s jokes, which his mother can meet only with dogged silence, he begins to waver” (Boyhood 3). His conclusion, as a young boy, can only be that if his mother cannot find someone to teach her to ride a bicycle, and if none of the other housewives do so, then his father must be correct; “His heart turns against her” and he joins in with the jeering (3). While John usually finds himself on his mother’s side against his father, “in this case he belongs with the men” (4). The personal (and selfish) impulse to keep his mother’s attention for himself, to rob her of possessing her own desire, manifests itself in the way he laughingly participates in the mean-spirited jokes his father makes about the bicycle.

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What then can be said about the ‘real’ J.M. Coetzee’s boyhood? Perhaps little.

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4 “Coetzee” is a very common surname among Afrikaners, but not among South Africans who speak English as their first language.
Writing about Mallarmé in his essay “Impersonality in the Criticism of Maurice Blanchot,” Paul de Man characterizes the artist’s alienation as

neither social nor psychological, but ontological; to be impersonal does not mean, for him, that one shares a consciousness or a destiny with a number of others but that one is reduced to no longer being a person, to being no one because one defines oneself in relation to being and not in relation to some particular entity. (69)

Likewise, in Coetzee’s texts it would be an exegetical mistake to read the frequent isolation strictly as a communication of details about the author’s life, even in the memoirs. He loses himself in the work, yet we do not find him in any complete, singular way within that work. Blanchot recognizes the importance of the author’s disappearance into the text—even into more rather than less autobiographical texts—and the temptation that an author’s self-preservation might entail, namely,

that the author may want to maintain contact with the world, with himself, with the language he can use to say “I.” He wants this, for if he loses himself, the work too is lost. But if, too cautiously, he remains himself, the work is his work, it expresses him, his gifts, and not the extreme demand of the work, art as origin. (Space 53)

Coetzee refuses the temptation of personal expression as an end to itself, and in doing so loses himself in the work, gives birth to the work, and experiences the loneliness of the writer. Even in the Coetzee memoirs, the reader is not impressed with Coetzee as the object of the book. Coetzee operates as a spectre in the texts, an ejected voice giving way to the dialogical aspects of textuality, giving way to the work (or worklessness) as origin. Coetzee becomes “the empty place where the impersonal affirmation emerges” (Space 55), the author whose words bring other historico-political voices into being.

For Blanchot, and for Coetzee also, “To write is to break the bond that unites the word with myself. It is to destroy the relations which, determining that I speak toward ‘you,’ gives me room to speak within the understanding which my word receives from you” (Space 26). Far from trying to communicate something about himself to his readers, Coetzee writes himself away. In this respect also then, the Coetzee characters can be thought of as vividly embodied spectres, shades of Coetzee’s own isolation as the author. This essential isolation constitutes the difficulty of Blanchot’s project, which Paul de Man identifies as the circular self-hiding of the work of art that makes the work into an entity immediately separated from the author. Following Heidegger, Blanchot perceives the impersonality of language, or, put another way and in
his own words, perceives that language assumes “neither a speaker, nor a listener: it speaks and writes by itself” (Blanchot, quoted in de Man 69). De Man calls Blanchot’s claim of the author’s disappearance naïve. Simon Critchley explains:

Paul de Man argues that Blanchot’s critical writings are ultimately directed towards an impossible act of self-reading, where his work seeks an ontological impersonality that is self defeating, because it cannot eliminate the self, because the self cannot be defeated. (Very Little 85)

Such circularity, Critchley suggests, is not so much an irredeemable fault as a criticism that Blanchot anticipates, a criticism addressed by what I have referred to in this essay as the autobiographical-function of the work, which works to open up the ambiguity of the work’s being. In one sense, the work belongs to being, and in another sense, it cannot exist in the same way I exist (Blanchot, Space 42–43).

Coetzee’s isolated characters call attention to an ontology of distance, of impersonality, of self-hiding, in which the work exists—in Blanchot’s words “subsists by itself” (42)—while it waits for the reader. Meanwhile, persons alienated from others and isolated by ageing and illness, too numerous to deal with individually here, fill Coetzee’s pages: Magda from In the Heart of the Country, the Magistrate from Waiting for the Barbarians, Michael K from Life & Times of Michael K, Susan Barton and Friday from Foe, Elizabeth Costello from The Lives of Animals and Elizabeth Costello, Paul Rayment from Slow Man, David Lurie from Disgrace, Señor C from Diary of a Bad Year, even Simón from The Childhood of Jesus, and still others. One might be tempted to say that these characters reflect Coetzee’s own feelings of isolation, but consider the variety, shades, and colours of alienation experienced by these characters. Coetzee’s characters are driven in the first instance by an author willing to work in the solitude of artistry, not separated, in the first instance, from friends and family, but separated from the project or ‘work’ become worklessness. As Paul Davies develops the idea, the work of writing becomes something altogether different than ‘work’ as it is usually conceived, even as conceived in Blanchot’s earlier writings, including Space (Davies 94).

“Wordless,” writes Blanchot, language “speaks already; when it ceases, it persists. It is not silent, because in this language silence speaks” (Space 51). This speaking silence presents itself again in Coetzee’s most recent novel, The Childhood of Jesus (2013), which follows a middle-aged man, Simón, and the child he looks after, David, presenting their new life in a Spanish-speaking town where Simón is expected to surrender his past. His intuition, one might call it, is predicated at some level on a notion of fate, even the fate that might
unite the young David with his mother. David—a name that plays into the religious undergirding of the novel—devises his own method of reading, which Simón continually attacks:

You can look at the page and move your lips and make up stories in your head, but that is not reading. For real reading you have to submit to what is written on the page. You have to give up your own fantasies. You have to stop being silly. You have to stop being a baby. (165)

The child, however, does not capitulate so easily, saying “I don’t want to read your way.” He proceeds to invent his own story about Don Quixote in his own language: “There was a man of double deed and nandynandynandy need, and when he rode he was a horse and when he walked he was a porse” (165). David identifies Don Quixote as his book, to which Simón incorrectly replies, “it’s Señor Benengeli’s book” (166; Benengeli is the fictional rather than real author of the book). David’s world is a world in which words open up meaning and embody Adorno’s force of I instead of requiring submission.

Coetzee frequently calls attention to Simón’s errors of fact and judgment as opposed to children’s marvellous ways of creating and recreating worlds by imaginative practices neither irrelevant—necessarily—nor silly. In this regard Coetzee’s David echoes or confirms Roland Barthes’s reflections from the “Toys” essay in Mythologies, in which Barthes bemoans the situation whereby children increasingly (and regrettably) find themselves in the roles of users and owners of their toys rather than as demiurgic creator-beings. Drawing on Plato—who charmingly appears in Childhood when David misidentifies Mickey Mouse’s dog, Pluto, as Plato—Barthes celebrates the child’s potential as demiurge: the child who plays imaginatively experiences his actions as those of a demiurge who “creates life, not property” (Barthes 54). Such notions of play come to constitute a critical practice at the heart of Childhood when David proves very valuable in toilet repair with his “ideas.” Simón quickly dismisses David from this “brute work” on toilets, which, as he describes, are objects “not receptive to ideas” (132). This brute work, as anyone who has worked on toilets knows, demands personality to be put aside, oftentimes stripping someone of his ability to maintain self-control in the face of the difficulties that always seem to surface (that’s the brutish part). The young David insists on staying to help unclog the drain following the logic, “It’s my poo” (that is, David as owner of the poo), to which his at this point ex-guardian argues, “It was your poo. But you evacuated it. You got rid of it. It’s not yours any more. You no longer have a right to it” (132). This excremental discourse mirrors Simón’s own predicament: Simón has evacuated his “right” to David and to being involved in his life, except in cases of emergency plumbing it would seem. The
boy’s ideas end up saving the day when he suggests bending a long kitchen fork to reach the clog, which consequently produces a tampon as the culprit; evidently, toilets can be receptive to ideas.

A similarly engaging moment occurs when David jumps over the cracks in the pavement as he walks beside Simón, demonstrating the differences between adult and child not only in how one relates to the outside world and its objects, but also how one relates to oneself. The child does not yet understand his own relation to the Other. Slavoj Žižek articulates the experience of alterity by retelling a joke popular among Lacanians:

A man who believes himself to be a seed grain is taken to a mental institution where the doctors do their best to convince him that he is not a grain but a man. However, after he is finally cured and allowed to leave the hospital, he immediately comes back, trembling with fear—there is a chicken outside the door and he is afraid it will eat him. “Dear fellow,” says his doctor, “you know very well that you are not a grain of seed but a man.” “Of course I know that,” replies the patient, “but does the chicken know it?” (185)

When pressed by Simón to hurry up and stop jumping over cracks, David replies, “No. I don’t want to fall into a crack.” Simón argues that this is nonsense and impossible, to which David passionately says, “I can! You can! Anyone can! You don’t know!” (Childhood 35). Like the patient who knows he is not a grain of seed but fears the chicken nonetheless, David fears the possibility of a crack’s relation to himself. Why wouldn’t a small crack widen to swallow him up? Perhaps the next crack in the pavement will not be so small? What makes Simón so sure? Held by an adult, this idea of falling into a crack might suggest madness, but the child’s imagination transfigures the world (his world and, sometimes, the world of those around him); as Elena, a music teacher and friend to Simón, later says, “children live in the present, not the past,” and she suggests that Simón take his lead from them: “why not try to be like a child again?” (143). To live in the present means to skip over cracks and to reason with toilets. It also means to forget oneself and at least some of one’s past when approaching the work of writing, the impersonal aesthetic of which demands both a childlike imagination and continual rethinking of one’s relation to the Other.

One leaves Childhood with a renewed appreciation for children, who, despite often living fraught lives of suffering and pain among parents and family whose convictions can be misguided or wrong, often live bravely and imaginatively—to the point even of inventing new ways of reading and
counting. David changes his world (to him, the world) by means of invented languages, new ways of seeing that Simón typically condemns as nonsense. Linguistic reinvention is a radical event, an upheaval of tradition and authority, but in this instance it bears most immediately on Don Quixote, a classic strong enough to survive such radical testing. Given that the program of institutional schooling is a conservative and often reactionary enterprise, David’s expulsion from school comes as no great surprise, since he is no less radical than the one to whom his name refers: Jesus, another ‘classic’ prefigured in the Old Testament by King David. The above-mentioned members of the House of David all reinvent thinking about the world, particularly through language—sometimes musical language—and toward the goal of goodwill, to a greater or lesser degree. Many of the Psalms from the Old Testament are attributed to David, renowned as a songwriter. These psalms encourage among other things a genuine goodwill towards (some) others. The goodwill taught and lived by Jesus of Nazareth according to the New Testament account signifies a radical shift from righteousness based on the Hebrew Law to faith, love, and grace, and the practical expression of these attributes; pragmatic goodwill towards others becomes the touchstone of the New Testament:

If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food,  
And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit?  
Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. (King James Version, James 2:15–17)

The empty goodwill of “Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled” is precisely the kind seen throughout much of Childhood, a degraded goodwill for the most part, an empty shade of the former glory of goodwill, which here exists in name and appearances only. This degradation surfaces in the first pages of the novel when Ana, a clerk at the Centro de Reubicación Novilla charged with receiving new arrivals in town, in a sign of goodwill takes Simón and David to (but not into) her house, leaving them instead to make themselves a shelter outdoors in

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5 In Boyhood, Coetzee writes that “nothing he experiences in Worcester, at home or at school, leads him to think that childhood is anything but a time of gritting the teeth and enduring” (14). He contrasts this with what childhood is said to be in the Children’s Encyclopedia, “a time of innocent joy, to be spent in the meadows amid buttercups and bunny-rabbits or at the hearthside absorbed in a storybook,” and comes to the conclusion that the latter definition proffers “a vision of childhood utterly alien to him” (14). Coetzee’s mother, in fact, acquainted her sons with the Children’s Encyclopedia and made sure they were exposed to many books, including mixed media, such as comics with images and text tied together (Kannemeyer 41). For more on Coetzee and counting, see Macaskill, “Fugal Musemathematics.”
the yard from “leftover building materials” (6). Children by contrast engage others in a way beyond merely communicating goodwill. Simultaneously caring and wrapped up in their own worlds, even in their own languages, children embody the middle ground between the personal and impersonal that could be read as Coetzee’s response to Blanchot.

Children constantly see the world in new ways, effecting a powerful defamiliarization and visual-aural renewal forgotten, and hence unknown and unavailable to most adults. This fresh seeing is also what happens when the author turns himself over to the work of writing, actively surrendering to the work that requires the sacrifice of self and the return to a childlike existence, insofar as this is possible. David’s actions, which to Simón seem silly, echo the words of that Jesus named in the title of the novel: “Jesus answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes” (Matthew 11;25). In the child resides the imagination not only to assemble and use language, to communicate thoughts by means of language, but also to create language and meaning, a language of one’s own, a language that means, or, to quote David, that “means something to me” (Childhood 186). This meaning constitutes the origin of the work of writing, an endeavour that simultaneously invests the author with meaning and strips him of some control of that meaning. The author’s language is always entirely personal, yet always, paradoxically, impersonal also. As Blanchot writes, “the writer belongs to a language that no one speaks, which is addressed to no one, which has no center, and which reveals nothing” (Space 26). The work of writing begins with a fascination—a childlike fascination—with the world and systems around us: toilets, cracks, numbers, language, music, dogs, bicycles, whatever: “If our childhood fascinates us, this happens because childhood is the moment of fascination, is itself fascinated. And this golden age seems bathed in a light which is splendid because [it is] unrevealed” (Blanchot, Space 33). The child lives within the gaze of fascination, as does the writer, and what fascinates “seizes and ceaselessly draws him close, even though it leaves him absolutely at a distance” (33).

The work of writing begins when fascination keeps the writer at a distance yet also draws the writer closer to the image or object of his gaze, to the force of I that remains from personality forsaken. In short, “fascination is solitude’s gaze. It is the gaze of the incessant and interminable,” a blindness in vision, a dead gaze, whereby the author can only ever finish his work at the moment he dies (Blanchot, Space 23, 32). Fascination is “the exercise that consists in learning to die in order to attain the new immortality, that is, meletē thanatou, the care taken with death, the exercise of death, the ‘practicing (for) death’ that Socrates speaks of in the Phaedo” (Derrida 14). And this exercise
includes the work of writing—fiction, poetry, prose, criticism—whenever taken on ontologically at the cost of the writer’s self, his self-expressive impulses and even his inter-personal communication. The work ends up speaking as we might imagine God once speaking, or even Jesus, or even a prisoner, or even a child, saying—without quite saying—“I am that I am” and nothing more.
Works Cited


