EDITORIAL PREFACE
J.M. COETZEE: CONTRAPUNTAL MEDIATIONS

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At a conference considering the relationship between responsibility and event hosted by the International College of Philosophy in 2002, one of the conference events took place as an extended conversation between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy, during which, thinking not only of all the work from many hands that had gone and that always go into various preparations for and presentations at a conference, Nancy returned (“all this work brings me back”) to “the following question: Who or what is asking us to do this? To what are we responding here?” (Derrida, For Strasbourg 60).

This sort of question haunts not only academic gatherings and undertakings, but the practice of thought itself, a practice Martin Heidegger associates with the hand—“All the work of the hand is rooted in thinking” (16)—thus excluding the nonhuman animal from the work of thought, work that Heidegger also calls “handiwork.” The exclusion, alongside other such divisions, is in keeping with the tradition that has long separated the human from the nonhuman on the basis of capacity for response as opposed to reaction. The nonhuman animal, according to this sleight of handiwork, cannot respond, but only react. And so, for example, a nonhuman animal cannot therefore be responsible before the law, though an animal’s owner can be held legally responsible, as happened recently in Australia when a goat named Gary ate flowers from a landscaped bed outside the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. In this instance the prosecution argued that James Dezarnaulds, the human held responsible for Gary’s conduct (and the person therefore upon whom the police levied a fine of over 400 dollars in response), “acted recklessly” in allowing the goat to reach the flowers. A magistrate subsequently dismissed the charges, finding no evidence that Dezarnaulds had colluded with Gary to damage vegetation.1

Sometimes situations of this sort get more complicated in the attendant deliberations over responsibility to which they may give rise. One more case then: some years ago, another, but this time anonymous, goat—perhaps a goat

without name—was held in a Nigerian prison cell as an “armed robbery suspect.” The goat was accused of car theft, and suspected of shape shifting by the vigilantes who turned him in, taking the would-be thief’s transformation into goat-shape as a ruse. A national police spokesperson later went on record to announce that “of course goats can’t commit crime.” Goats cannot be held responsible. The goat was presumably locked in a cell just in case there might be something to the allegations of shape-shifting, or at least until the owner came to claim him: in any event, “until investigations were over.”

Nonhuman animals are widely thought incapable of response; but such thinking might reveal an error that delineates some of the limitations of thought itself.

I shall periodically appeal or return to the matter of reaction, response, and responsibility (the topic will keep bringing me back); but first, Nancy’s question calls for a more direct response in the context of the event, however modest, here constituted by the launch of a new MediaTropes issue, a special edition on the work and thought of J.M. Coetzee.

Who exactly is asking us to do all this work? Who or what asks that we—I include Coetzee—do all the work implicated in thinking, reading, writing, organizing conferences, or preparing special editions? To what are we, as humanimals, responding?

Various answers to such questions come and return to mind: some will point towards more or less instrumental practicalities (we do this work in order to achieve academic promotion or its equivalent, for example); other answers might be less transitive (we do this in response to the joy we feel or to the pain, a joy and, or, a pain before which we feel some responsibility). And there will be answers variously permuting and combining the above-mentioned possibilities, largely because people (and nonhuman animals, even within particular species) are different, and respond in consistently different ways to their environment: those studying animal behaviour sometimes speak of themselves as looking for consistency “among individual differences in behaviour”—or, in short, of differences in personality—which can be observed not only among the primates, but also among birds and fish and among usually quite small little creatures from hermit crabs to sea anemones (Hart).
The personality at the centre of this special edition is the most decorated living Anglophone writer and distinguished academic, J.M. Coetzee: Nobel laureate, scholar, and advocate for animal justice; citizen of South Africa by birth, and, more recently, of Australia, where he committed himself to being a citizen in a publically accessible one-man citizenship ceremony at the Adelaide Festival of Arts, giving there also a brief address in which he affirmed that by becoming a citizen “one undertakes certain duties and responsibilities,” including a willingness “to accept the historical past of the new country as one’s own” (Australian Department of Immigration; Debelle).

Is it possible to accept the historical past of an adopted country as one’s own? I imagine the answer to be “yes-no,” an articulation that occurs and reoccurs in Coetzee’s sixth novel, Age of Iron, when the ageing and cancer-ridden protagonist, Mrs. Curren, struggles for a word between the monological “Yes” or “No” as she writes of her life and imminent death to her daughter self-exiled in the United States. Mrs. Curren reaches for a yes-no banned from the courts where—even if on trial for your life—you are allowed only two words, yes or no, but not both together, and where the judges warn “Yes or No: no speeches,” to which one must say “yes”: “‘Yes’ you say. Yet all the time you feel other words stirring inside you like life in the womb” (132–133), words or a word like the yes-no for which Curren says she is fighting, “fighting for it not to be stifled,” fighting—“like one of those Chinese mothers” with whom she identifies herself—against the fate of a neonate who will be taken “from the midwife’s arms and, if the sex is wrong,” will be “stifled just like that, pinching the little nose to, holding the jaw shut. A minute and all is done” (133).³

In Afrikaans, first language for most of Coetzee’s closest forebears, ja-nee (yes-no) is a commonplace affirmation, though always an affirmation coloured by the equivocal scepticism of its ostensibly oxymoronic formulation.

Let us say ja-nee to the possibility of accepting the historical past of an adopted country as one’s own. Even as briefly as it has here been sketched, the expression and the Age of Iron context from which yes-no is drawn quite unequivocally establish, however, that the personality in question—and so too the work under consideration in this edition of MediaTropes—is multilayered,

³ I exploit the yes-no expression at some length in the third installment of “Fugal Musemathematics,” a three-parted and serialized essay from which I have here repeated some turns of phrase.
complexly engendered, polyvocal, and heterografted. While no one, himself included, will ever know exactly to what extent Coetzee might or might not succeed in accepting Australia’s historical past as his own, his writing incontrovertibly demonstrates that he has succeeded in embracing a diverse literary past of mostly European origin as his own: his texts resonate with the voices of that past, among whom loudly sound Homer, Cervantes, Defoe, Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Kafka, Joyce, Borges, Beckett, and Barthes—accompanied by an expansive chorus of others. Ja-nee: the more one recognizes the various vocal echoes dancing in consort with one another, the more one becomes assured of being in the presence of Coetzee’s singular voice, a voice that has no single author-parent or monolithic nationality, a voice which, despite its singularity, refuses the monolinguality of the univocal and authoritarian word. More or less autobiographically fictive voices within the novels proliferate also, further complicating the levels of heterglossia whereby, for instance, we encounter the transposed and transgendered writing situation of a male Coetzee writing into being a mother stricken in years and by cancer, dying and writing to her absent daughter, and all this under a dedication to dead intimates: Coetzee’s father, mother, and son, whose mother was at the time of writing terminally ill with cancer.

Coetzee has commented extensively on the duties and responsibilities of the writer (in nominally nonfictional platforms from *Doubling the Point* to *Here and Now* and elsewhere); clearly such matters preoccupy Coetzee (and many of his various paper and paper-writing characters, beginning with Eugene Dawn and the Coetzees from *Dusklands*, including the illiterate one, and culminating with characters writing after Mrs. Curren—most notably Elizabeth Costello in a sequence of hybridized novels initiated by *The Lives of Animals*, and the equally hybridized performances of “JC” and “John Coetzee” from *Diary of a Bad Year* and *Summertime*, respectively).

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I take the duty of this special edition—in which various hands work with Coetzee’s work—to be an obligation to respond as variously as possible to Coetzee’s generically-various and, to some extent, topographically-various productions, here subject to sounding.

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The edition proper inaugurates itself beyond these prefatory remarks with an extract from one of the short fictions in Coetzee’s most recent publication, *Three Stories*: “Nietverloren,” first published as “The African Experience” in
2002, the year Coetzee moved from South Africa to Australia. In “Nietverloren,” as so often in Coetzee’s fiction, the arid Karoo, in many ways the spiritual heartland of this and these Coetzees for whom it complexly constitutes the heart of the country to which they belong and also do not belong—ja-nee topo- and tropo-logically presents itself as a narrative protagonist of some sort, silently articulating some of its various states of being through the eyes, initially, of a child who sees a circle on the farmscape and who subsequently sees a photograph again complexly connected to the landscape circle or fairy circle in its visible and even its invisible dimensions: “the two donkeys yoked together, and a man in tattered clothes” were “not supposed to be in the picture,” were not expected to be visible. Invisibility was typically the case for beasts and humanimals of burden in South Africa during the mid-1920s when the picture was taken.

The extract from “Nietverloren” here reproduced is complemented by four Ben MacLennan photographs of Voëlfontein, the Coetzee family farm in the Karoo. The pictures were taken especially for this special edition. My gratitude goes out to Ben MacLennan for furnishing most of the photographs that throughout grace the interstices of this MediaTropes edition. I also thank Wium van Zyl for supplying two photographs of Voëlfontein that appear later in the collection (115–116).

Ben MacLennan, journalist, author, photographer, and son of the late South African poet, Don MacLennan.
This initial collaboration between words and images in the Coetzee extract returns in the essay on titular space with which the edition draws to a close. Linguistically, “Titular Space” tropes through a series of sometimes graphically-indebted terms—portrait, maquette, self-portrait, marcottage, mapping, graftage, and so on—as it puts Coetzee’s recent novel *Summertime* alongside Kafka’s “Before the Law” and in tandem with *In the Heart of the Country*. Coetzee’s second novel, written in a before-time when Coetzee was still “finding his feet as a writer” (*Summertime* 225). Verbally, the essay pays attention to the title as a more or less graphic place and space of troping. But, in this last essay graphic images appear again, again to serve more as supplements than as illustrations to the words they accompany. Indeed, the final essay presents itself by supplement as an instance both quasi-musical and quasi-graphical. The compositional logic of the essay, as manifest by the essay’s division into (usually) three rows of text on each page connected to others and to each other by horizontal and vertical alignments, is quasi-musical insofar as such an arrangement loosely resembles the characteristic structure of a fugue; but the compositional logic is also quasi-graphical insofar as it takes the physical page as constituting a typically threefold or three-dimensional unit of composition capable of being read from top to bottom across three rows, as presented, or, selectively now, by continuous row, beginning with any of the three row-beginnings and proceeding to the end and then likewise pursuing either of the remaining rows, registering or ignoring the graphic supplements as they appear, disappear, and reappear in the page reading / rereading sequences.

The photographs from Ben Maclennan and from Wium van Zyl that appear in “Titular Space” capture the arid beauty of South Africa’s Karoo region, offset this time by reproductions of some paintings from here and there, and from a film also.

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The hinge or dehiscence around which these two recently addressed and graphically-imbued contributions turn is Charles Davis’s photo-essay in the middle of this mostly verbal but also visually troping collection. The Davis essay offers a series of magnificent portraits presenting in their often imbrued and saturated wetness the contrary to a dry Karoo, even as they register also the seasonal dryness of Australia, signing in the graphic silence of their topo-animal subjects the variously configured topography of Coetzee’s adopted country: not specifically Adelaide, no, but at their photographic centre, and beyond this centre, the astonishingly beautiful Snowy Mountain region of southern New South Wales, which the photographs and accompanying remarks certify as being Davis’s heart-locus, Davis’s heart of the country.
Then there are the more or less orthodoxly academic essays—all contrapuntally various in personality, timbre, and provenance—interpolated around and among the aforementioned contributions, beginning with Mike Marais’s deftly engineered essay, “The Incurious Seeker,” which shows how reading Coetzee enables, alongside other ethical responsibilities, a more nuanced response to Samuel Beckett—and by corollary—how reading Beckett enriches response to Coetzee. Ably informed, especially by the work of Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, and Maurice Blanchot, and ranging quite widely across the Beckett and Coetzee oeuvres while remaining solidly rooted in a reading of Beckett’s *Murphy* and Coetzee’s *Age of Iron*, Marais traces ways in which Coetzee and Beckett join together, *ja-nee*, in related but different searches for “the stranger” that thematically marks their work, and pursues how in both writers this thematic trace leads to “an aporetic tension between search and waiting [that] informs Beckett’s and Coetzee’s conception of the writing process itself.” Marais argues that in both writers “the search for the lost self is informed by an ethic of responsibility” (7), and identifies the ways Coetzee’s writing “configures this search as a responsibility for the otherness of the foreigner” with intimate reference to *Age of Iron* as its own being, albeit descended from Beckett (18). As it begins to reach its end, the essay increasingly links response and responsibility to reading.

In the next essay, “Feste Ansichten in His Own Person: J.M. Coetzee Speaks,” Gillian Dooley follows the play of opinion and belief in three recent Coetzee works, beginning with *Elizabeth Costello*, whose eponymous protagonist struggles with these terms—especially belief—in a manner not entirely dissimilar from the way the book itself teases divisions among “chapters,” “lectures,” “readings,” and “lessons.” Most of what are now listed on the table of contents in *Elizabeth Costello* as “lessons” were originally unorthodox lectures or readings framed as fictions in which, more often than not, someone is giving a lecture. For a while in Coetzee’s career, such hybridized events replaced more typical instances of public readings from his novels. Coetzee was at this point not distinguishing between lectures and narratives; sometimes, and most remarkably in *The Lives of Animals*, the “lessons” were at some point proffered by the ‘real life’ Coetzee as lectures, and—in the case of *Lives*—were independently published together with a scholarly introduction, index, and responses elicited from eminent academic scholars from a variety of disciplines.

Briefly pointing to the diverse background leading up to *Elizabeth Costello*, and mentioning also Coetzee’s interest in dialogic heteroglossia as he
articulates this interest in *Doubling the Point*, Dooley wonders what it means to say that Coetzee does—or does not—speak ‘in his own voice’ in these later texts, and so adds her voice to the conversation among “countervoices” within and in response to the more recent Coetzee texts, approaching what she sees as a diminishing distance between Coetzee and his writing-characters through *Diary of a Bad Year*, where she undertakes some surprising opinion-driven speculation before taking up consideration of the Paul Auster correspondence with Coetzee recently published as *Here and Now*. By adding her voice—inflected sometimes as a critic, sometimes as a reviewer, but never as a theorist—Dooley unwittingly allows her essay also to enter into contrapuntal conversation with the theory-driven contribution from Marais which her essay follows as a matter of placement, and from which it differs much as a matter of procedure and voicing.

Theory returns—we are brought back to it—in and by William Collins’s “Restoring Madness,” an essay that itself looks back to Coetzee’s early novel, *In the Heart of the Country*, where the focalizing and articulating voice, known only as Magda, appositely says that so much of herself is “only theory,” a passage Collins cites (63). Responding to what he considers a dearth of attention to madness in the critical commentary on *Heart*, Collins reads and sounds this novel through and by way of the “neglected lens of madness” (47), glancing along the way to *Age of Iron, Waiting for the Barbarians*, and, in a mad footnote, *The Master of Petersburg*. Turning in intertextual pursuit also to Coetzee’s essays on Becket, on apartheid thinking, and on madness and rivalry, Collins exploits the self-characterization Magda makes of herself as a hermit crab, a Magda-crab who, according to Collins, periodically and variously “inhabits literary tropes.” Like the hermit crab, Magda follows alongside or inside a particular trope “for a time, then either casts [it] aside or is cast aside by [it],” writes Collins, at which point she appropriates another shell, migrating—as Magda admits—“from one empty shell to another” (*Heart* 43; Collins 50).

Perhaps silently in cahoots with Plato (without mentioning any such collaboration), Collins identifies madness as the privileged literary trope turning within and around this novel, extending the import of madness well beyond a hermit crab reference or shell-trope Magda remembers “from a book” (*Heart* 43). Like the hermit crab, madness is here seen to grow and so cannot permanently be confined. “[I]n Coetzee’s fiction and scholarship,” writes Collins, madness “consistently and meaningfully denotes, on the one hand, a contagious force moving throughout a social body, and on the other, the labour of writing, particularly under the threat of illegibility” (55).
This is the point at which Mike Piero contrapuntally picks up the collection’s heteroglossic story in his own person and voice, arguing in his essay subtitled “The Impersonality of Childhood” that the intermediate term between personality and the work of art, in this case the literary work, is the labour of an impersonal aesthetic of writing that “negotiates a middle ground between the extremes of the personal and impersonal, the person and personality” (80). Affiliating but not neatly overlapping Coetzee’s “impersonal” aesthetic to and with the “personal” nature of autobiography, and so making sure this aesthetic gets interstitially situated in the space between autobiography and biography, Piero examines “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” (81). Collins’s interest in writing as a kind of madness is here redirected towards writing as irreducible isolation: “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” (89). Such a writer and such writing, Piero suggests, will be ‘out of place,’ will work and write from some sort of “out of place-ness.” In this particular respect Piero links Coetzee in passing to other writers, including again the two with whom Coetzee is most often associated: Beckett and Kafka.

Ranging quite widely across the recent Coetzee works, up to and including *The Childhood of Jesus*, Piero’s essay complements and supplements its neighbours. It not only looks back—over the Davis photo-essay that so finely renders scenes of isolation—to the preceding Collins essay, but, in its reliance on Maurice Blanchot, Piero’s essay returns—it comes back—to the first essay also, Marais’s “The Incurious Seeker,” and not only because the latter has already raised for the benefit of reading *Age of Iron* Beckett’s Murphy travelling to a “third zone” characterized as “a non-intentional state of consciousness [that is] thus profoundly impersonal” (Marais 20). As even the relative proximity of their titles suggests, and despite considerable differences in execution, the two essays are at least thematically imbricated.

In the following essay, “Mirror Neurons and Literature: Empathy and the Sympathetic Imagination in the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee,” Hilmar Heister begins by taking his readers back also: to *The Lives of Animals*, the generically unsettling work that is both an independent book in its own right, *ja-nee*, and an integral part of *Elizabeth Costello*. To return to *Lives* and the contexts informing Elizabeth Costello’s recognition of embodiment—her understanding of what it means to be a being inhabiting a body—and her advocacy of “the sympathetic imagination,” is also to revisit Kafka’s parable of “Red Peter” and the historical record of that primate Wolfgang Köhler called Sultan.
I shall come back to Sultan soon, but meanwhile follow Heister as he leaves Sultan to link Costello’s related senses of embodiment and sympathetic imagination to some elements of the neuroscience discourse surrounding the relatively recent discovery of mirror neurons, broaching as he does so the issue of how this discourse supplements our intuition that at least some kinds of narrative can trigger readers’ sympathetic imagination and cultivate their practice of empathetic identification. Coetzee offers the reader, notes Heister, “a vast array of situations, character constellations, and conflicts to be added to the already available cognitive or otherwise experiential repertoire of life” (109). Acknowledging that “neurons know nothing of the fullness of living,” Heister pursues the possibility that “the macro-picture of what it means to inhabit a body in all of the complex fullness of Costello’s sense of embodiment could be supplemented, or otherwise rearticulated—somehow confirmed—within the miniature domain of mirror neurons” (103); this is one way, a more or less ‘scientific way,’ to pursue truth: here by way of encounters between the neurosciences and poetry, both broadly conceived.

Approaching from an alternate vantage point, the literary critic and theorist Victor Shklovsky insists that “Art always and only deals with life” (Witness 57). In the same set of interviews, Shklovsky also says “Art is continuous astonishment”: “Because of art it’s as if we take off our gloves, rub our eyes, and see reality for the first time, the truth of reality” (99–100). Perhaps we do what we do—all this work of writing and reading and thinking—out of a sense of astonishment, which, for all we know, we share with nonhuman animals also confronted by life, to whose triumphs and failures they too bear witness. The other animals write and read too, albeit not as we do; the other animals surely think also, though again not as humanimals do.  

Heister reminds his reader of the way Costello imagines herself—I come back to Sultan—into the position of Sultan as Wolfgang Köhler’s experimental subject: “Köhler supplies food to Sultan with obstacles that require Sultan to figure out how to reach the food. Costello imagines Sultan asking himself what he might have done to deserve such cruel treatment” (102). For his part, Shklovsky remembers an experience he once witnessed:

A monkey was locked in a room and they hung some fruit high up on the wall. Underneath it, there was a crate. If he turned the crate on its

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4 I follow Hélène Cixous, who follows Derrida on “the animality of writing,” herself writing that “writing, speech, trace are not the proper characteristic of the human. There is animal trace, animals write” (Cixous, 43; Derrida, The Animal); with the help of Cixous and Derrida, and Coetzee’s Disgrace, I work more extensively with the writing, reading, thinking, and singing animal in “Entr’acte.”
side, the monkey could almost reach the fruit. But to get it, he would also have to use another crate, which was next to the first. He would have to stack them on top of each other. But he would also have to be sure to put the second crate lengthwise, otherwise it wouldn’t have been tall enough. And that monkey, our distant ancestor, did everything right. But when he got the fruit, he was so excited he threw it all over himself. He was inspired. He didn’t just want to eat, he wanted to create. (175–176)
Works Cited


