EDITORIAL PREFACE

J.M. COETZEE: CONTRAPUNTAL MEDIATIONS

BRIAN MACASKILL

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

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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 “stifle[d] 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.

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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—accompained 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 monolingualism 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).
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 Beckett, 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.4

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

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

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NIETVERLOREN

J.M. COETZEE

For as long as he could remember, from when he was first allowed to roam by himself out in the veld, out of sight of the farmhouse, he was puzzled by it: a circle of bare, flat earth ten paces across, its periphery marked with stones, a circle in which nothing grew, not a blade of grass.

He thought of it as a fairy circle, a circle where fairies came at night to dance by the light of the tiny sparkling rods that they carried in the picturebooks he read, or perhaps by the light of glowworms. But in the picturebooks the fairy circle was always in a clearing in a forest, or else in a glen, whatever that might be. There were no forests in the Karoo, no glens, no glowworms; were there even fairies? What would fairies do with themselves in the daytime, in the stunned heat of summer, when it was too hot to dance, when even the lizards took shelter under stones? Would the fairies have enough sense to hide under stones too, or would they lie panting among the thornbushes, longing for England?

He asked his mother about the circle. Is it a fairy circle, he demanded? It can only be a fairy circle, she replied. He was not convinced.

They were visitors on the farm, though not particularly welcome visitors. They visited because they were family, and family were always entitled to visit. This particular visit had stretched on month after month: his father was away in the war, fighting the Italians, and they had nowhere else to go. He could have asked his grandmother what the circle was, but his grandmother never went into the veld, saw no sense in walking for the sake of walking. She would never have laid eyes on the circle, it was not the kind of thing that interested her.

The war ended; his father returned with a stiff little military moustache and a dapper, upright stride. They were back on the farm; he was walking with him in the veld. When they came to the circle, which he no longer called a fairy circle since he no longer believed in fairies, his father casually remarked, “Do you see that? That’s the old threshing floor. That’s where they used to thresh, in the old days.”

*Thresh:* not a word he knew, but whatever it meant, he did not like it. Too much like *thrash.* Get a thrashing: that was what happened to boys when they were naughty. *Naughty* was another word he drew back from. He did not want to be around when words like that were spoken.

Threshing turned out to be something one did with flails. There was a picture of it in the encyclopedia: men in funny old-fashioned clothes beating the ground with sticks with what look like bladders tied to them.
“But what are they doing?” he asked his mother.
“They are flailing the wheat,” she replied.
“What is flailing?”
“Flailing is threshing. Flailing is beating.”
“But why?”
“To separate the kernels of wheat from the chaff,” she explained.

Flailing the wheat: it was all beyond him. Was he being asked to believe that once upon a time men used to beat wheat with bladders out in the veld? What wheat? Where did they get wheat to beat?

He asked his father. His father was vague. The threshing happened when he was small, he said; he was not paying attention. He was small, then he went away to boarding school; when he came back they were no longer threshing, perhaps because the drought killed the wheat, the drought of 1929 and 1930 and 1931, on and on, year after year.
That was the best his father could offer: not a fairy circle but a threshing floor, until the great drought came; then just a patch of earth where nothing grew. There the story rested for thirty years. After thirty years, back on the farm on what turned out to be his final visit, the story came up again, or if not the story in full then enough of it for him to be able to fill in the gaps. He was paging through photographs from the old days when he came upon a photograph of two young men with rifles, off on a hunt. In the background, not supposed to be part of the photograph, were two donkeys yoked together, and a man in tattered clothes, also not supposed to be in the picture, one hand on the yoke, squinting toward the camera from under his hat.

He peered more closely. Surely he recognised the site! Surely that was the threshing floor! The donkeys and their leader, captured in mid-stride sometime in the 1920s, were on the threshing floor, treading the wheat with their hooves, separating the grains from the chaff. If the photograph could come to life, if the two grinning young men were to pick up their rifles and disappear
over the rim of the picture, he would at last have it before him, the whole mysterious business of threshing. The man with the hat, and the two donkeys, would resume their tread round and round the threshing floor, a tread that would, over the years, compact the earth so tightly that nothing would ever grow there. They would trample the wheat, and the wind—the wind that always blows in the Karoo, from horizon to horizon—would lift the chaff and whirl it away; the grain that was left behind would be gathered up and picked clean of straw and pebbles and ground small, ground to the finest flour, so that bread could be baked in the huge old wood-burning oven that used to dominate the farm kitchen.
THE INCURIOUS SEEKER: 
WAITING, AND THE SEARCH FOR THE STRANGER
IN THE FICTION OF SAMUEL BECKETT
AND J.M. COETZEE

MIKE MARAIS

In J.M. Coetzee and the Novel: Writing and Politics after Beckett, Patrick Hayes argues that Coetzee, while influenced by Beckett’s prose style, assimilates it in such a way that his writing not only departs from the latter’s solipsism but also provides “an anti-foundational imagining of moral community” (71). While there is much merit to this argument, Hayes’s distinction between Beckett’s solipsism and Coetzee’s concern with community downplays the extent to which the human subject’s conception of herself depends on the differential process through which community establishes itself. In the first section of this paper I show that, already in Murphy, we find evidence in support of Ileana Marculescu’s argument that Beckett inscribes solipsism in his writing only to subvert it. Murphy’s attempts at solipsistic knowledge fail precisely because he has been estranged from himself by language and community. What appears to be solipsism is, in fact, a search for the self from which he has been divided by community. In Beckett’s writing, the self’s concern with its ability to know itself is always a concern with community.

By the same token, Coetzee’s concern with community is always a concern with self. So, although I agree with Hayes that Coetzee’s writing is more engaged with community than Beckett’s, I contend that this engagement proceeds from an extension of the Beckettian search for the stranger, and is therefore grounded in a profound suspicion of community. Instead of attempting to imagine the ‘good community,’ Coetzee’s fiction seeks always to interrupt the exclusionary process through which community constitutes itself. The opening passage of “The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee” in Dusklands already shows that Jacobus Coetzee is eminently aware that community determines itself negatively, that the ‘we’ it constructs is defined by what it is not: “The one gulf that divides us from the Hottentots is our Christianity. We are Christians, a folk with a destiny. They become Christians too, but their

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Christianity is an empty word” (61). From these sentences, it is apparent that the community of Dutch settlers in the Cape in the eighteenth century depends on the outsider, the foreigner, and therefore on the exclusions which enable its inclusionary movement. My argument, then, is that the principal difference between Beckett’s and Coetzee’s writing lies in the latter’s configuration of the search for the stranger. Since the forms of identification that community renders available to its members are predicated on its construction of the foreigner, the search for the lost self is ineluctably tied to the question of the foreigner. If the seeker is to find this self, she must see the foreigner as a stranger.

Despite this important difference, the search for the stranger in the fiction of these two writers proceeds along similar lines. That is, it oscillates between active, subjective intention and a passive, receptive state of non-intentional consciousness. For the subject to find his lost self, he must forgo his position as a subject in community. To use Jacques Derrida’s formulation, an “unconditional” form of hospitality is exacted of the subject (Of Hospitality 77). In other words, the subject that seeks the stranger cannot adopt the position of a host who invites and names his guest in advance, since doing so would be to receive this visitor from within community’s structures of recognition and thus foreclose on his strangeness. Such a gesture of welcome would simply affirm community and consolidate the subject’s position within it. Instead, the seeker must try to say “yes to who or what turns up, before any determination, before any anticipation, before any identification” (Of Hospitality 77). I argue that Murphy, although published several decades prior to Derrida’s thinking about unlimited hospitality, thematizes a very similar notion in its descriptions of non-intentional waiting. If the stranger is to be found, the search must proceed without object or subject. In order to receive the stranger, the subject must relinquish the position from which she searches. To use Molloy’s phrase, the “seeker” must become “incurious” (Beckett, Molloy 59).

Finally, I discuss the way in which this aporetic tension between search and waiting informs Beckett’s and Coetzee’s conception of the writing process itself. For both these authors, I argue, the search for the lost self is informed by an ethic of responsibility. The author is responsible for this stranger that community has produced. Through his writing, the writer must make a home for that which exceeds language. Since this is not a task that could ever be completed, the author’s responsibility is without term, and writing is itself therefore a form of waiting for a stranger who, if she were to arrive, could not be recognized. In its conception of the possibility of such an arrival, Coetzee’s work differs from Beckett’s. For the latter, the arrival of the stranger would obliterate the seeker. By contrast, for Coetzee the obliteration of the seeker
holds out the possibility of redeeming the self from its state of disgrace in community. My particular concern is with the way in which Coetzee self-reflexively figures this impossible possibility in his chiastic portrayals of writing and reading as forms of dying and redemption.

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Beckett’s characters certainly are obsessed with knowing themselves. Quite early in Murphy we learn that the novel’s eponym, to whom the narrator refers as a “seedy solipsist” (53), is on a quest of sorts.¹ He seeks “what he had not ceased to seek from the moment of his being strangled into a state of respiration—the best of himself” (46), the “self whom he loved” (121). Since it involves a withdrawal from body into mind, this quest for a lost self has a Cartesian dimension.² Early in the novel, Neary observes that Murphy’s “conarium has shrunk to nothing” (6), a statement that alludes to Descartes’ location of the conarium or pineal gland as the point at which the soul, that is, the principle of thought, interacts with the body. The implication here, as Hugh Kenner notes, is that Murphy “leads a completely dual existence” between body and mind (61). Significantly, though, Murphy’s quest for “the best of himself” also involves a withdrawal from community itself. He resists working for a living, is indifferent to money, commodities, property, love, marriage, and procreation. Through his strategic idleness he refuses to occupy society’s roles and to perform the identities those roles inscribe and prescribe.

Murphy’s search for the “self whom he loved” thus takes him out of both body and community, the implication being that these have divided him from himself. Its Cartesian inflection seems to suggest that his search is for the stable ground from which the non-material, rational “soul” in the “machine” is able to become the object of its own gaze (Descartes, Discourse 116–118). By immobilizing his body in his rocking chair, he tries to gain access to his mind, which Beckett spatializes by dividing into three “zones.” It is the third of these, namely “the dark,” that Murphy finds most “pleasant,” and to which he seeks to ‘travel’ (Murphy 72). Crucially, however, once there, he finds “nothing but

¹ Several readers have commented on the importance of the quest in Beckett’s fiction. For example, Lance St. John Butler sees the entire Beckett oeuvre as a “search for a self that will be more than a self” (12). For an insightful discussion of Beckett’s use and abuse of the quest narrative, see Leslie Hill (59–61, 77–78, 82–83, 137). See also Shira Wolofsky.
² As I proceed, it will become clear that I disagree with the claim that Murphy is a “Cartesian novel” (see Mintz; and Cohn 49).
commotion" and a “flux of forms” that coalesce and then disintegrate (72). While his eyes are wide open, as both the narrator and Ticklepenny reveal (3, 120), he sees nothing. In visiting himself or, in the etymology of this word, seeking to see himself (“Vide” definition 4), Murphy finds that he is not at home. He does not see the Cartesian “soul,” the supernatural homunculus, who, from its “principal seat”—the conarium, or ‘third eye’—directs the material “machine” by processing all the perceptual information it receives (Descartes, Passions 347–348). If his conarium has shrunk to nothing, there can be nothing to see because there is nothing that sees.

Although Murphy’s search may initially appear to stage the movement of Cartesian scepticism through which the self, in doubting that which lies beyond itself, confirms its ability to experience its mental processes, it finally has much more in common with Arthur Schopenhauer’s argument that “the I or ego is the dark point in consciousness” which, like the eye, “sees everything except itself” (2: 252; see also Bond 13). Murphy is not a transcendental subject who can make of his mind an object of reflection. Rather than solipsism, then, his introspective quest enacts yet another of Schopenhauer’s arguments, namely that

as soon as we enter into ourselves [...] and wish for once to know ourselves fully by directing our knowledge inwards, we lose ourselves in a bottomless void; we find ourselves like a hollow glass globe, from the emptiness of which a voice speaks. But the cause of this voice is not to be found in the globe, and since we want to comprehend ourselves, we grasp with a shudder nothing but a wavering and unstable phantom. (1: 278)

From Beckett’s parody of the movement of Cartesian doubt, it is clear enough that Murphy’s best self is not the Cartesian homunculus, the ‘little man’ who has somehow gone missing in the machine. Accordingly, the reader must look elsewhere if she is to ascertain the nature of this self and the reason for its loss. An answer of sorts to these questions is provided by Beckett’s depiction of the “third zone” as a space outside language and the positions it articulates. If Murphy loses rather than finds himself in this space, the implication must be that the self’s identity is dependent on community, that it only encounters itself as a subject in an intersubjective world. Evidently, the self that Murphy “hates” is the one that has been enabled by the community from which he withdraws (121). By extension, the self that he “loves” (121), and for which he seeks, has been displaced by the identity he possesses within community. Ironically, he seems to be looking for what he himself negates.
As early as *Murphy*, Beckett thus provides us with a character obsessed with knowing himself because community has divided him from himself. While never articulated in as many words, Murphy’s scepticism of self is finally no different from that of The Unnamable, whose following words indicate that the subject is always already an object: “I, say I. Unbelieving” (Beckett, *The Unnamable* 285). Like this later character, Murphy has been estranged from his best self by “the words of others” (308). Beckett’s point is not just that the subject is intersubjective, but that it is so because it is constituted in and through language. In a sense, it is therefore always outside of itself. As Michel Foucault explains, Descartes’s “‘I think’ led to the indubitable certainty of the ‘I’ and its existence,” whereas “‘I speak’ [...] distances, disperses, effaces that existence and lets only its empty emplacement appear” (13). In yet another of his reflections, the eponym of *The Unnamable* refers to the emptiness of this “emplacement”: “They say they, speaking of them, to make me think it is I who am speaking. Or I say they, speaking of God knows what, to make me think it is not I who am speaking” (363). When the ‘I’ says ‘they,’ it is using not its own word, but a word of others: it is they who say ‘they,’ and the ‘I’ that is positioned in opposition to ‘them’ is also their word, an object. As such, the “words of others” reduce the self and, in the process, render it invisible, anonymous and unnamable. What is left, as Foucault puts it, is “A language spoken by no one: any subject it may have is no more than a grammatical fold” (54).

My argument, then, is that Murphy seeks a self that has been displaced by language but which is nevertheless still somewhere within him. It is his search for this lost self, which both precedes and exceeds what he calls ‘I,’ that takes him to the alinguistic “third zone.” Given that it is precisely his entry into community upon having been “strangled into a state of respiration” that has led to the loss of this excessive self, he must leave behind not only community and its forms if he is to find his lost self, but also that part of himself that community and its forms have enabled. Herein lies the importance of the narrator’s observation that Murphy sees nothing in “the dark,” which, as I have already noted, implies that he loses himself. This point requires some elaboration. Murphy’s consciousness has no content because it is not conscious of something. Not being directed at an object relative to which he can define himself negatively, his consciousness is not self-distinguishing. The reason he does not see anything in “the dark” is thus quite simply because he is not there as a subject to direct his gaze. He cannot conceptualize or identify anything as an object, and cannot thereby locate both it and himself in a cultural context. What is described here is therefore consciousness in the absence of a controlling subjectivity. Indeed, we are told that “the dark” is “without love or
hate,” which is to say wholly impersonal. Earlier, exactly this anonymity is suggested by the absence of possessive pronouns in the narrator’s description of Murphy in his chair: “The breath was not perceptible. The eyes, cold and unwavering as a gull’s, stared up” (3; see Bohman-Kalaja 115). While in “the dark,” Murphy is in “the will-lessness” and “not free,” which is to say deprived of agency (Murphy 72).

This absence of subjectivity is, of course, deeply ironic. After all, Murphy is engaged in a quest, an action—usually involving a journey from a home to a foreign destination—undertaken by an agent with a goal in mind. Because a quest has an object, it is intentional and teleological. A quest proceeds from the assumption that it may be completed and that its success or failure will be determinable. As I have indicated, Murphy’s journey to the “third zone” does involve a departure of sorts. He leaves community, which, however, he does not regard as ‘home.’ For him, indeed, life is “a wandering to find home” (4). In his rocking chair, he sets out for the “third zone,” a space where he, as we have seen, believes he is able to “love himself” and so feel at home (6). As I have also indicated, though, he reaches this destination only through leaving himself behind. The subject that seeks to find the self that it loves can only do so by losing the subject that seeks and therefore the ability to seek, find, and love.

Since it is neither intentional nor self-distinguishing, the kind of consciousness that is here depicted is passive and receptive. The search, in losing the subject that seeks, and therefore its object and telos, lapses into a form of non-intentional waiting that has much in common with Maurice Blanchot’s description of attentional consciousness:

Attention is waiting: not the effort, the tension, or the mobilization of knowledge around something with which one might concern oneself. Attention waits. It waits without precipitation, leaving empty what is empty and keeping our haste, our impatient desire, and, even more, our horror of emptiness from prematurely filling it in. (Infinite Conversation 121).

Although ‘to wait’ is a verb, in Beckett’s novel it connotes a passivity that is not simply the opposite of subjective action but a product of the absence of a subject who intends and acts. Because he is rendered passive in “the dark” by the dissolution of subject-centred consciousness, Murphy’s waiting is not something that he does. Waiting here is deprived of a subject that waits. The “incurious seeker” waits without waiting for anything that may be described as
an object constituted by an intentional act of consciousness. He is open to, and utterly defenseless against, whatever may arrive. Being “in the will-lessness,” he is unable to invite or welcome anyone or anything. As the root of ‘welcome’—wilcuma—indicates, to welcome is to will a comer (“Volition” definition 14). It is exactly his inability to will a comer that defines Murphy’s waiting. He waits for that to arrive of which he can have no expectation. In other words, he waits for the stranger, the self from whom he has been estranged by the words of others.

In this non-intentional state, Murphy is unable to seek, to see, and so to discover an object. Somewhat incongruously, though, as I have already indicated, his eyes are wide open. What is intimated by this curious detail is a passive mode of perception. In waiting, Murphy watches. As its etymology indicates, ‘to wait’ is to watch (“Vigor” definition 8). By becoming passive, that is, Murphy becomes vigilant, which is to say attentive to that which exceeds an intending subject’s perceptual and conceptual grasp. The fact that there is nothing to see in “the dark” does not mean that there is nothing there, but rather that there is nothing visible as an object for intentional consciousness. Murphy waits and watches for this excess or nothingness.

When it arrives, the excess in question does so in the formless form of the invisible gas that annihilates Murphy. As Murphy’s earlier etymological speculation reveals (110), the word ‘gas’ derives, through the Dutch gas, from the Greek word for chaos. Chaos is not only the nothingness from which form derives, and therefore its enabling condition, but also what exceeds it, and which may without notice or warning irrupt into and disable it. In the novel, gas serves as a figure for the excess of social form, including forms of identification and recognition. Gas is a catachresis for the remainder, the stranger that the house tries to keep out but which, ironically, is already inside, has always

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3 In the passage in which these words occur, Molloy describes the effect on him of his perception of a “little object” which, very importantly, is not identified: “For to know nothing is nothing, not to want to know anything likewise, but to be beyond knowing anything, that is when peace enters in, to the soul of the incurious seeker” (58–59). To be an “incurious seeker” is to be “in the will-lessness.”

4 In some respects, my distinction between seeing and watching is related to that which Uhlmann draws between perception and apprehension. Whereas perception defines an object by investing it with “continuity in time and place among all the other perceived objects in space,” apprehension decontextualizes the object. In apprehending it, that is, the subject divorces an object “from all relation,” including that between it and itself (75). While I agree with much in this insightful discussion, I find Uhlmann’s choice of the word ‘apprehend’ a little odd. Etymologically, to apprehend something is to seize it, to grasp it with the mind (“Prehend” definition 5). In Uhlmann’s description of apprehension, the self forgoes precisely its ability to grasp anything cognitively. It is no longer a prehending subject.
already invaded it by stealth, and can at any time destroy it. In Dutch, I should add, the word ‘gas’ is a homonym of gast, that is, ‘guest.’ The gas that enters his garret is the invisible visitor for which Murphy waits, but which he has not invited.\(^5\) Indeed, this guest only arrives because Murphy is not there as a knowing and intending subject to see and welcome it. Although he receives it, inhales it, is possessed, overwhelmed and, ultimately, even consumed by it, he does not know that this is so. In other words, the arrival is something that happens to him rather than something he has willed. The guest comes not by design, but unbidden or, to use the novel’s word, by “accident” (163).\(^6\)

Murphy’s waiting is thus profoundly aporetic: he waits for the stranger because he seeks to know himself, but is absent from the waiting and so cannot know himself. The knowing ‘I’ is not at home to will and welcome this comer. So, although Murphy dies, he is not present at his death. His death reveals that his search for his best self, the one he loves, has all along been a search for the death of the self that seeks and loves. He has been waiting to die. The arrival of the stranger he has sought inevitably displaces the self that seeks and by whom it has been displaced. It follows that Murphy’s death does not complete his search because it is an accident rather than an action that the seeking subject has undertaken.

Since it continually lapses into a form of non-intentional waiting that is entirely ateleological, Murphy’s quest is interminable.\(^7\) Because his absence from his vigil precludes him from experiencing and grasping—as a subject—it present, the time of waiting is radically divorced from the time of the search. What he watches in his vigil he does not see, and because it is therefore not present as an object for consciousness, it cannot be remembered. As such, the time of waiting and the time of the arrival of the stranger cannot form part of a retentional past—nor part of a present—from which a future may be protended.

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\(^5\) Prior to the arrival of the gas, Murphy receives another uninvited visitor during a vigil, namely Ticklepenny, who, earlier in the novel, decides against introducing himself as “Gussy or Gus” (60), and who happens to be the person who installed the gas in Murphy’s garret. On leaving, this guest, whose arrival Murphy has not noticed, warns him to “watch himself,” to which the latter responds with the question “in what way?” (121).

\(^6\) See Coetzee’s discussion of the word ‘gas’ in his essay on Gerrit Achterberg’s “Ballade van de Gasfitter” (“Achterberg’s” 73–75). Apart from reflecting on its homonyms, Coetzee examines this word’s symbolic import in the poem. Especially insightful, in this regard, is his argument that the gasfitter is a figure of the poet, and that the gas, which “enters every home” as guest, symbolizes “the spirit, ghostly, overwhelmingly, coming upon us with fatal power, smelling of the void, tamed only by the dichter-priest” (73).

\(^7\) I should add that this is where Murphy’s quest differs from mysticism, which usually requires that one lose oneself in order to find oneself.
or anticipated. From the perspective of the subject that seeks, the vigil thus belongs to an immemorial past, and is therefore always radically anterior to the quest itself. Rather than forming part of it, then, the time of non-intentional waiting precedes and inspires the quest. In fact, the search for the stranger is a response to the vigil, an always-belated attempt on the part of the seeker to present this irretrievable past, to recuperate a happening that cannot be forgotten because it cannot be remembered. Accordingly, the subject that seeks, which is to say acts, is acted upon, by that which he seeks. In Beckett’s novel, the irony is that Murphy is already possessed by what he pursues. He is haunted by a ghost in the machine: not the Cartesian homunculus but an immemorial memory of the stranger that he is during his vigil. The stranger he seeks to see and be in the time of the quest is what he already is in the time of waiting.

There is, of course, a profoundly self-reflexive dimension to Murphy’s quest. Like it, Beckett’s literary endeavour may be read as a search in language for the stranger who exceeds the subject that writes, that says ‘I’ unbelievingly. Beckett’s writing, this is to say, is a search for the alien he bears within himself, and who demands to be acknowledged. It is a search for what has, in fact, generated it, but which it itself—that is, the medium through which the search is conducted and of which the ‘I’ that writes is a part—precludes it from finding. By implication, the stranger is not only the origin of the quest, but also its excess and telos. Beckett’s writing is a search for its own excess, for that which produces and disables it.

If this is so, it follows that Beckett is doubly possessed. On the one hand, he is possessed by what he pursues. Like Murphy, he seeks that which is already within. On the other hand, like The Unnamable, he is “possessed of no utterance but theirs” (Unnamable 362). In other words, he is possessed by “their” utterance, by the words of others. The means that he has at his disposal to find and say what he is compelled to find and say are not only inadequate to the task, but also posit an identity that displaces what he seeks, and thereby precludes him from completing his quest. Again it is The Unnamable who best articulates this double bind: “I have to speak in a certain way [...] first of the creature I am not, as if I were he, and then, as if I were he, of the creature I am” (329). Blanchot’s comment on writing in general, namely that the “existence of the writer is proof that within one individual there exist”—“side by side”—“a

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8 For Levinas, the time of the self’s encounter with the Other cannot be grasped as a here and now by a prehending subject, and has therefore always passed. Being entirely non-phenomenological, the “moment” or “instant” of this event is a “lapse of time.” Hence he refers to “the diachrony of the instant,” which is “something irrecoverable, refractory to the simultaneity of the present, something unrepresentable, immemorial, prehistorical” (38, 49, 50).
mute who has lost all words,” and “an orator, [a] master of discourse”—“firmly wedded” together—(“From Dread” 346), thus holds particularly true for Beckett’s aporetic writing endeavour. In *Murphy*, exactly this relation without correlation is externalized in Murphy’s feverish attempts at communicating with Mr. Endon—whose name, as many commentators have noted (see, for example, Coe 24), means ‘within’—through the wholly inadequate medium of chess. As Kimberly Bohman-Kalaja persuasively argues, Mr. Endon, “though he moves in turn, is never really responding” to Murphy’s moves (125). In fact, it is precisely the former’s lack of communication, his muteness, which requires that the game be played. The game is a response exacted by this silence of sorts. At the same time, however, Mr. Endon’s failure to respond to Murphy’s moves prevents the game, which requires closure, from ever being completed. Accordingly, the form of communication involved in the game is only ever a monologue that is always yet to be concluded. Murphy must continue to play because he is waiting for Mr. Endon to play.

It is just so with Beckett, whose double possession by the stranger and by community’s forms makes of his writing a waiting of sorts. To the extent that it is an end-directed quest, his writing demands closure. But, to the extent that the quest involved is a search for its own excess, his writing cannot find closure, and consequently requires that its endless duration be endured. In ceaselessly moving toward an unattainable closure, the quest inevitably becomes a form of waiting, which, in Foucault’s description, “has the endurance of a movement that will never end and would never promise itself the reward of rest” (56).

The quest is thus itself a form of waiting. Unlike non-intentional waiting, though, writing is a waiting on the stranger by which the writer is already possessed, and not just a waiting for this stranger. The writer waits for the stranger because he already waits on him. He writes not because he is a free agent but because he has been inspired by this uninvited gast who has always already arrived. The search that the writer undertakes through his writing is thus a response demanded by the stranger. In a sense, Beckett writes under dictation. Like Murphy, he acts, which is to say writes, but does so because he is acted upon by the stranger for whom he is responsible. It is his responsibility, through his writing, to make of language a home for that which is refractory to language. He must make the mute within him speak. While this is not a task that could ever be completed, Beckett cannot but continue to attempt to do just that: his responsibility for the stranger permits him no choice in the matter. The aporetic logic of this ethic of responsibility is articulated by the protagonist of *The Unnamable*, who, after saying “I have to speak,” adds: “No one compels me to, there is no one. It’s an accident, a fact. Nothing can ever exempt me
from it, there is nothing, [...] nothing that can lessen what remains to say” (308). The fact that “there is no one,” that “no one” is, compels Beckett to write. He is obliged to pursue the remainder of what he says.

Since Beckett’s search is for the excess of his search, for what remains after whatever he has said and done, it is never concluded by the completion of the individual text. The story that must be told is always yet to be told, and thus extends beyond the compass of the individual work. For this reason, Beckett repeats in the narratives that follow Murphy, with varying degrees of variation and ingenuity, the same story. The inevitability of this repetition is self-reflexively foregrounded, even parodied, in the refrain of Voice and Music which ends “Cascando” by gesturing toward its incompletion:

—don’t let go . . . finish . . . it’s the right one . . . this time . . . [...]  
—this time . . . it’s the right one . . . finish . . . no more stories . . . sleep . . . we’re there . . . nearly 

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. . . just a few more . . . don’t let go . . . Woburn . . . he clings on . . . come on . . . come on—  
..........................................................................  
[Silence.]  

(303–304)

The “right one” is, of course, the story that would complete the quest for the stranger, and so obviate the need for “more stories.” But, of course, yet more needs to be said. A new story is required, and because in its turn it will prove unable to bring the search to a close, it will be the same story as its predecessors and, indeed, the same story as its successors. The new story is always already the old one, and therefore not “the right one.” Like The Unnamable, Beckett goes on, even though he cannot go on (see Unnamable 407). He is never “there,” and his writing is thus always incomplete, and so in need of supplementation. My argument is not new. Blanchot maintains that Beckett, in his narratives, “has entered a circle [...] that does not begin, does not end, yet is greedy, demanding, will never stop.” Beckett’s writing, he goes on to say, “is an experiment without outcome, although from book to book it is pursued in an ever purer way, rejecting the weak resources that would allow it to pursue itself” (“Where Now?” 210).

From this observation, it follows that Beckett is not entirely in control of his writing: it has its origin not in the writing subject, but in its own excess that
constantly calls into question the ‘I’ who writes.9 In fact, the subject that writes does so in order to be displaced by the stranger it has displaced. Beckett’s responsibility for the stranger demands that he sacrifice himself to the stranger. Like Murphy’s quest, his writing seeks the death of the subject that seeks. He writes in order to die. Ironically, though, his writing necessarily asserts what it seeks to destroy, and this, in turn, means that the ‘I’ that writes must continue to do so because it cannot die.

If it is a search for an unlocatable origin that requires the sacrifice of the self that seeks, Beckett’s writing cannot possibly be solipsistic. Indeed, its emphasis on a pre-reflective non-intentional consciousness questions precisely intentional consciousness’ assumption that it is able to take as its object the non-material self and its mental processes. Beckett writes because he does not know himself, and must continue to write because he cannot know himself. Instead of solipsism, what emerges from the endless waiting that is his oeuvre is a conception of writing as a form of self-sacrificing responsibility for the stranger that has been produced by the exclusions through which community establishes itself. In this respect, the ethic that compels Beckett to write is remarkably congruent with the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, whose starting point is exactly the radical priority of non-intentional consciousness over intentional consciousness.10 Having said this, I must immediately add that Beckett’s focus is the effect on the self of its otherness to itself, whereas Levinas’s is the effect on the self of the otherness of the other person. In the next section of this paper, I demonstrate that this is also where Coetzee’s writing differs from Beckett’s. As I argue, though, this difference marks not a departure from, but an extension and development of, the Beckettian search for the stranger. Despite the fact that Coetzee himself seems to agree with Hayes’s argument that Beckett’s writing is solipsistic (“Eight Ways” 23), the search for the stranger in his own work is ultimately a search for the stranger within the self that writes.

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9 With reference to The Unnamable, Blanchot argues that “the one writing is already no longer Beckett but the demand that led him outside of himself, dispossessed him and let go of him, gave him over to the outside, making him a nameless being, the Unnamable, a being without being who can neither live nor die, cannot cease or begin” (“Where Now?” 213).
10 For a discussion of the relevance of Levinas’s philosophical ethics to Beckett’s writing, see Uhlmann (162–186).
As I have already noted, Coetzee’s writing proceeds from a recognition that the
Beckettian emphasis on the stranger cannot but imply the foreigner, since the
forms of identification that community makes available to its members depend
on the latter. At some point or other, the identity of the individual in community
must always intersect with the collective’s identification of the foreigner. As
such, the telos of the search for the stranger is never simply the strangeness of
the individual in community, but also that of the foreigner on whom community
depends in order to establish and sustain itself. Coetzee’s writing evinces a
clear awareness of the fact that the distance signified by the foreigner is finally
impossible. By locating the search for the stranger in both community’s inside
and outside, Coetzee’s fiction constantly questions its boundaries. Indeed, his
writing configures this search as a responsibility for the otherness of the
foreigner. If the writer were to see the foreigner as a stranger, he would find the
stranger within himself.

In Coetzee’s novels, the search for the stranger is variously inflected as
a quest for the lost, unborn, damaged, stillborn, or dead child. The protagonist
of *Age of Iron*, Mrs. Curren, a white South African, realizes that she is
possessed by South Africa’s colonial history, that the crime of apartheid
through which black people were rendered foreigners in their own country was
perpetrated in her name and that it is therefore a part of her. “A crime was
committed long ago,” she says, “So long ago that I was born into it. It is part of
my inheritance. It is part of me, I am part of it”:

*Like every crime it had its price. That price, I used to think, would
have to be paid in shame: in a life of shame and a shameful death [....]
Though it was not a crime I asked to be committed, it was committed in
my name. I raged at times against the men who did the dirty work [...] but
I accepted too that, in a sense, they lived inside me. So that when in
my rages I wished them dead, I wished death on myself too. (149–150)*

While Mrs. Curren says ‘I’ and ‘they,’ she does so unbelievingly. Like
Beckett’s *The Unnamable*, she knows that both these words are the words of
others, and that the distance they install is specious. Her knowledge that she is
possessed by the language of her community and the discourse of race that it
bears, brings with it the realization that she cannot use the distances language
posits to exculpate herself from the crime of apartheid. This is why she
constantly articulates her strong sense of shame and her desire for redemption
from her state of disgrace.

Like Beckett’s Murphy, Mrs. Curren is dissatisfied with her
intersubjective identity. Her possession by the language of her community has
dispossessed her of what she was or may yet become. As her following words
indicate, her quest in this novel is to find the child that has been displaced by the context in which she is located: “From the cradle a theft took place: a child was taken and a doll left in its place to be nursed and reared, and that doll is what I call I” (100). Only through finding this lost child, who is a stranger to that which she calls ‘I,’ can she be saved and become other than she presently is. To pursue her quest, Mrs. Curren has to see the foreigner as a stranger. So, for instance, she tells Vercueil—whom she compares to a child (52–53, 100), and whose name puns on the Afrikaans word for ‘hidden,’ that is, verskuil (34)—that she wants to “see” him as he “really” is (165). She seeks to see what is concealed from her by the language and discourse with which her community has made of race a signifier of difference.

In this regard, Mrs. Curren is no different from any number of Coetzee’s other protagonists. The Magistrate, in Waiting for the Barbarians, is similarly obsessed with seeing the “barbarian girl” as she was before she was tortured by Empire—that is, before Empire inscribed itself on her body. He wants to see what the very words “barbarian girl,” which identify and so position her within his community’s system of cultural differences, preclude him from seeing. This is the point of the foot-washing ritual in which he engages. Through it, he enters a stupor of sorts, a receptive state in which he is open to the possibility of affirming “who or what turns up,” to borrow again Derrida’s phrase from Of Hospitality (77). The state of consciousness here connoted is a form of attentionality, of non-intentional waiting, and is juxtaposed with Empire’s intentional waiting for the arrival of what it expects and therefore knows in advance: the ‘barbarians,’ the foreigners through which Empire constitutes itself as a community.

The problem with seeing the foreigner as a stranger is therefore that she has been rendered invisible by the language and discourses of the community in which the seeker is located. It is for this reason that Mrs. Curren reflects that she must love the boy, John, precisely because she does not love him. She must doubt herself, what she thinks and feels, because her position in community locates her values and attitudes to both herself and others. Hence she must love John “despite herself” (125); that is, despite what the words of others have made of her and, indeed, have made of him. If she is to love, she must do so ecstatically. Her love must be divested of an intending subject and therefore of the object that such a subject inevitably intends. If she can love in this way, her love will be directed not at John, who is a “child of iron,” a child who has been

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11 In his commentary on an earlier draft of this essay, Brian Macaskill rightly points out that verskuil, in its turn, resembles verskil, which means ‘difference.’
damaged by culture, but at the invisible child that is hidden within him. Only if divested of subject and object can her ‘love’ be for this stranger.

It is instructive to compare this treatment of love with Beckett’s in *Murphy*. While Murphy claims to love his lost self, the “third zone” to which he travels in order to find this stranger is, as I have noted, characterized by exactly the absence of love or hate because it is a non-intentional state of consciousness and thus profoundly impersonal. The ‘I’ that professes to love the self from whom it is estranged cannot experience this love because the ‘I’ is not there to experience love. If Murphy loves in the “third zone,” he does so anonymously and therefore selflessly. In fact, his annihilation by the arrival of the gas invests his love with a sacrificial dimension. The same dynamic of self-sacrifice is evident in his relationship with Mr. Endon, whom he also claims to love (*Murphy* 115). In the chess game, he eventually surrenders to the latter:

> he dropped his head on his arms in the midst of the chessmen, which scattered with a terrible noise. [...] Murphy began to see nothing, that colourlessness which is such a rare postnatal treat, being the absence [...] not of *percipere* but of *percipi*. His other senses also found themselves at peace, an unexpected pleasure. Not the numb peace of their own suspension, but the positive peace that comes when the somethings give way, or perhaps simply add up, to the Nothing, than which in the guffaw of the Abderite naught is more real. (153–154)

From this description, it is clear that Murphy surrenders not the game, which is inconclusive because his opponent does not occupy an oppositional position, but himself, the subject that plays and who claims to love.

Because of its emphasis on the strangeness of the foreigner, Coetzee’s writing treats the forfeiture of the ‘I’ that seeks to love somewhat differently. If one were able to love the foreigner anonymously, and therefore not see him or her as a foreigner, the stranger would have arrived and would have destroyed the ‘I’ that seeks to love. At the same time, though, this would have liberated the stranger within the self that loves despite itself. In having been freed from its possession by the words of others, including the first-person singular pronoun, the self would have become other than it had been. This is why Mrs. Curren intuits that her salvation somehow depends on her ability to love John, even though she has no desire to do so. It is also why she associates Vercueil’s “uninvited” entry into her home with a disturbance of the “stillness” and “stagnation” of her mind (*Age* 74), a description that resonates with Levinas’s depiction of the effect on the self of the unexpected arrival of the Other as a liberation from its “enchainment to itself, where the ego suffocates in itself” (124). To open oneself to the Other, Levinas later adds, is “to free oneself by
breathing from closure in oneself” (180). Significantly, Vercueil is throughout Coetzee’s novel figured as both a saviour and an angel of death. As the novel’s ending makes clear, Mrs. Curren expires in having been inspired by his uninvited arrival: “He took me in his arms and held me with mighty force, so that the breath went out of me in a rush. From that embrace there was no warmth to be had” (Age 181). Apart from the image of expiration, the detail that Mrs. Curren finds no “warmth” or love in Vercueil’s “embrace” suggests the death of the ‘I’ that seeks to love despite itself. Through his unannounced arrival, Vercueil kills her and therefore saves her from her enchainment to herself.

Given that Mrs. Curren, the letter writer in this epistolary novel, writes her own death, the novel’s ending is not nearly as clear-cut as I have suggested. The ‘I’ that does not experience love because it is not there to do so writes about the fact that it does not experience love because it is not there to do so. In various permutations, this irony is apparent throughout the novel. How does one love despite oneself? Can one choose to love despite oneself? In other words, can one control one’s loss of control? How does one “learn” to “let go,” as Mrs. Curren puts it (119)? Can one will “will-lessness”? Or, more to the point, can one will one’s death to come?

While Martin Heidegger describes death as that “possibility which is one’s ownmost” because no one can die for someone else (294), it is equally true, as Blanchot points out, that death cannot be experienced by a subject (Space 95–100). Since death is the end of the subject, it is not an action that may be accomplished in a realm of agential possibility. To choose to die is to attempt to control one’s loss of control. It is to place oneself in the paradoxical position of the suicide who, in killing herself, seeks to reduce death to an object that may be grasped and thereby controlled by a subject.12

In Age of Iron, this problem is figured in Mrs. Curren’s writing. Like Beckett, this character writes in order to die. Since her writing has its origin not in the ‘I’ that writes but in the interplay between the stranger without and the stranger within, she is not entirely in control of it. To appropriate Elizabeth Costello’s appropriation of Czesław Miłosz’s words, Mrs. Curren is a “secretary of the invisible” (Coetzee, Elizabeth Costello 199). She writes in order to forfeit the subject that writes. As with Beckett, the irony is that she is possessed only of the words of others with which to accomplish this task.

12 In a section of The Space of Literature entitled “Death as Possibility,” Blanchot discusses the notion of death as a task and achievement. After asking the questions “Can I die? Have I the power to die?” he reflects on Kirilov’s words, “I recommend my death to you, voluntary death, which comes to me because I want it to” (96–100). See also Critchley (77–85).
Through what she calls “misshapen” words, that have been “vomited up from the belly of the whale” (*Age* 128), she must locate the child that has been damaged by language. This is why she is so intent on “find[ing]” her “own words, from [her]self” (91). She seeks words that are not the words of others. The “right word” is, of course, the word that would destroy the ‘I’ that writes. While Mrs. Curren writes in order to die, to sacrifice herself so that she may become other than she is, she cannot do so because her writing asserts the ‘I,’ the word of others that she is. Partly at least, this is what the presence of the ‘I’ at its own death in this first-person narrative suggests. It suggests, that is, an endless dying, a waiting to die.

Coetzee’s negotiation of this aporia is directly related to his emphasis on the self’s dependence on the stranger for salvation. Although not a possibility open to a subject, a forfeiture of self is something that could be accomplished by a visit from a stranger. In *Age of Iron*, this possibility is mooted not only by the descriptions of Mrs. Curren’s relationship with Vercueil, but also by the text’s meditation on its reception by its reader and readers. Being an epistolary novel, it is of course self-reflexively aware that it is directed at a reader. Mrs. Curren’s letter is a letter and therefore has an addressee. Her intended reader is her daughter, someone she knows in advance and of whom she thus has expectations. For this reader, she translates, indeed transubstantiates, her body into words:

> So day by day I render myself into words and pack the words into the page like sweets: like sweets for my daughter, for her birthday, for the day of her birth. Words out of my body, drops of myself, for her to unpack in her own time, to take in, to suck, to absorb. As they say on the bottle: old-fashioned drops, drops fashioned by the old, fashioned and packed with love, the love we have no alternative but to feel toward those to whom we give ourselves to devour or discard. (8)

Ironically, though, it is exactly the kind of self-sacrificing love professed in this passage that is precluded by the fact that the sacrifice is directed and therefore affirms and consolidates the positions of giver and receiver within an economy of exchange. For her sacrifice to work, Mrs. Curren must love her daughter in the way that she would like to be able to love John; that is, despite herself. Her letter must address not (or not only) the daughter she knows, who is now an American and therefore a foreigner of sorts, but also the stranger she does not know, the black child not from her womb of whom she can have no expectations.

At issue in this self-reflexive reflection on writing and reading are the ways in which literary texts interpellate their readers and interpolate themselves
into the lives of their readers. Being situated in language and therefore community’s structures of recognition, texts inevitably locate their readers, who are, of course, also situated in culture. Made up of “misshapen” words, Mrs. Curren’s letter, like its writer, is possessed by ‘the words of others’ and therefore in a state of disgrace. It waits to be redeemed from this state by a reader it has not addressed, or by a reader who refuses, or comes to refuse, its address. This is why Mrs. Curren also refers to her daughter as her child who is estranged, who has grown strange (127). It is certainly why she exhorts her daughter as follows:

I tell you the story of this morning mindful that the storyteller, from her office, claims the place of right. It is through my eyes that you see; the voice that speaks in your head is mine. [...] Now, my child, flesh of my flesh, my best self, I ask you to draw back. [...] It would be easier for you, I know, if the story came from someone else, if it were a stranger’s voice sounding in your ear. But the fact is, there is no one else. I am the only one. I am the one writing: I, I. So I ask you: attend to the writing, not to me. If lies and pleas and excuses weave among the words, listen for them. Do not pass them over, do not forgive them easily. Read all, even this adjuration, with a cold eye. (95–96)

So, even as it interpellates its reader, Mrs. Curren’s text holds out the possibility that she may be, or may become, a stranger. In other words, the reader it interpellates is not necessarily the one for whom this text waits. It waits, in particular, for a reader who will read it with a “cold eye” and thereby attempt to encounter those characters, like Vercueil and John, whom Mrs. Curren has inevitably misunderstood, misrepresented, and so silenced. The reader in question, this is to say, would be one who would venture beyond the economy of the text through reducing the reductions of its representations.13

If its actual reader were to read in the way suggested in this passage, his reading would inevitably seek to extend the novel’s wholly inadequate search for the stranger. By not suspending disbelief in its representations, but rather engaging in an act of counter-focalization (see Spivak), a process which requires discerning what it has reduced, distorted, and therefore excluded, the reader would have become part of the text’s quest. In fact, his reading would have become a search for the excess of the writer’s search and would therefore necessarily betray its betrayal of the stranger. He would read—that is, seek to

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13 In Johan Geertsema’s fine argument, Age of Iron is “at once constituted by the attempt to render otherness and the attempt to render that rendering problematic” (259). Accordingly, it is the reader’s responsibility to reduce this novel’s reductions of the other.
see—with a “cold eye.” The crucial corollary here is that the reader, in supplementing the text’s representations, would have altered the text, made it strange to itself. In relation to the novel’s presentation of itself as Mrs. Curren’s sacrifice of self and endless dying, the reader would have enabled not this writer surrogate, but Coetzee, the actual writing subject, to give himself to a stranger, to become a sacrifice without object and thus intention, and thereby to become a stranger to himself. By extension, the reader would have inadvertently become the writer’s saviour by enabling him to die. The reader would have redeemed the writer from his state of disgrace by dispossessing him of the ‘I,’ the word of others, by which he is possessed.

Moreover, the reader, in making the text strange, would also have enabled it to make of her a stranger to herself. By engaging the text, the reader will have been visited and possessed by that which informs its search. In her reading of the novel, that is, she would have encountered what exceeds the differences inscribed by her language and culture and therefore will have deferred or will come to defer the patterns of identification they posit. Differently put, she would have encountered the stranger in herself. In terms of the trope of invisible air that pervades Coetzee’s writing, the reader will have inspired, and been inspired by, the writer’s expiration. At least, this is one of the implications of the analogous relationship of Mrs. Curren, the writer surrogate, to Coetzee, the writing ‘I.’ As I have already suggested, the one who reads has a role to play here; she must allow the writing ‘I’ to expire: not the Curren ‘I’ who speaks of its own death at the end of *Age of Iron*, and who has therefore not died, but the Coetzee ‘I’ who writes this character. If the reader does so, she will have been inspired by Coetzee’s dying breath. Significantly, in this regard, Mrs. Curren refers as follows to the affect and effect of her letter, the bearer of her remains, of her spirit, her dying breath, on its reader: “It is not my soul that will remain with you but the spirit of my soul, the breath, the stirring of the air about these words, the faintest of turbulence traced in the air by the ghostly passage of my pen over the paper your fingers now hold” (*Age* 118–119). If inspired by the writer’s dying breath, it follows that the reader will have read anonymously, that is, despite herself, and that her reading would therefore not only be without a telos, but also without a locatable position in community. In short, the reader, through her engagement with the text, would have been unhomed from community. The ‘I’ that she is in community will have died.

To read in the manner here suggested is to enable the text to become unconditionally hospitable and thereby also to lose control over one’s reading and so render oneself unconditionally hospitable. To read in the manner here suggested is to read in a way that enables a “stranger’s voice” to sound in one’s
ear. Exactly this is connoted by the ending of Coetzee’s *Foe*, which figures a visitation of the text by the reader and of the reader by the text. In the first part of the ending, an anonymous ‘I’ arrives at Foe’s house, enters it unannounced, and encounters some of the novel’s characters in postures of sleep. Their passivity suggests a waiting without object. The text waits for the reader it cannot expect, and when he or she does arrive, the arrival goes unnoticed. In other words, in this image of reading, the reader-figure visits the text by visiting herself upon it. Once in the house, this visitor searches it and eventually finds Friday, the novel’s catachresis of the stranger. Thereafter, she places an ear to Friday’s mouth, and lies “waiting” (154). Evidently, the seeker has become “incurious.” Reading as an active search has lapsed into a passive, non-intentional waiting. As it is here depicted, reading is without object, a non-intentional waiting for the stranger’s voice. In visiting herself upon the text, the reader-figure is visited by what has visited itself upon its writer.

It is therefore apposite that this reader-figure, in the second section of its ending, extends the novel’s search for the child. She acts, which is to say searches, because she is acted upon by a stranger. Earlier, Susan Barton emphasizes in conversation with Foe the necessity of making the mute Friday’s silence speak (142), thereby self-reflexively commenting on the telos of the text’s search. Significantly, though, she concludes that this is a task for one who comes later. At the end of the novel, it is exactly this task that the reader-figure undertakes. In waiting for the reader it cannot expect, the text waits for her to complete its textual quest. On finding a manuscript in Foe’s house, the reader-figure proceeds to read what turns out to be the opening sentence of the novel, after which she or he breaks with the text, and enters a watery underworld that is “not a place of words” (157). In effect, the figured reader is going where the text cannot take her and, in the process, taking it to a Beckettian and alinguistic destination. Once in this watery realm, she encounters Friday, the “child waiting to be born that cannot be born” (122), in a foetal position, and attempts to speak his silence. As it is here presented, her search is a waiting on the child who waits to be spoken and thereby to come into being as an object of and for consciousness. The Beckettian irony again evident here is that while it is the seeker’s responsibility to articulate the silence of the stranger by which she is possessed, she has only the words of others with which to do so. At least, this is what is intimated by the failure of the reader-figure’s attempt to speak Friday’s silence: “Each syllable, as it comes out, is caught and filled with water and diffused” (157). Since she has nothing to say and nothing to say it with, the figured reader must ceaselessly supplement her supplements of the text’s supplements. The responsibility with which she has been charged is infinite because it cannot be discharged. Friday waits and she waits on him.
These images of the text’s reception suggest that reading may become a space in which the reader visits himself upon the text, and the writer, through the text, visits himself upon the reader. If such a mutual visitation, or—now using words Mrs. Curren uses to describe her relationship with Vercueil—if such a “mutual election” were to happen (Age 179), it would have been entirely non-intentional and therefore pre-reflective. As such, the writer could not know whether or not the right reader, that is, the stranger, had arrived. By extension, he would also not know whether or not he had died and whether or not his “best self,” to use Mrs. Curren’s Beckettian phrase, had arrived. The same would obviously hold for the reader. So, although it is true to say that the writer writes in order to die, and that the reader too reads in order to die, it needs to be added that writing and reading are, in this understanding, an endless waiting to die, and therefore an endless dying. It also follows that, for Coetzee, as for Beckett, the writer must tell the same story, albeit with endless variation, over and over again. In *Foe*, as much is implied by Susan Barton’s following reflection on Foe’s writing project:

> And might not Foe be a kind of captive too? I had thought him dilatory. But might the truth not be instead that he had laboured all those months to move a rock so heavy no man alive could budge it; that the pages I saw issuing from his pen were not idle tales of courtesans and grenadiers, as I supposed, but the same story over and over, in version after version, stillborn every time: the story of the island, as lifeless from his hand as from mine? (151)

Foe is, of course, not just an author-figure in this novel. As the reader of Susan Barton’s manuscript, he has been tasked with the responsibility of completing her story. His writing is also a reading. Quite clearly, the suggestion here is that the writer’s aporetic task is shared by the reader. In his or her reading, the latter is always necessarily attempting to complete, and therefore to tell, the “same story.”

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In Coetzee’s fiction, to write and to read is endlessly to wait on the stranger who is excluded by community’s forms of recognition. Accordingly, Coetzee’s work continues and intensifies the kind of engagement with community that is already evident in the Beckettian search for the stranger. It does so through its recognition that the identity of the individual in community is contingent on the foreigner, and that the stranger is therefore both proximate and distant. The
search for the stranger within oneself is a waiting for the strangeness of the foreigner. As I have indicated, this logic extends to the writer’s relationship with the reader, who is necessarily implicated in his search. Indeed, Mrs. Curren describes her letter’s reader, her child who has “grown strange,” as her “best self” (*Age* 95).

Despite these crucial differences, the nature of the search for the stranger is remarkably similar in the two writers under discussion. While the stranger can never be found, it is the seeker’s responsibility to do just that. The seeker must make of community a home for the stranger, which means that the seeker must be unhomed by the stranger. By extension, the seeker must constantly seek to alter community in order to accommodate the stranger. The deep suspicion of community’s forms of belonging apparent in Beckett is even more pronounced in Coetzee’s writing. To belong, for Coetzee’s characters, is to exist in a state of disgrace, and therefore to abnegate responsibility for the stranger. Indeed, belonging precludes the possibility of ethics. The diagnostic nature of the titles of novels like *Age of Iron* and *Disgrace* indicate their disease with their ‘worldliness,’ and therefore their desire to become strange to themselves, to be unhomed from community. By implication, these titles indicate that the texts they designate wait for the stranger who may deliver them from what they are. Since the duration of their wait is without term, they are necessarily incomplete.

If Coetzee’s fictional project involves thinking the ‘good community,’ it does not do so by conceiving of ‘good community’ as something that could ever be a *fait accompli*. The closest that a community could come to being ‘good,’ which is to say ethical, would be through conceiving of itself ateleologically. It would have constantly to interrupt itself by opening itself to its exclusions, and thereby disavowing its claims to completion, to being ‘good.’¹⁴ The ‘good community’ is thus futural, always yet to come in a form presently unrecognizable. It should be noted in this regard that if the Coetzee-search for the stranger were to be completed, if it were indeed possible to see the foreigner as a stranger, community would be rendered impossible. Indeed, the kind of unconditional hospitality implicit in this search suggests a community that excludes exclusion, which is precisely what the differential construction of community precludes.

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¹⁴ See Blanchot’s discussion of the possibility of a community that disavows itself as it avows itself (*Unavowable*).
Works Cited


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**FESTE ANSICHTEN IN HIS OWN PERSON: J.M. COETZEE SPEAKS**

**GILLIAN DOOLEY**

In *Here and Now* (2013), J.M. Coetzee asks “how seriously we should take Jorge Luis Borges” (135). The substance of his question (whether Borges is indulging in a *jeu d’esprit* or proposing an idea with “real philosophical depth”) for my present purposes interests me less than the fact of Coetzee’s interrogation of a Borges story on these terms. It echoes the sort of questions I want to ask about Coetzee: when are the ideas, beliefs, and opinions expressed in a particular subset of his published works to be taken “seriously”? What, if anything, gives us a warrant to believe that the opinions a Coetzee character or persona expresses are shared by the author?

This is the kind of question I would normally be reluctant to pose, having been thoroughly schooled in critical admonitions against the Intentional Fallacy, but my interest is aroused by three recent Coetzee books that seem to invite such interrogation. These three books, which fall outside the context of the academic essay proper, have included extensive expressions of opinion. Two of them, *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), contain lectures and essays within their fictional frames, and the third, *Here and Now*, presents itself as a published sequence of letters between Coetzee and the American author Paul Auster. The wide-ranging discussions in these books cover topics from political philosophy, language, animal rights, and paedophilia to music, food, and sport. There is substantial continuity in the opinions expressed, and the characters or personae expressing these views also have a good deal in common: they are all highly intelligent novelists educated in the western tradition, sceptical, left-leaning though by no means consistently or conventionally so, and all are approaching old age. Nevertheless, these opinions are expressed in three explicitly different personae, and from three different rhetorical positions. What I find most tantalizing is that with each of these three books these personae are progressively more closely identifiable with Coetzee himself. Elizabeth Costello, in the book of that name, is a character who crosses gender and national boundaries from her creator. JC in *Diary of a Bad Year* shares at least some biographical circumstances with Coetzee—land of birth, gender, initials, and occupation, for example. Then, in *Here and Now*, we are
presented with what at least purports transparently to be the author J.M. Coetzee’s own voice in correspondence with Auster. How do I, as a reader and a critic, negotiate this progression? Just how much licence does the apparently closer correspondence between author and writing persona give me to believe that I know what Coetzee really thinks or believes?

Despite their different shades of meaning, in this essay I will sometimes use the terms ‘opinion’ and ‘belief’ more or less interchangeably. This is partly driven by their use in the two books Elizabeth Costello and Diary of a Bad Year, the former of which is largely concerned with belief—what is both felt and thought to be true—and the latter with opinion, which under some circumstances can have less favourable connotations, lacking the aura of heartfelt conviction which in some senses redeems belief, and having its unpleasant echo in the word “opinionated” and its cognates—“Opinâitre, say the French, obdurate, stony, mulish,” says JC in Diary (101). JC refers to the distinction his publisher draws between the German words Ansichten (usually denoting convictions of a putatively ‘factual’ kind) and Meinungen (personal opinions, more closely related to beliefs): “The Meinungen I held yesterday are not necessarily the Meinungen I hold today. Ansichten, by contrast, are firmer” (102). According to my German dictionary, both words can mean “view” or “opinion,” but only Meinung includes “belief” in its definition. This contributes to the imprecision, or nuance, or potential for alternate perspectives within the latter term. Even though the shadow of the Christian credo colours the word, and this shadow is surely implicit in the word “belief” as it appears in Elizabeth Costello, pervaded as that novel is by a wary engagement with Christian concepts such as caritas and salvation of the soul, beliefs can change, and are more likely to vary from community to community, from faith to faith. JC in Diary of a Bad Year hopes his German publisher will use the title Feste Ansichten, “Strong Opinions”, for the book to which JC has been invited to contribute. However, the essays he writes are undermined, almost literally, by two other narratives running in parallel along the pages underneath. The first of these is a first-person narrative by the writer of these essays, and the second is an account by a young woman, Anya, whom the writer encounters, is smitten by, and whom he employs to help him type and edit his essays.

In one of the essays that occupy the upper part of each page, “On Harold Pinter,” JC writes of Pinter’s bravery in criticizing Tony Blair:

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 a ground where one’s opponent is far more practised and adept. 
(Diary 107)

Let us, for the moment, take speaking “in one’s own person” in the straightforward sense that JC offers here, allowing it for now to mean “not through one’s art.” According to such a definition, Coetzee is of course not actually speaking ‘in his own person’ here. Although there are many similarities between Coetzee and his character, known to Anya as Señor C, and whom I am calling, for convenience, JC, there are many formal signs within the book that mark it as fiction. On the other hand, although the book is an instance of art, there are some occasions when voice is given to opinions that can plausibly be attributed to the author himself as well as to the fictional alter ego.

In one of his short essays in the second part of the book, the “Second Diary,” JC relates giving a reading from his novel Waiting for the Barbarians at the National Library of Australia, prefaced by an introduction in which he compared the anti-terror legislation about to be introduced by the Howard Government to laws in apartheid South Africa. His speech, he says, was quoted, inaccurately, in The Australian newspaper and provoked an irascible letter to the editor a couple of days later: “In the rough-and-tumble world of politics, a letter like this counts as no more than a pinprick, yet me it numbs like a blow from a lead cosh” (140). In fact, on 24 October 2005, a report did indeed appear in The Australian announcing that, at a reading at the National Library of Australia on the previous day, Coetzee had “launched a thinly veiled attack on Australia’s proposed anti-terrorism laws, likening the Howard Government’s controversial reforms to human rights abuses under apartheid in his native South Africa” (Price). The wording of the article quoted in the novel matches that of the article published by The Australian, and a letter such as the one JC describes appeared on the following day. Can we therefore be excused if we conflate the character with the author? And, to what extent? Also, if we do, where does such conflation lead us? The path may well be a thorny one, but if we are alert to its perils it may take us to a new vantage point without risk of substantial injury. Chris Danta, for one, in his introduction to the anthology Strong Opinions: JM Coetzee and the Authority of Contemporary Fiction, argues that JC can, at least to some extent, “be read as a lyrical abbreviation of JMC,” and proceeds from that position—which he concedes some might think “wrongheaded”—to build an argument about Coetzee’s commitment in his fiction to “writing without authority” (xiii):

As I see it, Elizabeth Costello is an experiment in incarnation through which Coetzee expresses the Janus face of literary authority: the sense in which the writer is paradoxically turned outward towards his or her
community, but also inward towards the higher authority of his or her own conscience. (xv)

*Here and Now* was published two years after Danta’s preface. The book is formally nonfiction, but very little about it claims to be written with ‘absolute’ authority—it contains much that is clearly posed for the sake of argument, or discussion, and many of the ideas floated would not stand up to rigorous interrogation. The last sentence of the last letter from Coetzee to Auster reads, “The world keeps throwing up its surprises. We keep learning” (248)—and I am still intrigued by the congruence and contiguity between this sentence and those in *Elizabeth Costello* and *Diary*. I continue to wonder what they tell us about Coetzee, his beliefs and opinions, and what it means to him to speak *in propria persona*.

The incident of *The Australian* article is not mentioned in *Here*, but Coetzee does there describe his reaction to a letter he received from a member of the public. In this case, it was from a woman who had read *Slow Man* and objected to an anti-Semitic remark by Marijana, a character in this novel. The letter writer’s reaction is silly, but I wonder if being misinterpreted in this way might be the impetus for Coetzee’s attempt to speak more clearly in a public forum about what he *does* believe in order to forestall such misunderstandings.

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Elizabeth Costello is a world-renowned, award-winning novelist. Her novels are the subject of dissertations; the “Elizabeth Costello Society” publishes an “Elizabeth Costello Newsletter.” But she is not as eminent as J.M. Coetzee. She apparently does not have two Booker prizes to her name, nor has she won the Nobel Prize for Literature. We learn that she has not been in the habit of expressing opinions, at least not to her family: her son John

has lived around her for nearly four decades, on and off, and is still not sure what she thinks about the big questions. Not sure and, on the whole, thankful not to have to hear. For her thoughts would be, he suspects, as uninteresting as most people’s. A writer, not a thinker. *(Elizabeth 10)*

However, in the chapters that follow, her thoughts—opinions or beliefs—on various topics, including some of “the big questions,” are expressed in a series of public lectures given in *her* own person. The most consistent and perhaps controversial of these opinions, and those that have generated the most
commentary, relate to human relations with animals. She, like Coetzee, is a vegetarian by conviction. This is also the one question on which she expresses firm opinions:

The death camps would not have been dreamed up without the example of the meat-processing plants before them.

That and more she had said: it had seemed to her obvious, barely worth pausing over. (Elizabeth 156)

Although she casts this in the past tense, looking back on her lecture at Appleton College in “Lesson 3,” she does not repudiate what she had said. The controversy, according to this retrospective account, had entered when she equated the moral import of animal slaughter with “what we call the holocaust.” She had been attacked for “belittling the Holocaust,” and, significantly, had been “defended by people whose support for the most part embarrassed her: covert anti-Semites, animal-rights sentimentalists” (156). In the earlier lesson, Costello’s daughter-in-law Norma, who “holds a PhD in philosophy with a specialism in the philosophy of mind,” had complained that Costello’s “opinions on animals, animal consciousness and ethical relations with animals are jejune and sentimental” (61). “There is no position outside of reason where you can stand and lecture about reason and pass judgement on reason,” Norma had told John in reaction to Costello’s lecture (93). But in “Lesson 4” Costello vehemently rejects the type of reasoning deployed by “one of the academic philosophers I read in preparing for yesterday’s lecture” (111). Is Costello’s later dismissal of animal-rights sentimentalists an inconsistency in her character or does she believe that her position is not susceptible of this interpretation?

JC also writes about the cruelty of slaughtering animals, not only those exported alive to Egypt and ill-treated in a Port Said abattoir (he is thinking of a documentary he saw), but any animal killed for meat. He, too, is apparently a vegetarian: when he entertains Anya and her partner Alan to dinner he provides quail for them but eats a “butternut and tofu tartlet” himself (Diary 134). Unlike Costello, he mounts a semblance of an orthodoxy rational argument: “the notion of compassionate killing is riddled with absurdities” (54), while the critique of his opinions staged in the book repudiates pedantry and argumentation in favour of Anya’s more personal (or sentimental) approach and in contrast to the criticisms in Elizabeth Costello that Costello’s opinions lack philosophical rigour. Each particular character and situation comes with its necessary foil.

1 “Of course I don’t” eat meat, says Coetzee in a 2004 interview: “It’s a repulsive habit. I gave it up 30 years ago. God knows why it took me so long” (Coetzee and Susskind 14).
When the controversy aroused by her parallel between the abattoirs and the Holocaust prompts an invitation to a conference in the Netherlands to speak about the problem of evil, Elizabeth Costello finds herself in the position of attacking the work of a fellow author who is, unexpectedly, present. Once again, fact and fiction intersect: Paul West, the (actual, ‘real-life’) author of *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg*, appears in the novel *Elizabeth Costello* as the unresponsive addressee of a warning and apology by Costello for what she is about to say about him in public. Although she feels that “there ought to be [...] some way of rounding off the morning and giving it shape and meaning: some confrontation leading to some final word” in the corridors of the conference venue, she is left unsatisfied (182).

Despite the contests in which she embroils herself—reason versus sentiment, experience versus demonstration, poetry versus philosophy—Elizabeth Costello often exhibits what might be called conviction fatigue. At the end of the uncomfortable dinner that follows the lecture in which she has drawn parallels between Nazi death camps and abattoirs, she responds, wearily, to a politely offered opinion about the double standard involved in human beliefs about animals, “I don’t know what I think [...] I often wonder what thinking is, what understanding is” (90). This is not the first time we have encountered such doubts. In “Lesson 2,” which is focalized through Costello rather than her son, she “listens to her own voice” giving an oft-repeated lecture on “The Future of the Novel,” and is uncertain “whether she believes any longer in what she is saying.” Furthermore,

she no longer believes very strongly in belief. Things can be true, she now thinks, even if one does not believe in them, and conversely. Belief may be no more, in the end, than a source of energy, like a battery which one clips into an idea to make it run. (39)

This, without even considering the opposing viewpoints that are presented in the novel, should alert us to treat any of her statements of opinion with caution as firmly held beliefs of the fictional character Elizabeth Costello, or doubly so as those of Coetzee himself. Is it fair to say that beliefs are more akin to feelings, while opinions are more akin to thoughts or ideas? There is undoubtedly some overlap between these concepts; this might be a way of making sense of Costello’s implication that beliefs give energy to ideas. In the surreal purgatory of “Lesson 8 [:] At the Gate,” the first attempt at the statement of belief Costello is required to provide begins, “I am a writer, a trader in fictions,” and continues: “I maintain beliefs only provisionally: fixed beliefs would stand in my way. I change my beliefs as I change my habitation or my clothes, according to my needs” (195). And indeed, when she finds that her lack
of conviction is standing in her way, impeding her progress through the gate, she maintains, or discovers, or invents, a belief in a species of Australian frogs that remain underground in suspended animation until the rain comes. When pressed and cross-examined by the judges, who are sceptical, she responds by saying, “I believe in what does not bother to believe in me” (218).

JC in Diary of a Bad Year is surer of his opinions, and has accepted with alacrity “an opportunity to grumble in public, an opportunity to take magic revenge on the world for declining to conform to my fantasies” (22). These views are thoroughly ingrained:

The passions and prejudices out of which my opinions grew were laid down long before I first set eyes on Anya, and were by now so strong—that is to say, so settled, so rigid—that aside from the odd word here and there there was no chance that refraction through her gaze could alter their angle. (100–101)

He is, however, influenced by Anya: “What has begun to change since I moved into the orbit of Anya is not my opinions themselves but my opinions of my opinions” (106). It is this change of heart, rather than change of mind, that leads him to write a second set of essays, more personal in tone and content, less magisterial and more revealing (at least superficially so) than the first, to lure Anya back after they have had a disagreement.

Anya is the agent of change in this novel. Her appearance in JC’s life drives the plot, such as it is. But reading the novel for the third or fourth time before writing this essay, I was struck by how unconvincing Anya is. Her voice, especially when she first speaks directly to the reader, seems to me like the wishful fantasy of an ageing male. Her sensual exhibitionism—“If I were a man I would not be able to keep my eyes off me” (23)—takes her into the realm of crude and rather tasteless caricature. She does become a more rounded character later, but I am not entirely convinced by her devotion to JC. I realize others disagree. Robert Hahn, for example, calls Anya’s voice “strikingly, refreshingly new” and says she is “a vividly imagined character” (5). But what interests me here is that I automatically impute the fantasy to JC the character rather than to Coetzee the author. I find myself unwilling to believe that Coetzee would invent such an implausible character in his own person. It follows therefore that—as I see it—Anya is a projection of JC’s: perhaps a woman he has seen but with whom he invents a relationship to comfort himself and to provide some drama in his dreary life. Or perhaps she ‘actually’ does his typing, and the rest is fantasy.
The speculation above is not only speculation, but also a matter of opinion: something again not easily able to be settled one way or another. But if we accept that Anya is an unconvincing caricature, then each reader has to decide whether he or she believes Coetzee is playing a subtle game or has become unaccountably inexpert in character delineation in this single case. My next step along this thorny path of suppositions is to contemplate how the novel is affected by the possibility that Anya is not (within the world of the novel) actually the narrator of the third strand of text. Might this be a strategy on the part of Coetzee to provide a particular type of challenge to the opinions he is voicing through JC, different to the challenge that would be offered if Anya were a character with the same fictional status as JC? To accept this possibility as a narrative stratagem is to make of JC a more pathetic character, a lonely old man in bad health with nothing but his opinions and his fantasy life. To accept this possibility is to make of *Diary* a far bleaker book. It would also mean that all the countervoices are in JC’s own mind, and that—as he approaches death—JC is tempering his irascible view of the world by a process that is purely internal.

Elizabeth Costello’s opinions, or beliefs, are, as I have said above, subject to change according to circumstances, and are always challenged within the narrative, both by her own statements and internal monologue and by other characters. Being left without an answer, without resolution or vindication, is the usual state of affairs in this novel. This is not the case in *Diary of a Bad Year*. The premise of the narrative is that Anya is won over by JC and repelled by Alan’s attempt at cheating him. JC’s early judgment is that she has “a spoiled child’s way of thinking. The trouble is she is not a child any more. It leaves a disturbing taste” (40). However, she turns out to be intelligent, though not intellectual, honest, and good-hearted—as well as generous at displaying her “silky moves” for his benefit (25). She promises to be with him when he dies, and to look after his affairs: a prospective happy ending of a kind rare in a Coetzee novel, offering both resolution and a kind of vindication of his life and of their friendship. Anya writes to him from her new home in Queensland, “We had a good relationship, you and I—don’t you think?—and it was based on honesty” (172). If this is ‘actually’ happening in the world of the novel, then it is about the best outcome that could be imagined for a terminally ill single man with no family and, it seems, no other friends. This is one reason to doubt whether Anya exists independently of JC.

Coetzee has said that “there is a true sense in which writing is dialogic: a matter of awakening the countervoices in oneself and embarking upon speech with them” (*Doubling* 65). On the face of it, we have two countervoices
external to JC in this book: one inexpert, and the other compromised by malicious intent. Anya’s opinion of JC’s Opinions is dismissive:

I have to be honest, the strong opinions on politics and so forth were not your best, maybe because there is no story in politics, maybe because you are a bit out of touch, maybe because the style does not suit you. (174)

Her objections to the Opinions are unsophisticated and show little understanding of what he is trying to achieve and of what his German publisher has asked him to produce. Alan attacks the Opinions from a more intellectual standpoint. Anya reports that he “used to say you were sentimental. [...] A sentimental socialist” (156). Whether these contrary views are ‘invented’ by JC or are part of the narrative created by Coetzee, neither of them poses a particularly compelling challenge to his Opinions.

The other countervoices are JC’s own, the persona in the narrative and the essay-writing persona. Even in the first part of the book, in the “Strong Opinions,” JC begins to entertain self-criticism. In an entry on English usage, he asks himself “what sort of essay was I engaged in: a piece of objective linguistic analysis or a verbal diatribe on declining standards?” (120). He goes on:

I survey my elderly coevals and see all too many consumed with grouchiness, all too many who allow their helpless bafflement about the way things are going to turn into the main theme of their final years. We will not be like that, we vow, each of us: we will heed the lesson of old King Knut, we will retreat gracefully before the tide of the times. But, truly, sometimes it is difficult. (121)

The next Opinion is “On authority in fiction.” Tolstoy, JC writes here, was treated not only as a great author but as an authority on life, a wise man, a sage. His contemporary Walt Whitman endured a similar fate. But neither had much wisdom to offer: wisdom was not what they dealt in. They were poets above all: otherwise they were ordinary men with ordinary, fallible opinions. [...]

What the great authors are masters of is authority. [...] Learn to speak without authority, says Kierkegaard. By copying Kierkegaard’s words here, I make Kierkegaard into an authority. Authority cannot be taught, cannot be learned. The paradox is a true one. (124)
By writing thirty-one Opinions for publication, JC is confirming himself as at least a putative authority, or acquiescing in the enterprise of his publisher to present him as an authority of some sort. According to Carrol Clarkson, however, JC employs “the most elaborate and relentless syntactic constructions which deflect the attempt to attribute personal subjective agency, whether fictional or historical” (85). JC qualifies ‘his’ authority by the occasional admission of uncertainty within the Opinions, but the discursive authority at hand is more thoroughly questioned by his first-person narrative strand running beneath the essay-text. This narrative belies the authority of the essay-voice in the Opinions and shows its vessel to be an ageing, deteriorating body, buffeted by emotions which he knows to be, from many points of view, ridiculous, and beset by desires he often feels to be shameful.

These countervoices affect different readers differently. Some critics agree with Anya that the Opinions have little intrinsic interest—“The ruminations of JC / Coetzee are often annoying and can become oppressive,” says Hahn (5)—and that the vitality of the book is in the narrative of JC, Anya and Alan which runs along underneath. I am not of that opinion. I find the Opinions well-written, topical and thought-provoking. For me they are the most engaging part of the book, as well as the most substantial, while the ‘love story’ is rather slight and, as I have said, unconvincing to me. This latter is where the sentimentality of the book is located. Hence my suspicion that it is a fabrication by the character JC to provide his Opinions with countervoices that he can control.

Hahn, after an appropriate amount of demurral, decides to ascribe JC’s views to Coetzee, “relieved of a need to compose parables or allegories or plots, unbuttoned and uncensored, free to bombard us with whatever comes into his head while pretending to be JC” (5). Well, perhaps. The publication of Coetzee’s correspondence with Paul Auster does little to dispel the view that some of JC’s opinions are shared by Coetzee, though the context in which he writes them changes their expression subtly. Although writing a letter is of course as much an exercise in framing a discourse as any other act of writing, and as much care can be taken at presentation of the self and one’s opinions in that form as in any other, I believe one can expect a certain amount of transparency and sincerity which one is simply not entitled to expect in the case of fiction. Coetzee initiated the correspondence, according to the publisher’s blurb:

Although Paul Auster and J.M. Coetzee had been reading each other’s books for years, the two writers did not meet until February 2008. Not long after, Auster received a letter from Coetzee, suggesting they begin
exchanging letters on a regular basis and, “God willing, strike sparks off each other.”

This is the only explanatory information provided: there is no preface, no afterword, there are no acknowledgements, and no information is proffered about why and when the decision was made to publish. But one effect of the rhetorical situation here is that the immediate and explicit presence of an addressee whom Coetzee expects to be sympathetic though not uncritical cannot but help give his opinions a less uncompromising air than they assume in *Diary*. The questions, though still rhetorical in flavour, might actually have a role in a conversation, for example:

Your dismay and my dismay: the shared dismay of two aging gents at the way the world is going. How does one escape the entirely risible fate of turning into Gramps, the old codger who, when he embarks on one of his “Back in my time” discourses, makes the children roll their eyes in silent despair? The world is going to hell in a handbasket, said my father, and his father before him, and so on back to Adam. If the world has really been going to hell all these years, shouldn’t it have arrived there by now? When I look around, what I see doesn’t seem like hell to me.

But what is the alternative to griping? Clamping one’s lips shut and bearing the affronts? (*Here* 181)

This extract clearly bears a familial likeness to the passage quoted above from *Diary of a Bad Year* about “the grouchiness of [JC’s] coevals”: the jokey self-deprecation, the admission of futility accompanied by the inevitability of complaint from the elderly. Elsewhere in *Diary*, Anya reacts with distaste to one of the Opinions JC has asked her to type:

Among Señor C’s latest set of opinions there is one that disturbs me, makes me wonder if I have misjudged him all along. It is about sex with children. He doesn’t exactly come out in favour of it, but he doesn’t come out against it either. I ask myself, is this his way of saying his appetites run in that direction? Because why would he write about it otherwise? (71)

In the context of the novel, Anya’s question might echo a reader’s. Whether Anya is a construct of JC or of Coetzee, such a reaction is conventional and serves to underline JC’s complaint concerning “the current hysteria about sexual acts with children” (45). But what Anya fails to understand is that this is not actually an opinion, but a critical response to a widely held attitude, and any suspicion that this Opinion is inserted into *Diary* by Coetzee as an indication of
JC’s hidden perversion (Anya assumes henceforth that he has a stash of pornography somewhere in his flat) is mitigated by the appearance of the same subject, twice, in *Here and Now*:

Today pretty much everything seems to go. The righteous fury that used to be able to play over a whole range of tabooed sex acts (including adultery!) has been focused on a single act, namely grown men having sex with children. (59)

“Hysteria” in *Diary* versus “righteous fury” in *Here*: once again, the rhetoric of the letters echoes that of the novel. The second time he mentions paedophilia in the letters, Coetzee writes,

I remember, a few years ago, writing an essay on pornography in which, as what I thought of as a winning rhetorical move, a reductio ad absurdum, I asked aloud whether we were going to require filmmakers to certify that the actors they used in sex scenes were in no case minors. (202–203)

I have not been able to trace the essay to which Coetzee here refers. There is an essay titled “The Harms of Pornography” in Coetzee’s *Giving Offense*, but it doesn’t pose that question, being principally about women and pornography in response to Catharine MacKinnon. However, the point is implicit in what JC writes in the Opinion “On paedophilia” in *Diary*, opening up the intriguing possibility that even Coetzee has conflated himself with his character. But the interest he shows in criticizing the logical and psychological contradictions in the moral crusade against paedophilia in popular culture shows that this is certainly more than a covert message to Anya inserted by JC in his Opinions.

There are many other examples of subjects that appear in both these books, one of which more or less asserts itself as fiction while the other presents itself as simply the publication of correspondence between colleagues. Coetzee writes archly in *Here* that “characters in novels have a degree of independence from their authors, and—particularly in the case of secondary characters—do not unfailingly speak for them” (96). Characters in novels—even major characters, for that matter—never “unfailingly” and exactly speak for their authors, though the word “unfailingly” surely does here allow for possible overlap. Equivocations of authority in this regard give rise to many questions. As David Robjant writes in his review of *Here*,

Apparently these exchanges aren’t thrust out into the world by some vigilante hacker to demonstrate a moral vacuum at the heart of capitalism, but are actually “leaked,” as it were, by the authors themselves. For this oddity, a range of explanations present themselves.
A theory I would have liked to confirm is that the book is an epistolary novel, in which the authors surrender their true identities to the demands of plot and comedy. Sadly not.

The last letter in Here is dated 29 August 2011; the book was published in March 2013. When correspondence, diaries, and other such writings that are primarily private in their nature are published—in a case like this, especially, when publication occurs so soon, and with the active participation of the writers—one wonders whether it was contemplated all along. Perhaps one explanation for the “oddity” Robijant alludes to is that Coetzee, who suggested that they correspond, is experimenting with another way of voicing his opinions, without the need to embody them more overtly as fictions.\(^2\) There is a revealing exchange in Here about Coetzee’s “faith” (or belief?) in himself as a writer. In response to Auster’s proposition that he—Coetzee—seems “to have solid faith” in what he is doing, the latter writes,

> I think that for once you are wrong about me. I don’t have a great deal of faith in what I am doing. To be more precise, I have enough faith to get me through the writing itself—enough faith or perhaps enough hope, blind or blinkered hope. (134)

Whether it is Coetzee’s lucid and authoritative prose style or his prominence in the literary world that gives the impression of confident self-belief, this statement came as a surprise to me.

Self-doubt could be the spur to creative experimentation, of course. Perhaps believing he falls short in one aspect of his art, Coetzee has developed mastery of others. In both Diary and Here a somewhat gloomy attitude to what is expected of a novelist is expressed. JC writes, “I was never much good at evocation of the real, and have even less stomach for it now” (Diary 154); and Coetzee confides to Auster that, as a novelist, he would not pass Nabokov’s test of knowing and therefore being able to imply in his novels details like floor plans, as well as the back story and destiny of his characters outside the fiction. “If this is the industry standard, I fail,” he glumly concludes (Here 193). This is of course as much a criticism of the concept of an “industry standard” for fiction as it is an admission of his own possible shortcomings. In Doubling the Point Coetzee spoke about another aspect of fiction that is perhaps of more interest to him:

\(^2\) Coetzee has not abandoned fiction, by any means: The Childhood of Jesus, a teasing, elliptical fable, containing no substantial discursive expressions of opinions or beliefs, was also published in 2013.
When a real passion of feeling is let loose in discursive prose, you feel that you are reading the utterances of a madman [...]. The novel, on the other hand, allows the writer to stage his passion: Magda, in *In the Heart of the Country*, may be mad [...] but I, behind her, am merely passionate. [...] [I]n the medium of prose commentary I can’t be passionate without being mad. (60–61)

One might, however, be permitted to be passionate in a letter to a friend, and so the project of writing to Auster might help bridge the gulf between passion and madness.

Unlike JC, Coetzee—now about the same age as his *Diary* character—does not yet seem to have lost the urge to experiment with new ways of creating fictional worlds. But, over the past twenty years or so, he has been displaying a concurrent (and not always unconnected) wish to express his opinions, or beliefs, his *Ansichten* or *Meinungen*, beyond the confines of the academic article or critical essay. The three books I have discussed in this article seem designed to find ways of doing that, gradually coming out—as it were—from behind the screen of fiction and addressing his readers directly *in propria persona*. As he writes to Paul Auster in *Here*, “what is the alternative to griping? Clamping one’s lips shut and bearing the affronts?” (181).

The gripes must out. One can’t easily see Coetzee becoming a newspaper columnist or a blogger. Writing a book of opinionated essays (certain to find an enthusiastic publisher), although it appeals to JC, seems out of character for Coetzee. *Elizabeth Costello*, which grew from a collection of talks he gave—in place of lectures and conference papers rather than public readings of his own more orthodoxly literary work—during the decade or so before its publication, must have seemed a viable solution for a time. However, as an alter ego, Costello left something to be desired; perhaps she was a means of dipping his toes in these seductive waters. With JC and his *Feste Ansichten* another protective layer came off, but the urge to speak more plainly outside the context of fiction, “not through one’s art” (*Diary* 107), seems to have prevailed and the idea of corresponding with Auster may then have presented itself as another way of decently airing these opinions in public without having their sincerity questioned by their framing devices. Wrongheaded and impertinent though it may be, for the sake of argument I here posit an opinion, if not a belief, that taken together these books provide a set of opinions that we can now ascribe to Coetzee, should we wish to do so.
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RESTORING MADNESS TO HISTORY IN J.M. COETZEE’S 
IN THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY

WILLIAM COLLINS

“The indifference of South African historiography to the question of madness […] should arouse nothing but mistrust, and make us redouble rather than abate our efforts to call up and interrogate the demons of the past.”

—J.M. Coetzee (Giving Offense 164)

In spite of Magda’s repeated descriptions of herself as “mad” (8; 10; 79; 123; 124; 125), “melancholy” (3; 7), “crazed” and “crazy” (50; 6; 138), the question of madness receives less than satisfactory attention in the critical landscape surrounding J.M. Coetzee’s In the Heart of the Country. One might first attribute such lack of attention to the relatively obscure place Heart occupies in Coetzee’s oeuvre. It is only his second novel, appearing just before the international readership garnered by Waiting for the Barbarians, and even amongst the likes of The Life & Times of Michael K with its inscrutable title character and Diary of a Bad Year with its multigeneric and multivocal textual apparatus, Heart presents to its readers unparalleled hermeneutic difficulties, several of which I outline below. Perhaps more tellingly, and more germanely to the interests of this essay, Heart’s relationship with its cultural moment remains difficult to formulate. Because literary production and reception under apartheid in South Africa were overdetermined by—from one part of the political spectrum—rigorous censorship legislation, and—from another—an expectation that literature should respond transparently to its cultural moment, much Coetzee criticism seeks to gauge how and how adequately his novels constitute a response to the exigencies of his historical milieu. Variously articulating the pertinence of Coetzee’s novels to their cultural moment as “situational metafiction” (Attwell 3), “middle-voice writing” (Macaskill 466), and “stag[ings] of otherness” (Attridge xii), critics effectively demonstrate that,
despite his self-consciously oblique and erudite narrative praxis, Coetzee’s work does manifest a thoroughgoing critique of not only South African apartheid, but also of the larger genus of political hegemony to which apartheid belongs.

Although I find occasion to quibble with him later in this essay, I wholeheartedly share Derek Attridge’s faith in the vast reinterpretive potential of Coetzee’s work, and likewise endorse “an engagement with the text that recognizes, and capitalizes on, its potential for reinterpretation, for grafting into new contexts, for fission and fusion” (10). In pursuit of this potential for reinterpretation, I read Coetzee’s Heart through the as yet neglected lens of madness. Because of the novel’s singular interpretive challenges, and because of its affinities with the novels of Samuel Beckett, I turn to Coetzee’s scholarship on Beckett for two conceptual tools with which to engage the text: Heidegger’s concept of Geworfenheit, and the Beckettian self-negating fiction of net zero. Using these tools, I observe that Magda negotiates the unclear rules of her existence by inhabiting and casting aside, in the style of a hermit crab, various literary tropes. Having thus provided some strategies for apprehending the text, I work toward outlining the semantic and rhetorical range of madness in Coetzee’s lexicon via an intertextual examination of his fiction and scholarship. What emerges from this reading is a vision of madness with distinct yet mutually implicated poles: on the one hand, madness as a contagious force moving throughout a social body and, on the other hand, madness as the experience of the labour of writing, especially that writing conducted under the threat of illegibility, a threat conditioned at least in part by the madness of the social body. Further, madness occupies a curious position with regard to history, figuring prominently in it while also evading or distorting it, a curiosity perhaps implicated in, caused by, or otherwise symptomatic of the resistance of madness to definition.

Following and at times parodying the South African plaasroman, Heart depicts a pastoral drama staged between Magda, a lonely “spinster with a locked diary” (3), her unnamed father and master of the farm (from whose mouth “echoes and echoes his eternal NO” [16]), and several servants (early in the novel, Jakob and Ou-Anna, but later and more principally, Hendrik and Klein-Anna). The central events of the novel—insofar as some agreement can be reached concerning what here constitutes an event—are the father’s marriage (quickly annulled, so to speak), Hendrik’s marriage, the father’s affair with Hendrik’s young bride, the impossibly multiple deaths of the father, Hendrik’s rape or numerous repeated violations of Magda, the servants’ departure from the
farm, flying machines possibly visiting the veld over which they perhaps voice cryptic aphorisms from the Western philosophical tradition, and Magda’s eventual isolation. More or less written or at least ostensibly verbalized by Magda, the text presents itself in 266 numbered sections, some as short as a sentence, others a few pages long, but most the length of a substantial paragraph. The numerical mediation of the text functions, according to Coetzee, “as a way of pointing to what is not there between” the sections: “the kind of scene-setting and connective tissue that the traditional novel used to find necessary—particularly the South Africa novel of rural life that In the Heart of the Country takes off from” (Doubling 59–60). Amongst that which is “not there” in the gaps between narrative sections, and so amongst that now missing material which “the traditional novel used to find necessary,” is coherence in its most mundane sense: while Magda’s self-effacing tone and philosophical rigor remain constant, the narrative at times jumps without transition from event to event, and at other times backtracks and retells events from a different and even conflicting perspective. At the end of Heart, readers may have powerfully real impressions of certain events having transpired, yet no reading of the novel can determine which events are or were “real” without giving priority to one of two or more conflicting episodes.

Perhaps more saturated with doubt than any of Coetzee’s other narrators, Magda and her “stony monologue” (12) evoke the work of Samuel Beckett, and in particular those aspects of Beckett’s writing illuminated by Coetzee’s own scholarly reflections on Beckett’s work. Himself following after Roland Barthes on this point, Coetzee in Doubling the Point somewhat ironically asserts that “The art of Samuel Beckett has become an art of zero, as we all know. We also know that an art of zero is impossible”; yet Beckett achieves “a fiction of net zero” by dramatizing “an incapacity to affirm and an inability to be silent” (43–44). In The Unnamable, this fiction of net zero takes the form of “phrase-by-phrase self-creation and self-negation” where each positive statement receives, if not full negation, then at least some annulling, minimizing, questioning, or qualifying statement (44). For example, the following passage—which auto-characterizes itself as a “bad example”—effaces itself thoroughly and more clearly than some of the other passages in which patterns of assertion and annulment span pages:

For example, to begin with, his breathing. There he is now with breath in his nostrils, it only remains for him to suffocate. The thorax rises and falls, the wear and tear are in full spring, the rot spreads downwards, soon he’ll have legs, the possibility of crawling. More lies, he doesn’t breathe yet, he’ll never breathe. Then what is this faint noise, as of air
stealthily stirred, recalling the breath of life, to those whom it corrodes? It’s a bad example. (Beckett 355)

The voice’s example asserts the breathing of an unnamed individual, denounces that assertion as “More lies,” and then decries itself as a “bad example.” One pattern of affirmation and negation enfolds another. The voice carries out this practice ad nauseum because it knows, as much as its unstable epistemology allows it to know anything, that it must never lapse into silence; it “must go on […] must say words, as long as there are any” (414). The art of “net zero” might not be the impossible art of pure zero, but its enactment nonetheless provides ample ground for the kind of philosophically inflected despair and delight so characteristic of Beckett’s work.

One such aspect of Beckett’s fiction Coetzee identifies and Magda embodies is “well described by Heidegger’s term *Geworfenheit*: being thrown without explanation into an existence governed by obscure rules” (*Inner Workings* 171). Magda “live[s] neither alone nor in society” (*Heart* 7), and feels herself to be “on the road from no A to no B in the world” (19). She cannot grope her way through dialogue like that which flows between Hendrik and her father, “so unruffled, so serene, so full of common purpose,” so unlike her own “torment of And next? And next?” (21). “[A] hole crying to be whole” (41), she “want[s] [her] story to have a beginning, a middle, and an end” (42), but perhaps because “Lyric is [her] medium, not chronicle” (71), she fears that “there is no past or future, that the medium [she] live[s] in is an eternal present” (116). Her words “come from nowhere and go nowhere, they have no past or future, they whistle across flats in a desolate eternal present, feeding no one” (115). David Attwell astutely describes her as the earliest example of a recurring character type in Coetzee’s oeuvre he calls the “displaced subject,” who “is not one of the primary agents of colonization but who lives in the conditions created by such agents, and who endures the subjectivity this position entails” (56). One by one, the conditions structuring Magda’s life come undone until, at the end of the novel, she is alone in the shell of the farm, no closer to answering the questions consuming her consciousness than when her father in the beginning pages first came clip-clopping across the flats.

Although Coetzee affords Magda a more fully realized environment and narrative than Beckett does for most of his narrating and writerly protagonists, she, or at least her discourse, also follows Beckettian self-annulling patterns: from the level of syntax and even etymology to the level of narrative episodes at large. Speculating, for instance, on her own origins, she claims to “extract a faint grey image” of her mother from “one of the farthest oubliettes of memory,” yet oubliette—a place where something is thrown (geworfen) in
order to be forgotten—clearly derives from the French oublier, “to forget,” and so preemptively invalidates this already tenuous “memory” (2). Surely enough, she concedes in the next clause that her image of a mother is precisely “one such as any girl in [her] position would be likely to make up for herself” (2). The opening lines of the novel showcase a larger episodic instance of self-negation especially disorienting for first-time readers. “Today my father brought home his new bride,” claims Magda: “They came clip-clop across the flats in a dog-cart drawn by a horse with an ostrich-plume waving on its forehead, dusty after the long haul” (1). Yet Magda immediately—in the very next sentence—casts doubt upon the second of these sentences: “Or perhaps they were drawn by two plumed donkeys, that is also possible [….] I was not watching” (1). Her further negation or revision of the first sentence reportage of what she was not watching comes many pages later, after a possibly imagined parricide, when it turns out that her father “does not die so easily after all” (16), and also that it was not or might not have been her father, but Hendrik, a servant, who “Six months ago […] brought home his new bride” (17). As a strategy for apprehending conflicting narrative sequences in Heart, Derek Attridge observes a “corrective rhythm” in Magda’s incompatible accounts, where she relates “first a fantasized version that comes to an abrupt halt, then a more grounded one that carries the narrative on to the next stage” without quite constituting a solution sufficient “to restore our faith in the realism of the narrative” (28). One might extend Attridge’s observation by making clear that, while the narrative action appears to follow from the second of two alternatives, the first is negated only in action but not in psyche; that is, for Magda’s consciousness, the second narrative is not corrective but palimpsestic.1

In an effort to find her bearings in this antipastoral world governed by obscure rules, Magda inhabits literary tropes, follows alongside them for a time, then either casts them aside or is cast aside by them, not unlike “the hermit crab” she puts forward as an image of herself, “migrat[ing] from one empty shell to another” (43). In this way the Beckettian pattern of affirmation and negation extends itself to narrative structure and identity. In an early and rather self-contained example, constituting the whole of section thirteen, Magda imagines an iconic caretaker: “The Angel, that is how she is sometimes known, The Angel in Black who comes to save the children of the brown folk from their croups and fevers” (5). This caretaker “sits up with whimpering children

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1 As a clear example, after Magda kills her father the first time, but he reappears riding “in out of the sunset” (16), her “heart leaps at this second chance, but [she] move[s] demurely, she bow[s] [her] head” (17). Although neither her father nor anyone else has any recollection of her first patricide, she behaves as if still chastened by it, or chastened simply, and as usual, by her father’s authority.
or women in labour” and “lighten[s] the last hours of the wounded” (5). This vignette is immediately preceded, at the end of section twelve, by aphorisms on identity: “I am I. Character is destiny. History is God” (5). Readers may want to interpret the Angel as Magda’s fantastical image of herself, yet “what is not there between” sections twelve and thirteen suspends the interpretation invited by their juxtaposition, and section fourteen carries on from section twelve as if section thirteen were not there. A reading and an identity are presented, but the mode of their presentation renders them void.

Having sloughed off the carapace of seemingly beneficent Angel, Magda—now an angel of death—kills her father (for the first time), along with his new bride who perhaps later turns out to have been imagined, and decides to commit suicide, opining that “Of all adventures suicide is the most literary, more so even than murder” (13). No sooner does she “dive for the abyss” than “the elegiac trance passes and all the rest is cold, wet and farcical” (13). Mediated in markedly literary terms, this episode showcases quite clearly the process visible also elsewhere in the narrative by means of which Magda seizes upon a narrative formula, here the romantic suicide, and thereafter rejects it or is rejected by it. Such episodes highlight Magda’s inability to fit certain narrative identities, a constant which is of a piece with her inability to fit into the pastoral social structure generally, contributing to what Coetzee might call her sense of Geworfenheit.

Magda goes on to inhabit several other tropes, like those of Cinderella (132) and Narcissus (134), but proceeds to cast these and other literary associations aside, as before. Madness, itself a trope with a rich and varied literary history, Magda consistently evokes—as in the above-cited descriptions of herself—even as she neither affirms nor denies madness as the state of her being. In her bedroom she is “the mad hag” she is “destined to be” (8), “crazed with loneliness” (50), and she has a “mind mad enough for parricide and pseudo-matricide” (10); yet much of her discourse reads so much like a masterful exercise of reason. Her mind works “clearly […] like the mind of a machine” (15), she has “meditations that would do credit to a thinker” (41), and she wonders: “How can I be deluded when I think so clearly?” (126). Committing herself neither to nor against it, Magda at least has a relationship with madness; it animates her discourse, it accounts for the instability of the narrative, and—in its historio-political aspect—it describes the cruelties of the radically asymmetrical power relations of a more or less colonial South Africa. But before determining more clearly Magda’s relationship with madness, and before making further suggestions about the relative dearth of trenchant criticism regarding Magda and (her?) madness, a working definition of madness
will be necessary, best gleaned, I believe, by attending to citations of its lexical variants from Coetzee’s fiction and scholarship.

2

The epigraph for this essay comes from “Apartheid Thinking,” Coetzee’s reading of apartheid architect Geoffrey Cronjé’s writings on race relations in South Africa, racial purity amongst the Afrikanervolk, and social policy for eventuating state segregation of racial groups. Excerpted in epigraph above, the full paragraph runs:

The notion I will explore here is that the men who invented and installed apartheid—or at least some of the men, some of the time—were possessed by demons. Pinning the blame for apartheid on demons is, I realize, pinning it nowhere at all. Nevertheless, if madness has a place in life, it has a place in history too. The indifference of South African historiography to the question of madness, and the tacit consensus in the social sciences that while madness—like what used to be called the “illegal Bantu”—may be conceded to have a place in society, this is ontologically a place apart, a nonplace that does not entitle madness to a part in history, should arouse nothing but mistrust, and make us redouble rather than abate our efforts to call up and interrogate the demons of the past. (164)

Coetzee hereafter specifies that his concern lies “less with Geoffrey Cronjé himself” than “with [Cronjé’s] madness, and with the question of how madness spreads itself or is made to spread through a social body,” and “More generally […] with the reinsertion of madness into history” (165). Coetzee poses his analysis against accounts of apartheid that deem it “a by no means irrational response to social developments which threatened the expectations of Afrikaners and the privilege of white South Africans in general” (163). According to such a view, apartheid was rational because it perpetuated extant segregationist practices and it served white material interests. Coetzee madly responds by following (in and by way of a reading) apartheid’s “heart-speech of autobiography and confession” (164): Coetzee follows, in and by reading, Cronjé’s obsession with the threat of mixture and his difficulty in accounting for desire across racial boundaries, and thus he—Coetzee—arrives eventually at the disconcerting conclusion that the aversion toward black bodies at the heart of the thought underpinning apartheid legislation spreads contagiously and indefinitely via metaphor and metonymy, and that, while we can read racism, “we are in no position to eradicate it, not only because it has no root (no ‘ultimate’ root), but because a reading position is not a position at all: it is what
I can only call a following” (184).² For Coetzee, madness here denotes a potent social force capable of effecting historical change, one which any history of apartheid should take into account.

Coetzee does not consider himself exempt from the contaminating force of madness: not the racist variety of madness inflicting “the electorate that bought the package offered by Cronjé and his friends” (183), but the contagion of madness engendered nonetheless by the workings of apartheid. Elucidating another aspect of apartheid’s madness, this time in “Emerging from Censorship” (also collected in Giving Offense), Coetzee describes how the paranoia that motivates state censorship practices can “spread from above to infect the whole of the populace” (34), including “writers themselves under censorship” who “Time and again record the feeling of being touched and contaminated by the sickness of the state” (35). “The paranoia is there, on the inside, in their language,” writes Coetzee (36). In a characteristically confessional move of autobiographical “heart-speech,” he admits: “In the excessive immediacy of its phrasing, its vehemence, its demand for sensitivity to minutiae of style, its overreading and overwriting, I detect in my own language the very pathology I discuss” (37). Writing during the heyday of apartheid, in “the repressive political climate of the post-Soweto period” when the narrow-minded, bureaucratic Judge Lammie Snyman chaired the Publications Control Board, Coetzee arguably never had the figure of the censor more in mind than when he was preparing Heart, as Hermann Wittenberg demonstrates in his reading of Coetzee’s correspondence from this period (134–136). The pathology Coetzee associates with state censorship thus contributes a particularly biting, personal layer to the already multivalent madness of and in the heart of the country, in and of In the Heart of the Country.

Despite the centrality of madness to Coetzee’s thought on apartheid and its censorship practices, and despite his own above-cited celebration of the reinterpreative potential of Coetzee’s work, Derek Attridge makes an overly facile (Foucault might call it Cartesian) dismissal of madness as it animates Heart. “Fantasy or mental disorder on Magda’s part seems out of the question now,” he writes, “as there is no suggestion that she could have read Hegel, Blake, Pascal, Spinoza, and Rousseau” (25). Attridge makes his assessment in the context of deciding if the flying machines Magda sees near the end of the novel, which speak “a Spanish of pure meanings such as might be dreamed of by the philosophers” (Heart 126), actually visit the veld, or if they are mere

² Macaskill and Colleran follow at some length Coetzee’s troping of reading and racism in “Interfering with ’The Mind of Apartheid.’”
illusions or fantasies she conjures up. Firstly, not having read Blake does not stop Magda from quoting and alluding to him—long before the arrival of the flying machines—when she claims that she “struggle[s] with the proverbs of hell” (126). The proverbs of hell, out of which emerges Magda’s claim—verbatim albeit uncited—that “Energy is eternal delight” (101), come from Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, as do other tropes from the novel, such as Magda’s preoccupation with “contraries.” Secondly, even if the echoes of the other Western thinkers unavailable to Magda could serve as a useful heuristic for establishing the exteriority of those flying machines to her imagination, their existence would not preclude her madness or at least her relationship with madness. If readers take too seriously the issue of madness, Attridge believes “the novel loses any grip on the real, and thus much of its narrative drive and engagement with the very real issues of family, gender, racial, and master-servant relations” (24). In other words, Attridge chooses to stabilize the narrative by controlling for madness in order to ease his approach to other thematic concerns. Readers should “assume, as [they] normally do in reading fiction,” Attridge claims, “that the words are to be taken as referring to real events unless there is good reason […] to take them as the outcome of fantasy or psychological derangement” (24); yet Coetzee himself writes to Clive Levinson, who wanted to adapt the novel for film, that “in fact it turns out at the end that nothing, or very little,” in the novel, “has been trustworthy” (qtd. in Kannemeyer 314). In an otherwise formidable reading, Attridge’s dismissal of madness constitutes the blindness that allows for his insights.

The impulse behind Attridge’s dismissal of madness provides a first clue toward explaining the absence of madness from criticism of *Heart*, and perhaps begins to explain also the “nonplace” to which madness, according to Coetzee, is relegated in South African historiography. Bracketing madness and its destabilizing effects on exegesis allows for more immediate engagement with those more transparently political, cultural, and historical concerns—those ‘very real issues’—which Coetzee’s earliest critics took him to task for not approaching more directly. Those earliest criticisms are by now well documented. David Attwell recalls the consensus in the mid-1980s amongst the South African Left that “Coetzee was a philosophical idealist whose fiction graphically portrayed the breakup of the dominating, rationalist subject of colonialism but who offered […] neither an analysis of the play of historical forces nor a moral anchor in the search for a humane response to colonialism and apartheid” (1). Similarly, Brian Macaskill pits Coetzee’s argument for the novel as “rival” rather than “supplement” to history against those who “find the ‘agency’ or ‘instrumentality’ of Coetzee’s writing inadequate to the demands of South Africa’s sociohistorical structure and associate this inadequacy with the
self-consciously postmodern literary structure of his narratives” (444). Although Attridge can be counted in the front rank of critics who attend to the “challenge” in Coetzee’s fiction “that goes to the heart of the ethical and political” (12), the cost of such approaches has been, for Heart and for other entries in Coetzee’s oeuvre, the denial, dismissal, or minimization of madness and of other issues whose political engagement is not immediately apparent.

Alternatively, some of the resistance to defining the role of madness in Heart may be implicated in the word’s resistance to definition in general. The lemmata for mad, its adjectival form, summon in the Oxford English Dictionary nine definitions, each with several sub-definitions, dozens of phrases and hyphenated usages, and citations reaching back through Chaucer and beyond to the eighth century Corpus Gloss (mād and gemād). One may be mad about, after, for, of, on, over, upon, and with something; or be as mad as Ajax, as a brush, as a goose, as a hatter, as a meat axe, as a wet hen; one may be mad-blooded, -humoured, -mooded, or -pated. Yet despite its vast semantic range, madness in Coetzee’s fiction and scholarship 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. These discernibly separate poles of meaning are also implicated in one another, complicit with one another; the madness of writing under the threat of illegibility appears precisely under and as a result of the wider, contagious madness of the active social body: that is, a madness which all too often constitutes history and distorts or interferes with the historical record. A survey of Coetzee’s fiction turns up the strikingly specific recurrence of a writing subject who, embattled from without by personal circumstance and by madness in its historical scope, struggles to translate faithfully such madness into writing, who labours as the conduit of madness, infected by that which he or she seeks to express. Though Coetzee’s oeuvre provides numerous examples of such figures, I limit my focus to two exemplary novels below. The first, Age of Iron, persistently foregrounds the issue of madness, and ties it clearly to writing and to the turbulence of history. Madness figures less predominantly, or at least less often as a signifier, in the second novel I examine, Waiting for the Barbarians, but when it does appear, it demonstrates how the tension between madness and writing extends itself to a tension between madness and the writing of the historical record. Strangely, madness thus inhibits or distorts its own record in history, auto-negating itself in a fashion not unlike Magda’s Beckettian discourse.

Age of Iron, Coetzee’s second novel directly treating apartheid, presents itself as an epistle from retired classics professor, Mrs. Curren, to her estranged daughter in America. The novel opens as Mrs. Curren, arriving home after
having been diagnosed with cancer, comes upon “a house of carton boxes and plastic sheeting” in which she finds a dog and a homeless drunkard who gives his name as Vercueil (3). Unable and ultimately unwilling to evict Vercueil and the dog from her property, dodgy and irascible though the former is, Mrs. Curren comes to depend upon Vercueil’s “hovering if undependable solicitude” (196), entrusting him to post her letter to her daughter after her death. That readers may never know for certain, because of the limitations of the narrative frame, whether the letter ever reaches its addressee constitutes a painful, persistent subtext throughout the novel.

Less trusting of Vercueil is Mrs. Curren’s housekeeper, Florence, whose teenaged son Bheki forces Mrs. Curren’s brief immersion—despite her age and condition—in the fully real madness of South African apartheid. Bheki, once “an open-faced little boy” (36), is now amongst what Mrs. Curren calls “Children of iron” (50), children who burn down schools even though her generation would think it “madness to burn a school down” (39). Accompanied by a truculent young youth who gives his name as John, Bheki participates in the armed resistance against apartheid police forces. During a lengthy episode in some ways reminiscent of epic descents into the underworld, Mrs. Curren accompanies Florence and her friend or cousin, Mr. Thabane, into a destitute township where fighting has broken out. Working her way through “the looming world of rage and violence” (96), she arrives at a school where, amongst other bodies, she finds “that of Florence’s Bheki” (102). Returning afterward to her car, she finds herself under the gaze of Afrikaner policemen. “A mad old do-gooder caught in the rain,” she imagines them thinking: “Am I mad? Yes, I am mad. But they are mad too. All of us running mad, possessed by devils. When madness climbs the throne, who in the land escapes contagion?” (105). Afterward, submerged in a melancholy imposed by her sickness and the sickness of her country, she contemplates suicide and tries to explain to Vercueil “the craziness that has got into [her]” given that “There is madness in the air here,” here in their country (117). Madness in this instance describes a turbulent force moving through a social body yet also surfacing in individuals, visible as the un- and dis-ease of entire communities rent by social policies cooked up by the likes of Cronjé.

Coupled with the pain of her cancer, the madness of her historical milieu—contagious as it is—infests her writing. Entailed upon the madness of her writing is not only the madness of her historical situation, but also the madness of translating such a situation into writing. Not long after arriving home after receiving her diagnosis and after finding Vercueil next to her garage, she has an outburst at her cats, in which she detects in her voice “a new,
mad edge” (12). Her pain progresses and, living in intervals of lucid suffering and drug-induced dullness, she writes:

In an instant I am gone and in another instant I am back […] In my throat is a taste of bile, of sulfur. Madness! I say to myself: this is what it tastes like to be mad!

Once I came to myself facing the wall. In my hand was a pencil, its point broken. All over the wall were sprawling, sliding characters, meaningless, coming from me or someone inside me. (182)

Madness here is immediately juxtaposed with the possibility of illegibility, the meaningless scribbles constituting a failure of writing. Later yet, in her closing passages, Mrs. Curren refers to her letter as “this confession, this madness” (194), and, a little later still, she chides her daughter for speculatively affording her grandchildren an ostensibly serene upbringing in the United States. These children—her daughter’s children—photographically captured wearing their orange lifejackets in a canoe on a lake “tamed,” a lake “renamed” and now called a “recreation area,” are, she thinks, wearing their “bright orange wings” so that should they end up in the water they will be safe “till a motor-boat comes to pick them up”; these children—her grandchildren—will “bob safely in the water,” and die “at seventy-five or eighty-five as stupid as when they were born.” “Let me say,” she adds, “in all tentativeness, that perhaps it dispirits me that your children will never drown.” Mrs. Curren imagines her daughter’s inflamed response to this unwelcome section of her letter: “Are you, at this very instant, flinging the page away from you in disgust? Mad old woman! are you crying out?” (195). Mrs. Curren’s “rope of words” (197) toward its end thus threatens to become a mad provocation, the final desperation of a writer working under constraints to press her situation into writing, unsure how her writing will reach its reader, and unsure how its reader will respond to her writing.3

3 A strikingly similar and similarly mad figure, Coetzee’s Dostoevsky in The Master of Petersburg—biographically inaccurate because autobiographically infected by Coetzee’s incorporation into the life of Dostoevsky the death of his own son Nicholas—succumbs to a madness that drives him, through writing, to betray his son and to pervert Matryona, the daughter of his son’s former landlady. Just as Mrs. Curren finds herself out of place in “The age of iron. After which comes the age of bronze” (Age 50), Coetzee’s Dostoevsky finds himself out of place in “An age of acting […] an age of disguise” (Master 195). Visiting St. Petersburg in hopes of reclaiming his son’s effects and perhaps of discovering the details of his death, Dostoevsky ends up embroiled in an affair with the landlady, all the while experiencing pangs of longing for her daughter Matryona, and consorting with Nechaev, a young revolutionary—not wholly unlike Bheki—who, claiming that Dostoevsky’s son Pavel was killed by the police, may have himself killed Pavel. Furthermore, Nechaev—pimped “enfant terrible of anarchism”
The difficulty of translating madness into writing in *Waiting for the Barbarians* raises the question of what happens when the writing in question could potentially constitute historical record, or, more concisely, what happens when madness impedes its own placement in history. The Magistrate of one of the distant outposts of an Empire irrecoverably loses his idyllic way of life when Colonel Joll of the Third Bureau pays a visit to conduct investigations regarding a possible—and possibly invented—uprising by the barbarians, upon whose land the Empire erected itself. Joll captures several barbarians, tortures them until they admit to plotting against Empire, and—having obtained or produced the information he needs in order to initiate armed action against them—plans further incursions. The Magistrate, his prudence at times lapsing, falls afoul of Empire when he returns a barbarian woman—partially blinded and hobbled, bodily inscriptions bearing the signature of Empire—to her people, an act which the Empire perhaps intentionally misinterprets as consorting with the enemy. Upon his return, he is imprisoned, deprived of food and contact, and tortured until, with a change of seasons and of fortune, winter arrives and Empire’s conquests begin to flounder.

The Magistrate concerns himself in large part with history and the recording of history. One of his hobbies is to excavate the ruins found buried in dunes outside the town walls, “waiting for spirits from the byways of history to speak to him” (16). Such endeavours colour his vision of his place in relation to the Empire, and of the Empire’s relation to history. At times he believes “It would be best if this obscure chapter in the history of the world were terminated at once” (24). “Empire has created the time of history,” he claims, Empire has located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe. Empire dooms itself to live in history (101), “extremist of the senses” (114), and “pope of ideas, dull ideas” (196)—represents a part of the madness of nineteenth-century Russia, but only a part. When Dostoevsky calls Nechaev mad, Nechaev warns him: “I am of Russia: when you say I am mad, you say Russia is mad” (202). Dostoevsky in turn replies: “You are only part of Russia, part of Russia’s madness […] I am the one who carries the madness” (202). The same madness that prevents Coetzee’s Dostoevsky from writing at the beginning of the novel spurs his writing on at its end. In an attempt to follow his habit of writing in the mornings, he sits at a writing desk, but “does not write a word,” because “the writing, he fears would be that of a madman—vileness, obscenity, page after page of it, untameable” (18). Yet in the end he surrenders to the madness and the vileness and obscenity it entails: “The madness is in him and he is in the madness; they think each other; what they call each other, whether madness or epilepsy or vengeance or the spirit of the age, is of no consequence” (235). Under the influence of this madness, he writes out, in Pavel’s old notebooks, where he knows Matryona will find and read them, two narrative sketches effectively perverting her image of Pavel, and he thereby betrays both children.
and plot against history. [...] A mad vision yet a virulent one: I, wading in the ooze, am no less infected with it than the faithful Colonel Joll. (133)

The Magistrate does not except himself, but rather sees himself as “the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy” (135). Madness, as in Age of Iron and in apartheid generally, denotes again a social force concerned with dividing people, and again the force is a contagion, infecting even those Attwell calls “displaced subjects,” who do not instantiate such divisions yet who nonetheless endure the conditions created by division.

Although infected, the Magistrate is not willingly complicit, and it is he who acts as a conduit in the difficult relation between madness, writing, and history. After returning the barbarian girl but before being imprisoned, he begins work on a document, though he does not know, at first, of what type: “A testament? A memoir? A confession? A history of thirty years on the frontier?” (57–58). When, after imprisonment and public humiliation, he is brought to face Colonel Joll, the Magistrate fervidly believes: “If I were to confront these men now, in public, in a fair trial, I would find the words to shame them” (113). Joll detects his unyielding sense of conviction and mocks him for it: “You seem to want to make a name for yourself as the One Just Man”; but, “to the people in this town you are not the One Just Man, you are simply a clown, a madman” (114; emphasis added). “History will bear me out!” cries the Magistrate, surely as have others, if not verbatim. “Nonsense,” says Colonel Joll. “There will be no history, the affair is too trivial” (114). At this point in the narrative, optimistic readers might expect the Magistrate eventually to clarify history vis-à-vis Empire, yet when he returns to his document at the end of the novel, he records “not the annals of an imperial outpost,” but instead its pastoral seductions as “paradise on earth” (154). The evils of maintaining colonial conquest and the earnest voice of the man who might denounce them remain unwritten and unheard, displaced because of the difficulty of putting madness into writing. Drawing upon Friedrich Hegel, Michael Valdez Moses also ties inscription in Waiting for the Barbarians to the possibility of history: “Those who do the writing make history; or what amounts to the same thing, those who make history are the only ones in a position to write it” (120). With Empire in retreat, the Magistrate would seem to have regained a position from which to write and to make history, yet his infection with the mad vision of Empire deters him from so doing. At the time when he means to undertake a meaningful record of Empire and its madness, he instead—in a cluster of paragraphs beginning “I think” instead of, say, “I write”—succumbs to doubt. He gives up his archaeological hobby, gives up also his attempt to write history,
and gives madness the opportunity to reduce to “net zero” its own place in the historical record.

3

Given the tension between madness, writing, the writing subject, and the writing of history in Coetzee—given Coetzee’s own infection under censorship by a contagious pathology or paranoia akin to madness—and further given the early charges of political quietism against Coetzee, one might ask: why, in writing *Heart*, does Coetzee allow madness to figure so prominently? What does the novel stand to lose or gain by eschewing realist or even transparently allegorical representations of historical circumstances in favour of a shifting, unstable, oblique narrative structure? To begin to answer these questions before returning again to Magda and her relationship with madness, I propose an examination of a few more citations of madness in Coetzee’s oeuvre, these ones less directly concerned with madness in apartheid, and more concerned with the rhetorical potential and limitations of madness in general.

To begin with, the tension between madness and the writing of history in *Waiting for the Barbarians* might remind readers that during the particularly oppressive period of apartheid, in the 1970s, when censorship laws were most aggressively enforced and when Coetzee published *Heart*, another properly historical movement, revolutionary in scope—the anti-psychiatry movement—was underway, and that its intellectual arm was inaugurated by a work itself animated by the tension between madness and history: Michel Foucault’s *History of Madness*. For Foucault, madness constitutes the undifferentiated din against which history is written: “The necessity of madness throughout the history of the West is linked to that decisive action that extracts a significant language from the background noise and its continuous monotony, a language which is transmitted and culminates in time; it is, in short, linked to the possibility of history” (xxxii). Just as Empire defines itself in part by its rejection of the barbarians, so too does history, kin of Reason, require madness as its Other.

Jacques Derrida’s well-known criticisms of Foucault’s project sparked one of the sharpest philosophical conflicts of the twentieth century, the Foucault-Derrida debate,4 which in turn propagated considerable and

4 Derrida executes his critique of *History of Madness*, “Cogito and the History of Madness,” in two major movements, the first addressing the feasibility of the project and the second challenging Foucault’s reading of Descartes’s *Meditations*, taken as a philosophical correlative of the social exclusion of madness. Derrida avers that Foucault’s desire to write an archaeology of silence from the perspective of madness is “with all seriousness, the maddest aspect of his
illuminating commentary. Among those texts inspired by the Foucault-Derrida debate, Coetzee shows some interest in Shoshana Felman’s *Writing and Madness*, which provides particular insight into the way in which literature mediates madness and history (see Coetzee’s “Madness and Rivalry” in *Giving Offense*). Felman finds that both Foucault and Derrida agree on fiction as a buffer zone between madness and philosophy, but they articulate differently the mode of this mediation, and in this way the question of madness becomes a question of position. Because madness is “pathos, not logos; literature, and not philosophy,” writes Felman,

> The tragic structure of history proceeds from the obliteration of tragedy from history. The pathetic resonance of madness proceeds from history’s obliteration of the pathetic resonance of madness. Madness as pathos is, in other words, the metaphor of the erasing of a metaphor; the history of madness is the story of the metaphor of history’s forgetting of a metaphor. (52)

Felman aligns literature with madness and opposes the pair to philosophy and history. Although he does not in “Madness and Rivalry” refer explicitly to rhetoric (as Felman does), Coetzee is drawn—in both Foucault and, antedating Foucault, in Erasmus—to the curious rhetorical potential of a position that, surrendering its claim to self-knowledge in the interest of placing itself outside the discourse defining the terms of a rivalry, carves out for itself “a position for the critic of the scene of political rivalry, a position not simply impartial between the rivals but also, by self-definition, off the stage of rivalry altogether, a *non*position” (84). Further, madness as “nonposition” evades the possibility of rivalry by refusing the status of model which, in Coetzee’s reading of René Girard from this same essay, inspires the desires that lead to the mimetic violence of rivalry. Refusing the status of model also makes willfully emulating the Erasmian nonposition of madness difficult, especially if one wants to appropriate irreproachable madness for political ends: there is “an extraordinary project” (34), and that, to the extent the project puts reason on trial for its crimes against madness, “such a trial may be impossible for by the very fact of their articulation the proceedings and the verdict unceasingly reiterate the crime” (35). As for the reading of Descartes, who Foucault claims simply banishes “madness in the name of the man who doubts” (Foucault 46), thereby disqualifying and excluding it in advance, Derrida counters that, far from simply excluding madness, Descartes fully subjects the Cogito to madness and other forms of error via hyperbole: “Whether I am mad or not, *Cogito, sum*. Madness is therefore, in every sense of the word, only one case of thought (within thought)” (Derrida 56). Thus, according to Derrida, Foucault misreads Descartes and, instead of putting reason to task from without, only repeats the Cartesian gesture of exercising radical doubt upon the tradition of what Derrida calls the *logos*, of which the Cogito is just one moment (55).
resistance in the Erasmian text to being read into and made part of another discourse” (103). Resisting political co-optation, madness once again—in its Erasmian strain—though implicated in and born of the workings of history, somehow also holds history at a distance.

This distance is not, however, infinite or unbridgeable. Even if one could recreate a self-effacing, mad consciousness, and set it up as the dominant voice of a novel, according to Coetzee the position of this consciousness would not remain forever outside the reaches of history in the way Erasmus’s madness would remain irremediably outside of the scene of political rivalry. Coetzee’s early, trenchant essay, “Nabokov’s Pale Fire and the Primacy of Art”—in a chain of numbered paragraphs like those which constitute Heart—quickly traces out the artistic pretensions that animate Pale Fire:

Romantic art appropriated the myth that the madman is the greatest truth-teller, and assimilated to the madman the ironist. To call “the madman is the greatest truth-teller” a Romantic myth is an act of post-Romantic exegesis. To call “‘the madman is the greatest truth-teller’” an act of post-Romantic exegesis is itself an act which will be open to the endless exegesis of the meta-myth we call history. By incorporating the exegesis into the fiction we do not escape history, we merely pre-empt its first stage. The double irony of Pale Fire does no more than pre-empt two stages [....] The ideal of Pale Fire is a Symbolist ideal: [...] having incorporated into itself all possible interpretations of itself, the work of art has, like a closed system of mirrors, shut itself off forever from interpretation and become a monument of unageing intellect. (6)

This cutting conclusion more or less directly reaffirms what has been at stake all along: that Coetzee would not imagine a work of art immured against the exegesis of history, not even with an ironic madwoman as its great truth-teller. An author might outfit a novel with effete ironic devices to pre-empt its en- and un-folding by history, but even such devices will turn out to belong to an identifiable time and place, and to serve or be made to serve certain interests.

Yet readers of his widely cited “The Novel Today” would also never expect Coetzee to compose a novel merely answerable to the kind of historical exegesis Pale Fire seems to seek to resist. According to Coetzee, the novel written not to complement history but instead to rival it would “work itself out outside the terms of class conflict, race conflict, gender conflict or any of the other oppositions out of which history and the historical disciplines erect themselves,” amongst which are such dyads as “propertied/propertyless,
colonizer/colonized, masculine/feminine” (“Novel” 3). Such dyads recall the “contraries” Magda wishes to “reconcile” (Heart 133): hole/whole (41), alone/in society (7), parent/child (133), master/slave (133). Following Coetzee’s foray into speculative linguistics in “A Note on Writing,” Brian Macaskill finds Magda’s resistance to binary identities and Heart’s resistance to both reductively historicist and theoretical interpretive schemes to be an indicator that Coetzee’s writing “resonates with properties of the linguistic middle voice,” in which writing or “doing-writing” “takes place between the strictures of self and other, language and history, intransitive and transitive utterance, practice and theory” (466). Coetzee’s best readers take steps neither to isolate him from nor to reduce him to history. His texts may participate in history, but some residue or remainder, constitutive of the singularity of any literary text, will at once resist immediate, local exegesis and enable engagement with unanticipated contexts, historical or otherwise.

My aim here is not to recast Coetzee as a Foucauldian or as some kind of anti-Nabokov, but rather to suggest that aside from apartheid, critics of historicist inclination could read Heart into and against the background of the anti-psychiatry movement. The near-paradox of such an act of reading is that while the anti-psychiatry movement was a properly historical phenomenon, it served as the foundation for an intense theoretical exchange, the likes of which were not far removed from the continental theoretical trends considered anathema, by some, to the historical exigencies to which literature under apartheid was answerable. Apartheid and anti-psychiatry, with their shared territory of madness, are for Coetzee mutually illuminating contexts. Historicizing literature contemporaneous with the period of high theory may thus mean reading theory as history.

I return now to Magda, about whom “so much […] is only theory” (Heart 43), and who in spite of fighting “against becoming one of the forgotten ones of history” (3), concedes at the end of the novel to having become one of “the

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5 These very terms, which Coetzee wishes to see the novel work itself out outside of, uncannily recall the terms earlier cited by Attridge, inside of which he wants to read Heart. Again, “history and the historical disciplines” are opposed to the workings of madness.

6 Coetzee in turn follows Rolan Barthes who in turn follows Emile Benveniste. In “A Note on Writing,” Coetzee briefly considers the implications of writing in the linguistic middle voice; that is, writing not as a subject independent of object and verb, writing neither completely actively nor passively, but doing writing “with reference to the self” (Doubling 94), such that, as Barthes claims, the writer remains “inside the writing, not as a psychological subject […] but as the agent of the action” (qtd. in Doubling 94).
“castaways of history” (135). The ambivalence of the final passage, section 266, is troubling. On the one hand, the disequilibrium introduced into the colonial power structure by Magda’s father’s having trespassed the master/slave boundary as well as the racial barrier—common as such trespasses have historically been in southernmost Africa since the arrival of the first Europeans in the seventeenth century—has finally played itself out to the point of exhaustion. The violence has ended at last. On the other hand, she is alone, or as good as alone, having for company what seems to be the corpse of her father or, as in Coetzee’s screenplay version of the novel, a father who “trembles with Parkinson’s disease” and “gives no sign of recognizing her” (Screenplays 92–93). Her earlier postulate that “It is not speech that makes man man but the speech of others” knells bitterly throughout the closing monody (Heart 126).

While she has throughout the narrative established her distance from the disjunctive poles of binary identities and from the hermit crab shells of literary tropes, Magda has deferred, up to this moment, defining her relationship with madness, itself a literary trope. Tempted at last “to tie up the loose ends,” she asks herself, among other questions, whether she will “die a crazy old queen in the middle of nowhere, unexplained by and inexplicable to the archaeologists,” or whether she will “yield to the spectre of reason and explain [her]self to [her]self.” Because “these are not idle questions,” she has “no doubt” that “somewhere there is a whole literature waiting to answer them for [her]” (138). Madness, reason, and Magda, “LA MEDIA ENTRE,” between them (133): just as she seems about to pose an answer to the question, to position herself regarding madness, she defers yet again. “Unfortunately I am not acquainted” with that literature,” she claims, “and besides, I have always felt easier spinning my answers out of my own bowels” (138). Unlike other tropes and identities in the novel, Magda neither consents to nor denies madness, but breaks off or is broken off from her narrative at the moment she poses the question to herself. Even Coetzee, when asked in an interview about Magda and madness, concedes that Magda “may be mad,” but in the following paragraph, he goes on to say that he “see[s] no further point in calling her mad” (Doubling 61).

To ascribe madness to Magda as a physician or a psychiatrist might do to a patient would be naïve. While madness constitutes a substantial presence in Heart as it did in the “heart-speech” of Geoffrey Cronjé, madness is also a question Magda leaves unanswered; but silence—and particularly the silence to which history relegates madness—is not the mode of her non-answer. Geworfen into an antipastoral decaying colonial structure, she writes herself into and is written out of various literary tropes, deferring beyond her “closing plangencies” the moment when she accepts or rejects madness. Heart thus does not place madness into history but rather stages the decisive moment of its
emplacement, suspending it in profile, traced out without leaving a trace, net zero but not pure zero. Characterized—according to Coetzee, Felman and Foucault—by its “nonplace” or “nonposition” outside history, that is, by its nonplacement, the resistance of madness to history may imply its resistance—manifested through proliferation—to definition. When definition fails, one turns—as Coetzee does in “Apartheid Thinking”—to metaphor, following and tracking a meaning back through the terms it has, like a hermit crab, inhabited and left behind; yet even metaphor, itself replacement, is another act of placement, another act resisted by madness. The best metaphor for madness may thus turn out to be its regression beyond every metaphor.
Works Cited


AUSTRALIANA: A PHOTO-ESSAY

CHARLES DAVIS

Primarily focusing on Australian wildlife in and around my home in the Snowy Mountains region of New South Wales, I have been photographing the natural world around me for the past several years.

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My family has owned a sheep farm near Cooma, New South Wales, for six generations now; from this legacy I draw much of the inspiration for my work. The knowledge gained from and about the Australian High Country through generations of farming and hunting has for me been a tremendous asset in understanding the neighbouring animals and their habitats, and has allowed me entry into the world I try to show in my photographs.

I try to capture not just a portrait of an animal achieved with a long lens, but focus intimately instead on the habitat and the animal within it. In this sense, I work like a landscape photographer. The photographs I have chosen for this presentation are all from the Australiana region, and show not only the stereotypical Australian aridity and heat, but reveal also the lesser known habitats of the continent, where I begin.

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I have chosen five cold and five warm images to convey the harsh and beautiful environment in which I work and which I seek to present to the world through my images.
Eastern Fog

It was still early in the middle of winter when I drove in the fog to the bottom of our drive and saw there these Eastern Rosellas sitting on an old dead snow gum, lighting it up like a Christmas tree. Eastern Rosellas seldom expose themselves this way, and don’t usually flock together. This was indeed a rare moment, and I’m grateful to have had my camera at hand. The large green parrots are juvenile Crimson Rosellas.
Arctic Roo

On one of the coldest days of the year I could see the snow coming from the south, and so headed for Namadgi, a nearby national park frequented by kangaroos. When I arrived at Yankee Hat the snow was falling far off in the bush; I had to walk five kilometres to reach the scene I wanted. The walk was worth it; the flakes came down thick and heavy over the area as the roos hopped away to find better shelter. I returned home cold and very happy.
Icy Looks

I found this female eastern grey kangaroo—probably the coldest kangaroo you will ever see—high in the Australian backcountry during one of the worst storms of the season. She had ice all over her fur and could not hop because the snow was so deep. Under such conditions we both sheltered from the wind behind this snow gum, with the mutual understanding that the wind was scarier than either of us could possibly be to each other.
Praise to the Rain

Winner of the ANZANG 2014 monochrome category. The other roos had seen this many times and merely sat drenched and depressed, waiting for the storm to pass. The young bucks had something to prove, rearing back onto their tails to intimidate each other into submission.
Cascade Gallop

A small herd of wild horses galloping across the deep snow in the Australian Alps. These feral horses, descendants of escaped or lost horses from as far back as early European settlement, are locally called Brumbies, and are closely connected to Australian book culture and legend as propagated in the well-known “Silver Brumby” series of children’s novels by Elyne Mitchell. The books centre themselves around the ghost horse Thowra, King of the Cascade Brumbies; the books have been adapted as both a film and an animated television show, though the power of the living Alpine horses exceeds the mythography to which these magnificent animals are connected.
Drinking the Sunlight

On one of the hottest days of the year, I headed out in the hope of finding animals drinking in the evening light. Expecting kangaroos, I was very surprised to see this echidna wander past me. So thirsty was he that he simply looked at me once and continued straight on to the water. The light had already evaporated from the ground, but the afterglow on the trees illuminated the water as if by fire-light. I had never seen an echidna drink before; I may never again.
Eating the Sunset

A Bearded Dragon near Willandra National Park, New South Wales, basking in the last rays of sunlight on a small salt lake in a very flat area of Australia.
I watched these Wedge-tailed Eagle fledglings grow from small chicks into the impressive apex predators they were meant to be. Jill is closest, on the left; Blinky is on the right. They both had markedly different personalities. Jill hated me, while Blinky was as friendly as a puppy. This photograph was taken at twelve metres above the ground: I was hanging from one arm and shooting with the other. The next day both fledglings left the nest, and two months later left the area to find territories of their own.
Love Nest

These two black swans had made their nest amongst the reeds in a very protected nature reserve. I waited till the sun came out to light up the reeds, and for both swans to come together on the nest. I loved the contrasting colours and the striking red of the swans’ beaks.
Rotarua Stilt

Champagne Pool, a terrestrial hot spring near Rotorua on New Zealand’s North Island. This lone Pied Stilt was resting amongst the steaming minerals and amazingly variegated water colours caused by various bacteria together creating in this case something closely resembling a water-colour painting. Taken as it was in the middle of the day, I was lucky the scene came out as well as it did.

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http://charlesdavisphotography.com.au

https://www.facebook.com/charlesdavisnaturephotography
COETZEE, BLANCHOT, AND THE WORK OF WRITING: THE IMPERSONALITY OF CHILDHOOD

MIKE PIERO

“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

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 autobio-graphical-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 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.\textsuperscript{5} David changes his world (to him, \textit{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 \textit{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, renown 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:

\begin{quote}
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)
\end{quote}

The empty goodwill of “Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled” is precisely the kind seen throughout much of \textit{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

\textsuperscript{5} In \textit{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 \textit{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 \textit{Children’s Encyclopedia} and made sure they were exposed to many books, including mixed media, such as comics with images and text tied together (\textit{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


MIRROR NEURONS AND LITERATURE: 
EMPATHY AND THE SYMPATHETIC IMAGINATION IN THE 
FICTION OF J.M. COETZEE 

HILMAR HEISTER 

The Sympathetic Imagination 

In his novels J.M. Coetzee explores the frontiers of literary representation and discourse, encouraging the reader to reflect on issues as varied as censorship, poetics, reciprocity, authenticity, truth, confession, ethics, animal rights, and encounters with the other. In two particular essay-fictions, “The Philosophers and the Animals” and “The Poets and the Animals,” that were originally presented by Coetzee at Princeton University as the Tanner Lectures on Human Values in 1997 and subsequently published in The Lives of Animals,\(^1\) the character Elizabeth Costello reflects on our attitudes and behaviour towards animals, and proposes that only through a failure of imagination on the part of humans—a failure related to the long philosophical tradition of considering humans superior to other animals—can the industrialized slaughter of animals be wilfully ignored or knowingly accepted. Coetzee employs the persona of Elizabeth Costello, an ageing writer giving lectures at the fictional “Appleton College,” as a means of addressing his own audience at Princeton and beyond, thus producing a narrative mirror that allows for a distance between Coetzee as author and the ideological positions adopted and enunciated by Costello.\(^2\) Costello’s approach rejects reductive rationalizing: “reason looks to me suspiciously like the being of human thought; worse than that, like the being of one tendency in human thought” (Lives 21), and instead proposes employing our sympathetic imagination to relate to the lives and life-experiences of others, especially including, on this occasion, those of the animals. 

\(^1\) This volume includes a collection of essays on animal rights written in response to Coetzee’s lectures by a variety of scholars from different disciplines. For a comprehensive account of the academic setting in which Coetzee presented these lectures see Attridge, “A Writer’s Life.” A version of this essay is also included in Attridge’s J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading. 

\(^2\) Since I am exploring a poetic concept at work in Coetzee’s writing, the author / character division is not especially relevant to my discussion. For a discussion see, for example, Dancygier, Mulhall, Walton, Poyner, and Splendore.
In the first of Coetzee’s two lecture-essays, “The Philosophers and the Animals,” Costello discusses in her lecture how philosophy has provided the ideological framework that emphasizes the human-animal divide, permitting the use, or rather abuse, of animals for human consumption and experimental procedures. According to Geoffrey Baker, Costello illustrates how “Coetzee’s thematization of sympathy operates [...] somewhere between the prescriptive call for political action and the Derridean / Adornian notion of transformation” (45). Costello challenges the common assumption of man’s supremacy over animals, and calls on our sympathetic sensibilities in order to effect change. Baker speaks of “Coetzee’s middle road—a practical agenda for transformative action that occurs on a seemingly non-political plane, at sites of interpersonal sympathy,” which he sees as the “affective aim of Coetzee’s fiction” (29, 27). And Josephine Donovan notes that Coetzee’s protagonists often experience an “intense empathetic identification with animal suffering and loss of dignity” (83). This identification occurs most obviously in *Disgrace*, over whose narrative course David Lurie’s attitude towards nonhuman animals changes dramatically, but is also evident in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, in which the Magistrate feels for the “barbarians” who are treated as though they were nonhuman animals. Similar thematics occur regularly throughout the Coetzee oeuvre. This process of identification is closely related to a bodily experience, providing a link to empathy via a visceral response. Both Lurie and the magistrate suffer physical attacks that prepare the ground for a heightened moral awareness aided by what Donovan calls a “visceral empathy” born of suffering (85).

To the rationalist discourse of the philosophers, Costello opposes the sensation of life shared by humans and animals:

To thinking, cogitation, I oppose fullness, embodiedness, the sensation of being—not a consciousness of yourself as a kind of ghostly reasoning machine thinking thoughts, but on the contrary the sensation—a heavily affective sensation—of being a body with limbs that have extension in space, of being alive to the world. This fullness contrasts starkly with Descartes’ key state, which has an empty feel to it: the feel of a pea rattling around in a shell. (*Lives* 33)

Costello aims to promote the empathetic faculties of humans, which allow us to engage with other animals in a significant and sympathetic way. She urges all to feel for others—that is, to experience sympathy for others—and to feel with and like others—that is, to experience empathy for them. As Sanford Budick notes in this regard, for Costello “it’s the reversal and reciprocity of a chiastic frame of mind that enables the novelist and reader alike to enter into the being
of a fictional character in a relationship of intersubjectivity.” A sympathetic imagination of this sort, continues Budick, “should enable one all the more to enter into the existence of non-human being” (243). The sympathetic imagination paves the way for an empathetic engagement with others. Costello, in an old-fashioned way, situates this potential in the human chest: “The heart is the seat of a faculty, sympathy, that allows us to share at times the being of another” (Lives 34). Costello calls on her audience to open their hearts and make room for the empathy that lies within. In yet another rebuttal of hegemonic philosophical traditions, she goes on:

Despite Thomas Nagel, who is probably a good man, despite Thomas Aquinas and René Descartes, with whom I have more difficulty in sympathizing, there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination. [...] If I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed, then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life. (35; emphasis added)

At no point does Costello clearly define what she understands the sympathetic imagination to be, but her lucid comments on Kafka’s Red Peter when she relates Kafka’s parable to the historical story of Wolfgang Köhler’s Sultan, as well as the horror she expresses at factory farming and industrial-scale slaughterhouses, suggest that the sympathetic imagination constitutes, at the very least, a means of opening up to a more positive engagement with the other, in this case the primate Sultan. Unlike Wolfgang Köhler, Franz Kafka made extensive use of his sympathetic imagination in creating Red Peter, encouraging the reader to extend her empathy into the world of other animals. In The Lives of Animals Coetzee continues Kafka’s line of thought in a meta-discourse on fiction exploring how we perceive other animals. Other Coetzee fictions extend the range of others encountered by the main character, including both human and nonhuman animals. These other encounters with otherness in all their variety test the achievements, failures, and limitations of the sympathetic imagination while simultaneously challenging the reader’s own sympathetic imagination.

In Coetzee’s second lecture-essay, “The Poets and the Animals,” Costello conducts a poetry workshop for the fictional Department of English at Appleton College and gives an account of two, actually extant, poetic engagements: first in Rilke’s poem “The Panther,” and then in Hughes’ poems
“The Jaguar” and “Second Glance at a Jaguar.”³ In favour of Hughes she compliments the way the poems “ask us to imagine our way into that way of moving ['as the currents of life move within it'], to inhabit that body” and claims them to be the “record of an engagement” with the jaguar (51). In her account of how these Hughes poems encourage us to inhabit the jaguar’s body, Costello emphasizes the role the body plays in the evocation of the jaguar’s “being-in-the-world,” again a technique mirrored by Coetzee, who imbues his characters with physical presence and therefore with the joy and pain that come of inhabiting a body: not only in Lives and in Elizabeth Costello, but also, and perhaps even more notably so, in earlier characters like Michael K in Life & Times of Michel K, the Magistrate from Waiting for the Barbarians, and Mrs. Curren from Age of Iron.⁴ The notion of embodiment described by Costello forms the basis for a process of identification with the other that allows the sympathetic imagination to engage with the embodied other.⁵ The congruence of physical being, both in joy and suffering, constitutes a fundamental similarity between humans and animals. In poetry, and in the literary more broadly conceived, this potential for congruence can draw the reader into a momentary or much longer experience of sharing the body of the other, and perhaps also of discovering or rediscovering the joy of being embodied beings:

By bodying forth the jaguar, Hughes shows us that we too can embody animals—by the process called poetic invention that mingles breath and sense in a way that no one has explained and no one ever will. He shows us how to bring the living body into being within ourselves. When we read the jaguar poem, we are for a brief while the jaguar. He ripples within us, he takes over our body, he is us. (53)

The notion of embodiment is a prerequisite for the sympathetic imagination to be effective in promoting empathy in both the author and the reader. The physical other comes with a consciousness and a subjective experience of the world. In a derogatory note on the logics of behavioural sciences Costello claims, “We understand by immersing ourselves and our intelligence in complexity” (62). Her lecture on the lives of animals, in which she pauses for a while over Wolfgang Köhler, has already given an example of what such an understanding might look like and how it might work when she imagines herself into the position of the chimpanzee called Sultan under Köhler’s

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³ For a more extensive discussion (including a reprinting of the poems discussed) see Mulhall 110–121.
⁴ On Coetzee’s use of the body see Conrad Lawrence Marquard Hughes.
⁵ Roux simply states: Costello’s “advocacy of literature over philosophy can be captured by two terms: embodiment and sympathetic imagination” (25).
experimental tutelage. 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. One might question the acumen of Costello’s arguments against philosophical reasoning, just as one might dismiss or reject the ethical stance she takes on behalf of the nonhuman animals. But Coetzee endows her with the passionate conviction of a sentient being who doesn’t claim to hold a greater truth, and who instead follows her intuition and her experience, both of which lead her to believe that the sympathetic imagination only needs to be awakened in order to make available an empathetic bond with the other. Costello concedes that her lecture lacks rational appeal and philosophical perspicacity, but supplements such deficits by modestly referring her audience to the imaginative realms of more capable poets:

If I do not convince you, that is because my words, here, lack the power to bring home to you the wholeness, the unabstracted, unintellectual nature, of that animal being. That is why I urge you to read the poets who return the living, electric being to language; and if the poets do not move you, I urge you to walk, flank to flank, beside the beast that is prodded down the chute to his executioner. (65)

Sympathy through Empathy

Sympathy means a feeling of compassion or concern for another being, and implies a position of concern for the other’s well-being. Empathy means the capacity to feel yourself into another being. Sympathy therefore asserts an outside perspective, whereas empathy implies the notion of attempting to gain

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6 The definition of empathy offered here follows Jean Decety’s approach: “In social neuroscience, empathy refers to a psychological construct that involves representations (i.e., memories that are localized in distributed neural networks that encode information and, when temporarily activated, enable access to this stored information, e.g., shared affective representations) and processes (i.e., computational procedures that are neurally localized and are independent of the nature of modality of the stimulus that is being processed—e.g., decoupling mechanism between self and other)” (“Empathy and Morality” 110). Promoting the concept of “radical compassion,” Anita Nowak collected fifty-two definitions of empathy, illustrating the wide range of discourses on empathy. One of Nowak’s sources, Khen Lampert, offers a definition similar to Decety’s that resonates with Costello’s account of the poets’ engagement with animals: “[Empathy] is what happens to us when we leave our own bodies [...] and find ourselves either momentarily or for a longer period of time in the mind of the other. We observe reality through her eyes, feel her emotions, share in her pain” (quoted in Nowak 16). Lampert links empathy to compassion; Costello might be considered sympathetic to such an approach.
an inside perspective or at least an approximation of insight into the other’s experience. Sympathy requires at least a minimal amount of empathy to facilitate grasping the inner state of the other before one can feel with him, her, or it. Empathy, as opposed to pity and sympathy, does not necessarily imply a position of well-meaning concern followed by the intention to help, since it initially occurs in a preconscious affective mode. For the purpose of this paper the distinction between sympathy and empathy, as here outlined, plays an important part that marks two different stages of engagement with the other. The author’s sympathetic imagination becomes manifest in the mode of representation, including modalities of narrative structure, perspective and devices, and these in turn can trigger the reader’s own sympathetic imagination. The result of such a sympathetic engagement of the imagination within the complexity of a novel can further the reader’s capacity for empathy. Exactly how empathy works has been discussed at length in a large variety of discourses (see Nowak), but the range of answers provided is testimony to the fuzziness of both the term and the lack of specificity in attendant explanations.

The fairly recent discovery of mirror neurons has created yet another discourse on empathy. Interestingly, the findings from neuroscientific inquiry into mirror neurons can in some respects quite easily be applied to literary narrative, especially when perspective-taking is represented and staged in the text. When we take the perspective of a literary character, we can potentially engage with the character empathetically. If the literary figure we are presented with is a character like Elizabeth Costello, we will of course need to remain sceptical ourselves about developments in neuroscience even as we open ourselves to new developments and new possibilities. But there is always a chance 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, for all that neurons know nothing of the fullness of living and probably know nothing per se of ethics.

The underlying mechanism of current neurological speculation about empathy is the mirroring of neurons. The fictional text carries traces of the sympathetic imagination of the author and of his empathy, which can be picked up and adopted by the reader. In this way, empathy takes place both in the creative process on the side of the author as well as on the receptive-creative
side of the reader through a process of neurological assimilation to the representation.\footnote{According to Zaboura the mirror neurons evoke “a so-called direct matching mechanism, which assimilates the perceived action pattern to the own action repertoire; direct because it happens without mediation. By this process the observer is enabled symmetrically to co-experience what goes on inside the other, what moves him—in a literal sense referring to the neurophysiologic level. Due to the almost identical biological configuration of the interacting parties an intersubjective shift of perspectives takes place from a third person to a first person perspective, which accordingly is titled simulation” (Zaboura 63; my translation, emphasis added).}

**Mirror Neurons and Empathy**

Elizabeth Costello situates sympathy in the heart, and her discourse in some ways articulates a generally Christian idea of compassion, or, more particularly perhaps, comes to resemble the spiritual approach taken by Khen Lampert. Costello’s commentary is illuminating, moving, and even persuasive, but it remains vague about how the sympathetic imagination works and how exactly it affects our perceptions of others. Despite her reservations about empirical and especially behaviourist practice, Costello’s account concentrates on the effects that an application of the sympathetic imagination can have, and on how it has been successfully applied in poetry, especially. I am interested in the underlying mechanism that allows the sympathetic imagination to become effective in inducing empathy. Side-stepping Costello’s scepticism regarding rational discourses and their scientific applications, I believe neurosciences might help us to understand how literary narrative (not only in narrowly poetic terms) can contribute to activating the sympathetic imagination and trigger empathy.

*Pace* Costello, neurosciences relegate the faculty of sympathy not to the heart, but to the brain and its neurological circuits, further pinpointing mirror neurons as the neurological basis for empathy. While by itself this understanding might to Costello seem reductive and narrow, it retains and perhaps even grounds her idea of embodied cognition, and emphasizes the intimate connection between our bodily and emotional states: it supplements her sense of making sense of the other from another perspective.

The initial discovery of mirror neurons by Giacomo Rizzolatti in 1996 occurred in the context of action perception and consequent simulation in macaque monkeys. The experiments revealed that a certain type of neuron participates in a “mirroring” reaction or response on the part of the experimental subject, who imitates the neurological pattern active in the
observed agent.\(^8\) One early experiment involved a macaque monkey observing a man grasping a glass of water and raising it to his lips in order to drink. The neurons activated by the observation mirrored the performed action, revealing a nearly identical activation pattern: as if the observing macaque monkey had performed the action himself. Mirror neurons have now been confirmed to exist in the human brain as well. Vittorio Gallese in 2001 linked mirror neurons to empathy in his “‘Shared Manifold’ Hypothesis” essay. J. Decety in 2005 postulated mirror neurons to be the proximate base of empathy (supported by Dan Batson and Frans de Waal). More recently, in 2009, Nadine Zaboura related these findings to the social sciences and the humanities, ultimately suggesting there might be a more complex network of different types of mirror neurons allowing for more complex functions than just mimetic learning and adaptation.\(^9\) Whether the reading process triggers mirror neurons remains difficult to evaluate, because research on the neurological functioning of the reading process has thus far concentrated on single words; extending the research to integrated text comprehension remains a future goal. So far it seems to be the case that reading a text involves various cognitive areas of the brain, which co-operate to perform a circuit that ends up in the frontal cortex where the final and integrated comprehension of text takes place.\(^10\) This circuit could potentially involve a complex network of mirror neurons resonating with the text.

Despite the proviso that much at this point is still speculative, fundamental similarities between Coetzee’s narrative exploration of the other’s consciousness and assumptions made by the neurosciences about mirror neurons and their relation to empathy can be found in both approaches and their respective corollaries. Firstly, the focus on the body both in Coetzee’s fiction (the notion of embodiment) and in the discourse of neuroscience (embodied

\(^8\) These findings resulted from a series of experiments with macaque monkeys made in a spirit not unlike that of Wolfgang Köhler, even though the methods this time are neurologically based: electrodes were implanted into the monkeys’ brains to record the activities of their neuronal networks. In the spirit of Elizabeth Costello we should engage our sympathetic imagination to get an idea, however vague, of how disturbingly invasive such procedures must surely be for the subjects of such experiments. That I am appalled by the methods employed to obtain these results does not discredit the resulting research.

\(^9\) Zaboura notes that the search for other types of mirror neurons remains a huge task considering the sheer amount of 100 billion neurons available. While at first mirror neurons where tested only for visual input, by now mirror neurons have been found to respond to acoustic input as well. Zaboura assumes that complex networks of mirror neurons most likely respond to complex combinations of input (75–76).

\(^10\) See Poldrack and Sandrach, and Perfetti and Bolger.
cognition) recognizes the importance of corporal being.\textsuperscript{11} Comparable to how Coetzee’s notion of embodiment is a prerequisite for the sympathetic imagination to become effective, bodily perception is a prerequisite for the mirror neurons to be activated and incite a process of recognition and empathy. Another vital aspect of both discourses is the encounter with the other. In Coetzee’s fiction such encounter supplies the testing ground for the effectiveness of the sympathetic imagination, at its best when it reaches epistemological boundaries: in the case presented here, our relation to nonhuman animals seems to demand a rethinking of our epistemology. In the discourse of neurosciences the imagining of self as other (putting oneself into the position of the other) is differentiated from imagining the other as such (intuiting the position of the other while maintaining the autonomy of the self). The first position leads to emotional contagion, whereas the second process allows for a fully empathetic approach. The question of perspective-taking informs both the discourse of Coetzee’s fiction as well as the discourse of neuroscience.\textsuperscript{12} First-person and third-person perspective are the two obvious modes of approaching the other, both in literature and in our social contexts. Coetzee’s early fiction relies heavily on first-person narratives (from Eugene Dawn, Jacobus Coetzee, and Magda, for instance) and engages the reader’s empathetic attention, but hardly much sympathy. Attentiveness is another analogous procedure in the grammar, so to speak, of Coetzee’s narratives and in the discourse of the neurosciences. The relations of the early protagonists to others are stunted, tainted, and hardly empathetic, though Magda at least seems to make an effort. This keeps the reader at a distance to the narrating subjects while providing intimate insight into their psychic life, thereby allowing the reader to practice empathy in spite of an aversion to the characters that Coetzee’s focalizing technique cultivates or guarantees. In his later fiction Coetzee more regularly constructs third-person narratives, which bring the reader closer to the narrating subject. In the ‘memoir’ trilogy this narrative subject is a proxy of Coetzee himself, a constructed version of himself seen in retrospect. \textit{Summertime} adds a polyphonic murmur of voices by adding interviews with a more or less fictional cast of people who knew Coetzee and

\textsuperscript{11} The embodiedness of cognition has been extensively discussed by Antonio Damasio, and by Philip Ledoux.

\textsuperscript{12} Neurological inquiry finds that, due to the almost identical biological configuration of the interacting parties, an intersubjective shift of perspectives takes place from a third-person to a first-person perspective; the shift is called simulation. The significance of simulation and the resulting resonance lies in its capacity to construct intersubjectivity: “A crucial element of social cognition is the brain’s capacity directly to link the first- and third-person experiences of these phenomena (that is, to link ‘I do and I feel’ with ‘he does and he feels’)” (Gallese et al. “Unifying View” 397, quoted in Zaboura 63; my translation of German original).
report their encounters with him, affording a multitude of perspectives which create a multi-faceted image of the persona constructed by the author. Here then we encounter an instance of the sympathetic imagination employed in a process of self-evaluation, a seemingly “endless cathartic exercise” as Julia, one of the interviewees, says (59). Coetzee engages with himself in a mode of empathy; even when the picture he draws is neither flattering nor necessarily favourable (as is often the case) it helps the author gain a new perspective towards some complexly composite versions of himself.

Narrative Empathy

In 2009 Fritz Breithaupt published his study titled *Kulturen der Empathie*, which combines research on mirror neurons with the literary analysis of narrative. Breithaupt provides a possible toolkit for looking at literature and its relation to empathy via the neurosciences. He begins with a fundamental assessment of empathy as an evolutionary pattern that, in its simplest form, cognitively served to allow one to grasp the narrative patterns implied by the actions of others, thereby enabling one to better predict the others’ future actions (just as the macaque monkeys in the early action-perception experiments came to recognize the intention of an action before its completion, and so realized that a hand grasping a water glass is most likely to be congruent with drinking water). In a fashion similar to Costello’s statement on the unlimited potential of the sympathetic imagination, Breithaupt states:

Wir besitzen anscheinend die Fähigkeit, uns wie unbegrenzt in alles einfühlen zu können, um es auf uns vertraute Schemata zu beziehen und dadurch imaginäre Brücken zwischen uns und anderen zu errichten, ohne das tatsächlich Unähnliche als Unähnliches mitdenken zu müssen. (20)

[We seem to possess the ability to feel ourselves into anything without limitations, in order to relate it to familiar schemata and thereby erect imaginary bridges between us and others, without having to think the actually dissimilar as dissimilar.] (my translation)

Breithaupt describes how easily we incorporate our perception of others into structures familiar to us, assimilating dissimilarity and thereby bridging the unresolvable gap between us and others. The production of dissimilarity in fiction challenges our empathetic capabilities. I find Coetzee’s fiction exemplary in this regard, illustrating as it does a deft and complexly nuanced construction of the other and of the occulsion or collision between more or less familiar protagonists and the surrounding otherness they encounter. Breithaupt
goes on to formulate a more complex cognitive empathy that includes a taking of sides by the observer. Empathy relies on the possibility of insight into the motivations and intentions of the parties, which hereby become the “soundbox of experience” [Resonanzkörper des Erlebens] that resonates in the reader (170, 145, 146).

Breithaupt formulates a narrative theory of empathy and assumes a dualistic setting based on the threefold structure of two opposing parties and an observer.\(^\text{13}\) The setting must provide the observer with the opportunity to engage with the protagonist and his actions by implicating her in the outlook and predictability of the future course of events. However, in a second step the observer must herself be able to prevent the loss of herself in the identification process: the empathetic process necessarily includes blockades of identification, allowing the observer to stay at a safe distance (otherwise she would risk losing herself in the process of identification).\(^\text{14}\) Nearly all J.M. Coetzee’s fictions can serve to exemplify these notions of empathy. The protagonists always suffer in one way or another, and are tragic heroes of a kind. The narrative strategies Coetzee employs allow the reader much insight into the respective characters, but at the same time maintain a distance by questioning narrative authority and reliability, be it of the character or of the author himself.

The theory of narrative empathy is a vital link between the neuroscientific concept of empathy and the sympathetic imagination of Coetzee’s fiction, bridging the gap between literature and neuroscience. By looking at how narrative empathy is evoked by fiction we gain a better understanding of what the sympathetic imagination is and how it works within the fictional space and beyond. Narrative empathy explains the transformation of input into information via mirror neurons: “Erst durch die Filter der narrative Empathie kann aus dem Mitlaufen der Spiegelneuronen Information werden” [Only the filters of narrative empathy enable the coactive mirror neurons to produce information] (Breithaupt 187; my translation). Coetzee’s sympathetic imagination uses narrative to create an intersubjective space that allows a “hypersubject” (Breithaupt 73) or the “intersubjective manifold” (Gallese) to come into being; this in turn offers the perfect stage for the mirror neurons and empathy to play themselves out.

\(^\text{13}\) Breithaupt chooses a drama by Lessing to illustrate his understanding of narrative empathy, but discusses it as text and not as performance, which indicates that his argument does not depend on the staging and live presentation of the text.

\(^\text{14}\) “Es gibt viel empathisches Geräusch, aber erst die Blockade erzeugt eine Kultur der Empathie” [There exists a lot of empathetic noise, but only the blockade creates a culture of empathy] (Breithaupt 114; my translation).
Conclusion

Coetzee offers the reader a vast array of situations, character constellations, and conflicts to be added to the already available cognitive or otherwise experiential repertoire of life. All these scenarios enhance the ability of the reader to deal with real-life situations, even though he may never find himself in a think tank designing war strategies, on a desolate farm in the desert, in a military outpost of an empire, in a camp or a burrow, affected by cancer in a racially segregated society, washed ashore on a solitary island, in the streets of Petersburg mourning the loss of a child, in a childhood memory, in a slaughterhouse, in an academic lecture, putting dogs to sleep, breaking a leg in a bicycle accident, or musing on one’s own death. But all these scenarios will have enabled the reader (and author?) to open his heart and let the sympathetic imagination take hold of it. As De Vega puts it: “Scenarios constitute proxy-situated cognition. That is, on the basis of a mapping between a language description and a scenario, proxy-situated cognition can occur. This is because the constraints of reasoning employed in real situations apply by proxy in reasoning with scenarios” (quoted in Sanford 184).

In his analysis of *Disgrace* in relation to Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King*, Michiel Heyns tells the story of Laurence Olivier imitating the death cry of a trapped mink to underscore the ultimate realization of Oedipus; noting its effect on the audience Olivier exits with a vindictive smile on his lips. Heyns sees this as “the artistic implementation of the sympathetic imagination”:

It enables Olivier in the first place to enter into the consciousness of the trapped mink and to transpose his sympathetic understanding to his rendering of the character he is playing—in order to activate the sympathetic imagination of the audience: the agony of the mink is transmuted into the audience’s pity and terror. For the trapped mink read dog with maimed hindquarters, for audience read us, the reader, for Oedipus read Lurie, for Olivier read Coetzee, for “Got them” read the near-imperceptible smile on Coetzee’s face on the dust jacket. (215)

This is not to say that Coetzee was ever aiming to achieve the kind of sensationalist effect Olivier obviously intended. Nevertheless, Coetzee’s fiction successfully draws the reader in and activates his or her sympathetic imagination, thereby increasing his or her empathetic sensibilities. The countless encounters with the other, in various forms and guises—recently leading to a grand moment of myriad self-reflection in *Summertime*, in which Coetzee brilliantly reapplies the sympathetic imagination to himself and his public image—have trained Coetzee’s readers to engage with the other and to co-experience moments of shared empathy without eliminating differences.
My reading of Coetzee tries to show how strong an impact his fictions can have on the sentiments of the reader. Other critics such as Timothy Costelloe and Ian Hacking reach similar conclusions, seeing in Coetzee’s literature an attempt to awake the sympathetic imagination in the reader, which they relate to Hume’s “progress of sentiments” (Costelloe 128, Hacking 22). Gareth Cornwell in a similar fashion enlarges the scope of what literature, in particular Coetzee’s fiction, might be able to achieve, or at least to promote:

What literature affords us above all is the opportunity to encounter other minds in their full complexity, to imagine and to empathize with a range of human thought and feeling that it is impossible for us to experience directly. If the ultimate goal of the humanities is full social justice, then a pre-requisite is a sufficient degree of objective self-awareness, of awareness of the extent of our own contingency, the extent to which our values and beliefs are historically and ideologically positioned (conditioned, determined).” (Cornwell 52)

Even though my arguments remain closer to the ground in proposing that Coetzee’s fiction in a very special way allows for empathy to flourish—with a little help from mirror neurons—I cannot resist the temptation of imagining the larger impact and implications all this speculation entails. Even the neurosciences seem to be aware of possible future benefits beyond the seeking of knowledge:

Further studies are required to increase our knowledge about the various factors, processes and (neural and behavioral) effects involved in and resulting from the modulation of empathic responses. This knowledge will inform us how empathy can be promoted to ultimately increase humankind’s ability to act in more prosocial and altruistic ways. (Decety and Batson, “Empathy and Morality” 122)
Works Cited


TITLEAR SPACE IN J.M. COETZEE’S SUMMERTIME: 
A MAQUETTE FOR A PORTRAIT, OR A SELF-PORTRAIT, 
OF THE ARTIST FINDING HIS FEET

BRIAN MACASKILL

Before the law, the title of a work is a title-deed subject to determinants of place and time (London after the 1710 Statute of Anne, or after the 1988 Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, for example). The work the title undertakes, however, also frames its own architecture, and so must be cognized as a topology as real as the “reality effect” of alpha-numerically simulated topography envisaged by Roland Barthes, must be re-cognized as a topo- and tropo-logical space built by the tropes which dwell, sound, and turn in the space separating—in a book—the cover from the textual body concealed within. This is in part a question of finding how the title stands, and of discovering what standing the title can be said to have earned, inherited, or proclaimed for itself.

Tropos (Latin tropus) signifies a rhetorical turning (τρόπος a turn; τρέπειν to turn). Titular space, to turn a phrase, is the dwelling (or root) grounded in the border area of what relates first to page-turning in a book: dust cover, spine, and outermost initial pages—where the title is grafted or marcotted, where it stakes its roots. And whence it asserts the book’s domicile or growth as a place of (perhaps poetic) business: through performances of desire, reproduction, interest, and auto-identification (including the author-portrait and the authoritative signature) more than by any cognitive operations that naming on its own can induce. The title thus bestows and grounds the first gestures of auto-beginning and page-turning, which—as in any even moderately-sincere autobiographical effort—constitute “the abruptness of what we call a beginning” that has “inconspicuously prepared itself over the longest time” (Heidegger 48).

The identity markings of genre quickly and often explicitly insinuate themselves into the turning-field of desire and interest, mingling there with the self-protecting and auto-promoting provisions of what comes to resemble also a building permit: an announcement of intent to create that authorizes its intent by listing certificates of right or acknowledgement and predicates of authority guaranteed by the name and reputation of a particular author and her agents; that engages further with even more overtly commercial acts of advertisement insofar as the artwork-book also at least half-hopes to turn into a profitable venture (to make some more).

The auto-bio-graphical undertaking in J.M. Coetzee’s Doubling the Point, edited by David Attwell, who also conducts the interviews printed in this book, and perhaps the governance of any such undertaking, if not “dominated by self-interest” (302), is at least replete with traces of self and competing visions of interest. This is emphatically so too for Coetzee’s most recent ‘auto-biographical’ novel, Summertime, grounded as a sketch or study of how an English biographer plans a biography of the late “John Coetzee” by grafting together various accounts—solicited in interview—from people who knew Coetzee at the beginning of his novel-writing career.
The farm Vogelfontein takes its place in an area of the Karoo called the Koup; the farm lies between Merweville and Fraserburg Road, a village which since 1950 has been known as Leeu Gamka. The map above still designates the village as Fraserburg Road. In 1916 J.M. Coetzee’s grandfather bought Vogelfontein, which the family spoke of (in Afrikaans rather than in Dutch) as Voëlfontein. “The farm is called Voëlfontein, Bird-fountain,” says the Coetzee-narrator of Boyhood: “he loves every stone of it” (80). It is here also that an interviewee remembers the John Coetzee from Summertime whispering to her as a child, “‘I want to be buried here’” (108), echoing through memory the words attributed to the Boyhood narrator: “Belonging to the farm is his secret fate,” and, “When he dies he wants to be buried on the farm” (96–97). In 1971, J.M. Coetzee lived with his wife and children—within walking distance of Leeu Gamka—in a farmstead on Maraisdal (lower image on map above). Coetzee finished writing Dusklands, his first novel, on this Karoo farm (Kannemeyer 215).

My essay seeks its standing in the boundary, frontier, or fragment border-area between the pictorially graphic and another rationality afforded by and from a typographical base. Political border areas in the British Isles were once and are still, less commonly, called marches, the typically marquisate places from which long ago a Marquess would have drawn or derived his title, a title also elsewhere called Marquis.
Henceforth, pictures and text will march with one another;
“march” as a verb linked to boundary marches once commonly meant “to border on.”
Photographs of Voëlfontein homestead (above) and Maraisdal (below) courtesy of Wium van Zyl.
“Just above the farmhouse is a stone-walled dam, twelve feet square, filled by a wind pump, which provides water for the house and garden”; but he, the Coetzee-narrator of *Boyhood*, “is proud of how little he drinks”: “He wants to be a creature of the desert, this desert, like a lizard” (83). Below: the dam wall across the usually dry Boesmansrivier, a little further beyond the homestead: “never does he lives [sic] more intensely that in the early mornings when he and his father set off with their guns up the dry bed of the Boesmansrivier in search of game” (*Boyhood* 87).

Photographs © Ben Maclennan, 2013

“People can only be in love with one landscape in their lifetime,” J.M. Coetzee once said in interview: “One can appreciate and enjoy many geographies, but there is only one that one feels in one’s bones” (cited in Penner 20).
A sketch or maquette of how and what in *Summertime* the title entitles might initially need to turn away from mimetically-induced topographies in the book (principally the expanses of the Karoo from the Roggeveld to the Koup), might need to turn for a while to the “paratextual” site of what Gérard Genette calls the “title apparatus”; might need to turn away, for a while, from the environs of the Coetzee family farm (JMC’s “place of origin” *Doubling* 393), and turn instead towards the topology of a titular border space as spatially graphic as a maquette (the model from which a work is elaborated) even as it turns to the typographic, straddling viewpoints thus made vulnerable to confusion: especially in works of fiction, linked as these usually are to the legal names of their authors, but also sometimes to the proper names of the fictional characters they propagate by facto-graft or marcottage—Mme Bovary, or Harry Potter perhaps. Fictions are also marcotted by their own title-names, which compound opportunities for confusion insofar as a title is and is not a name, even if it resembles a proper name. And this is not only so when the title reiterates a name, but under other circumstances also, especially in English, given the English-language custom of capitalizing most, if not all, titular words: *Summertime*, for example, or *In the Heart of the Country*.

Marcottage, also called air layering, is a method of propagation in which a girdled cut into the bark of a shoot is covered with rooting medium to encourage new roots to form before the shoot (now a marcot) is severed from the parent plant (says the *OED*). *Summertime* as title is a marcot propagated from Coetzee’s second novel, *In the Heart of the Country*, with which it cultivates a temporal and graphic layering in the portrait or self-portraiture of a youngish John Coetzee “finding his feet as a writer” (225): *A Portrait of the Artist Finding his Feet*; a portrait of one who later will unofficially come to earn the title, ‘the Master of Cape Town,’ like and unlike the Dostoevsky-subject portrayed in his seventh novel, *The Master of Petersburg*.

*In the Heart of the Country* is complexly entitled in ways that bring to mind the early English novel trying to find its feet, aware of its precarious identity—its lack of footing or rootedness in cultural tradition—and aware too of the commercial stakes surrounding its newness. The original title of Defoe’s *The Strange and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, Mariner, of York…* (the title continues at length from this point onwards) is exemplary in all respects, down to its reluctance to confess what Coetzee calls its “fake autobiography heavily influenced by the genres of the deathbed confession and the spiritual autobiography” (*Stranger* 19-20). “[N]o self-portrait without confession,” writes Derrida in *Memoirs* (117).

*Summertime* and *Doubling* share an interplay of interest and self-interest revealed by imbricated interviews by means of which both books show several views, some ‘between the lines’ as we say, thinking perhaps of looking through the slats of a blind, as Derrida does in *Memoirs of the Blind* (55) and as Mr. Vincent the biographer seems to be doing in *Summertime*, peeping back through time to catch glimpses in inter-view of a Coetzee finding his feet in the heart of the country some thirty years before. About thirty years prior to this, Joyce Carey’s Blake-inspired painter, Gully Jimson, finds himself sketching massive feet in a mural he plans to title *The Raising of Lazarus*: “The finest feet I’d ever seen” Jimson says of the feet on the wall, “They came up like music” (*Horse’s Mouth* 269). This is visibly contrapuntal and contrapuntally visible music: the title-music filmmakers strive for and hope to achieve.
In addition to the family farm and various writers including Dostoevsky and Defoe (the list is long), another crucial feet-founding grounding and sounding for Coetzee is lodged in music, the contrapuntal music of J.S. Bach in particular, celebrating life despite difficult circumstances; blind Bach at the end, beautifully composing contemplations of death.

In his several tributes to Bach, articulated sometimes in his own public voice (Stranger Shores), sometimes in the actions or voice of a more or less fictive character (Mrs. Curren from Age of Iron, for example, or JC from Diary of a Bad Year), and sometimes in the context of interview, Coetzee acknowledges being “deeply interested in music,” though on this specific occasion he adds, “but I am not a particularly visual person and have only an amateur’s interest in [graphic] art” (2009 interview with Kannemeyer [635 n45]). The disclaimer comes a decade after Coetzee had collaborated with Dan Cameron and Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev to produce the first major account of the celebrated graphic artist, William Kentridge, and so cannot entirely be trusted (cannot quite be trusted despite its insertion into ‘the public record’).

For the cinematographic version of The Horse’s Mouth, directed by Ronald Neame, the late John Bratby was commissioned to paint Gully Jimson’s paintings. Presented right is the tiger head detail from The Raising of Lazarus (the feet will only later emerge; it takes time to find one’s feet). Below is one of Bratby’s many self-portraits; this one exploits another and perhaps absolute identity-paraph of any humanimal artist: the fingerprint, paw-print, hoof-print, dental marking, iris pattern, tiger stripe, whatever. (The stripes on a tiger are as distinctive as a fingerprint.)

Above: Tiger Head detail from The Raising of Lazarus by John Bratby (1958). Oil on Canvas.

Left: Self-Portrait with Fingerprints by John Bratby (1957). Oil on hardboard, 27.5 by 23.5 inches. Private collection.


For more on Bratby and his “tubist” style of painting, see Yacowar.
But although titles of books assume the structure and some of the effects of a person-or place-name, perhaps to assert civil status (under copyright law, say), or assume the thing-name effect of labeling or name recognition (for retail purposes, perhaps), in many ways titles function unlike proper names: one reason being that facility of reference is a central function of names but only a peripheral function of titles, which are altogether more diversely peculiar in character (Levinson 38; cf. Fisher 287 ff., Adams 14 ff., Petersen, and just about any Derrida).

Just about any Derrida; just about any title-by-Derrida, that is, to summon titles by this proper-name synecdoche, although “The Law of Genre” and “Before the Law” are especially pertinent. In the latter essay Derrida engages with Kafka’s “Before the Law,” “Vor dem Gesetz,” published under the latter title in Kafka’s lifetime and so, by virtue of this title, not equivalent to the otherwise identical passage in the penultimate chapter of The Trial, where the text of “Before the Law” is uttered by a character and appears within quotation marks: but without the title-value of the independently published work, despite the quotation marks.

Titling as a supplemental act is a recent development, tied to the rise of the author and the printing press, and so to the fortunes of the novel; tied also to the law that at some point came to mandate the display of edition and cataloguing information, usually grounded on the verso of the title page. Fevre and Martin tell the story of how the title page came to be; Corbett and Lightbown pause at length over the graphic character of titling in the form of emblematic frontispieces from the Renaissance. But before all this, before the law took this particular turn, early texts were commonly titled by conventional incipit (“Here bigynneth the Book of the Tales of Canterbury”), and were not necessarily so marked by the author, but often by scribes, commentators, or, in due course, printers. This is one of the complications about that text Max Brod apparently titled “Before the Law” by incipit; Kafka refers to it in his Diaries as the “Legend of the Doorkeeper” (Gray 288–289)—after the doorkeeping sentry, the first of many, who guards this particular entry to the law.

Not apparently worried, as Levinson is, whether or not a title originating from someone other than the author can be considered a true title (editors are now typically involved in titling decisions), Derrida builds on his interest in the difference between the identical Kafka word-events (from “Before” and repeated in Trial) by turning to the related instance of a difference between the two otherwise identical phrases, “Before the Law” operating as title, and “Before the Law” as incipit performing a beginning of the textual body (212).

Derrida’s “Before the Law” (an additional occurrence of the phrase after those in Kafka’s “Before the Law” and in The Trial) also looks back in autobiographical glance (“All writing is autobiographical” insists Coetzee in Doubling [17; 391]); the phrase looks back to Derrida’s own appearance “before the law” in Czechoslovakia on charges of drug trafficking late in 1981, while he was still working on an early version of this, his, “Before the Law.”
The words that constitute a title are and are not—only sound or seem to be—identical to the same words that might occur elsewhere, even in the body of the text so entitled, even at its very beginning. Such equivalence would constitute a homophone rather than a synonym, says Derrida, since the two instances have neither the same reference (nor, more importantly I would think, the same value [189]).

As previously mentioned: although it might closely resemble a person-, place-, or thing-name, in many more ways the title is closer in identity to a graphic than to a name; the title constitutes part of a textual signature, part of a textual fingerprint.

Despite its apparent identity with the incipit, “Before the Law” as title remains heterogeneous to the same words located elsewhere (as the opening words to an essay on titular space and feet-finding, for instance) and heterogeneous also to what it entitles: that which in Kafka begins with the incipit “Before the Law,” itself part of the opening sentence—“Before the Law stands a doorkeeper.” Its heterogeneity, in other words, is connected to the way that the title belongs to the work and does not belong, given its topology—its separate placement before the inside of the work to which it connects—and given that the work this titular placement undertakes is connected to the outside, as Derrida points out: “It is self evident that the power and import of a title—which ‘names and guarantees the identity, the unity and the boundaries’ of the work—‘have an essential relationship with something like the law, regardless of whether we are dealing with titles in general or with the specific title of a work” (188–189).

And so writers negotiate, divide, map, markot, sound, ground, and plot their materials; and novelists continue, as they have from the beginning decades of the novel’s struggle for legitimacy—for entry through the doors and gates of cultural value—to explore the possibilities of license titles appear to afford, including division into chapter titles—fertile playground for the eighteenth-century novel—as, for example, in Fielding, who genially speaks in Joseph Andrews of chapter titles as “but so many inscriptions over the gates of inns […] informing the reader what entertainment he is to expect, which if he likes not, he may travel on to the next” (74): many gates; many doors.

Derrida made the Czechoslovak trip under the auspices of the Jan Hus Foundation in support of the Charter 77 group in Prague, who, among other activities, conducted clandestine philosophy seminars. Drugs were planted in his valise, according to Derrida, probably while he was visiting Kafka’s grave (Points 128; For Strasbourg 13). This lead to “an arrest and an investigation without trial” Derrida writes in “Before” (218), no doubt relishing—at least in retrospect—the opportunity to double once again the already multiplying and always different instances of being, after Kafka, before the law, and of being under this title, “Before the Law,” which Coetzee too doubles in the penultimate segment of Elizabeth Costello, entitled “At the Gate.” Here Costello arrives as “a petitioner before the gate” (194) only to find herself “hurled” into a “mise en scène” that—“she dislikes the word but there is no other”—she can only describe as “Kafkaesque”: the “wall, the gate the sentry, are straight out of Kafka” (209). The doubling device of constructing dialogic or heterogeneous viewpoints from which to examine complex sets of phenomena is a strategy Kafka, Derrida, and Coetzee share; with others, of course. Many doors; many gates.
The first of several gates leading to Voëlfontein farm, and the ladder leading to an attic door at the back of the homestead. Many gates, many doors; several portraits also: in a review of *Elizabeth Costello*, Marlene van Niekerk aptly refers to this text as a “pseudo self-portrait of J.M. Coetzee, a portrait of the artist as an old woman” (qtd. Kannemeyer 549; I have re-hyphenated). Photographs © Ben Maclennan, 2013.
The non-equivalence of title and name might be why seasonal names (like “Summertime”) or day names (like “Friday” from Robinson Crusoe and from Coetzee’s Foe, which re-names Daniel Defoe by birth-name) seem odd as given names, though less odd when thought of as titles: Friday, Summertime. Commentators on titling often emphasize that, unlike the name of a person, a title is an integral and constitutive part of what it names. Whereas titles may be thought of as parts of works, names are less plausibly conceived of as parts of the people they name: “Romeo doff thy name,” says Shakespeare’s Juliet, “And for thy name, which is no part of thee, / Take all Myself.” In addition to legally registered names, I was at birth graced with a Sesotho name, “Tapelo,” though this does not actually make me the “answer to prayer” signified by the Sesotho name.

Especially in verbal works, titles also tropingly participate in the troping of what they entitle. Hence, for Adorno, “The title is the microcosm of the work” (Notes Two 4); for Levin, “Most titles are synecdochic” and “many are metonymic” (xxxiv); for Adams, titles are “always synecdoches” (7).

Over the course of a century or so the early novel accumulated the credentials it had so determinedly sought, and so its title could begin to shorten, to become more like a name. The novel had made a name for itself, was even shortly to be promoted (by Bakhtin) to the status of most-valorized literary genre. But despite this rise in the novel’s fortunes, the entitlement process has no doubt to be repeated, propagated again or marcotted, by every single writer aspiring to literary significance. Thus we return to Coetzee’s second, still feet-finding, novel: the first to get an international toe-hold, the one he was ficto-finishing in the intimate company of Mr. Vincent’s last-placed interviewee, Sophie, who in Summertime was and is surprised “not to find myself”—herself named—“in his book,” this marcot, Coetzee’s early, earlier, book (235).

Coetzee’s Friday from Foe is closely inter-related with all the arts, despite that or because his tongue has been cut out, perhaps by slave-traders long ago, though Susan Barton (“Mrs Cruso” as she sometimes titles herself) suspects other possibilities too. Denied auto-access to the performance of language, Friday sings in a monotonous hum, plays a single six-note tune on an island flute made of reed (and on a recorder back in England) and dances, in a trance and for warmth perhaps (Barton speculates). Resisting the alphabet-tutelage of Foe and Barton, Friday fills his writing slate with “row upon row of eyes upon feet: walking eyes” (147), as though he were apprenticed to William Blake or anticipating Gulley Jimson. Again: the Doubling strategy of constructing dialogic or heterogeneous viewpoints is at the heart of all Coetzee’s writing; obviously so in the later fiction which again (as in Dusklands, the first novel, completed it so happens on a farm near the Coetzee family farm in the Karoo) most obviously engineers the process by proliferating a series of initials and proper names, to which eventually are added complications silently but urgently presented by the animals, very few of whom ever get named with proper names.

Easier to eat them that way.
For Derrida, in a phrase that appears to peer through the slats of a blind at the equivocal inter-view of graphic and grammar that titling inaugurates, the title places “about the name the abandonment of the sentence” (“Title” 11). This phrase can be turned, this way and that. By abandoning the sentence, the title can be said to pare down the semantic habitat of the work it entitles, and to present itself as if it were a name or a label or only a graphic condensation. Like the proper names in books that facilitate reading, (titular) name-labels help us conduct practical transactions with works: enable, for example, someone to purchase a sculpture, or designate a painting in an exhibition catalogue, or find and borrow a book from a library.

But, now on the other hand: to claim that the title places “about the name the abandonment of the sentence” is also to suggest that although the title might look or sound like a name, it can—yes—gather around itself by virtue of its title-value the plenitudinous abandon of the sentence, a plenitude it will propagate and so multiply: by pointing inward to the sentences it entitles, remaining heterogeneous from them, and by pointing outward to attract potential readers through gloss or advertisement. No book can anymore escape the market; and so Fisher is surely wrong to dismiss “any serious consideration of titling for merchandising purposes as being conceptually helpful” (287). Copyright itself hesitates between economic and natural law self-identity models. (Yen gives a concise account.)

Under circumstances shaped by its feet-finding earliness, In the Heart of the Country came to be multiply entitled: it exists as an “English-language edition published in [the] U.K. by Secker & Warburg (cloth) 1977”; and as an edition “for sale in the Republic of South Africa only” (this is the Afrikaans- and English-language version published by Ravan Press in 1978, the source of these quotations); and as a first U.S. edition under the title of From the Heart of the Country (Harper 1977), on whose edition notice we are reminded of the specimen “first published in Great Britain” and further learn, in a misleading note, that the “English version [was] prepared by the author from the original Afrikaans”; the U.S. title originally served to distinguish the book from William Gass’s In the Heart of the Heart of the Country and Other Stories, also published by Harper, 1968.

In works of fiction ostensibly ‘proper’ names can also easily be infected by some of the traits titles exhibit insofar as in fiction the proper name does not identify a real person but part of a simulacrum called a ‘character,’ whose linguistic identity usually includes a name as contribution to the “reality effect,” not the only effect fiction pursues or plays with. In Coetzee’s oeuvre one of the initial-title-name constellations plays variations on surnames that begin with ‘C,’ including the name of a woman called Curren, whom we meet in Age of Iron as a once academically-titled classicist now retired and simply titled “Mrs”—“Mrs Curren, nine letters, anagram for what?” (Age 158)—and whom Coetzee in Doubling speaks of as “Elizabeth Curren” (250; 340) despite that her first name does not appear in the novel, where she does however sign herself on one occasion as “EC” (38). The list of ECs comes to include also Elizabeth Costello, celebrated novelist (Lives of Animals, Elizabeth Costello, and Slow Man).
Such is the law of the title: to identify by tropos-turn, topos-label, paraph-signature and maquette-fingerprint the always permeable boundary between inside and outside, trope and name, person and character, work and world, the flourishes and privileges of linguistic identity, the rights and responsibilities of legal entity variously beholden to ethico-economic realities. And so it is that the title *Summertime* dwells linguistically and phenomenally in the domain it builds, grounding a discourse situated by synecdoche to the hotter season (in the Karoo from October to about April) and to the end of the beginning of the doubled yearly cycle—also therefore to the beginning of the end, the latter being the vantage point from which *Summertime* is assembled and whence it journeys back to visit its now dead subject-object and signatory of various names J[ohn] [M] Coetzee, absent in one sense, but still present as literary and autobiographical destination and linguistic protagonist; dead now, but also still alive in legal fact, still beneficiary of copyright protection, still complicit with the commerce of his books, most of which are signed “J.M. Coetzee,” but sometimes “John M. Coetzee” (see Cavalieri), and several of which contain some sort of “John Coetzee” or JC character. Coetzee himself complains in interview of journalists who “don’t even know my initials” (Crwys-Williams; for a concise account of the peculiar confusions surrounding the middle initial “M” see Attridge). And so it is that this Coetzee-name, like a (literary) title, becomes implicated in a dialectic of the fictive and the phenomenal, the identical and the non-identical, the general and the particular, the textual and the paratextual, and so forth—Adorno territory.

Much signing of this feet-finding work in the heart of the country, the first of Coetzee’s novels to be released from the outset on multiple continents, *Dusklands* still being at this time only available in South African imprint. As I had occasion to point out twenty years ago (when *I* needed to establish some sort of modest footing) *In the Heart of the Country* not only concerns itself thematically with tropo-topo-logically multiple languages, but quite literally signs itself in multilingual, multinational, and ideologically heterogeneous signatures (“Charting”). The topic has more recently been resurrected by Andrew van der Vlies, Hermann Wittenberg, and others. The EC list merges with the J[M]C list: John [M] Coetzee, Jacobus Coetzee from *Dusklands*, JC from *Diary*, and the JC / CJ chiasmus tropo-titularly implied by *The Childhood of Jesus*. Building thus on a set of Cs, Coetzee—related to them all—stages a play of characters who invite association with one another by their initials and who slip, slide, and glide into additional paradigms and contiguities of metaphorical and metonymic relationship by, for instance, linking Curren to Costello in the shared pain and shame of old age and imminent death, Costello to Coetzee in their shared concern with justice for all animals, including humanimals, and by gender-bendingly re-engendering the feminine Costello as *Diary*’s now-masculine Señor C (also known as “Señor C the Senior Citizen” and “Juan C” in a series of misunderstandings, mostly, given that a narratively-conducted internet search quickly reveals that this man who pursues the sultry young Anya despite his advanced age, sending her notes signed “JC,” isn’t “from Columbia” as Anya had supposed, “isn’t a Señor at all”).

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As title, *Summertime* turns on and into and so joins the troping of those pages it precedes, in structural terms as well as in more narrowly circumscribed instances of linguistic embrace, moments that acknowledge the sense of shame that attends (late) summertime excess and ripening, a sense of shame towards which the title points despite its apparently cheerful repository of connotations.

An example of this troping, this turning from fact to fiction and back again: towards the end of the “Margot” section (a medially-placed and otherwise centrally heart-felt section of the book, in many ways the most naked part of the book), John Coetzee’s aunt, Margot’s mother—aging and ailing, suffering from problems of the heart—is being transported by ambulance all the way from Calvinia in the Karoo to Cape Town. The hospital in Uppington is closer, but Cape Town’s Groote Schuur Hospital is preferable for the treatment of serious conditions of the heart. J.M. Coetzee’s mother died of such conditions in 1985 (Kannemeyer 440); John Coetzee’s mother is (ficto-prematurely) already deceased before the innermost *Summertime* narratives begin. Margot, a fictively reincarnated version of *Boyhood’s* ‘real-life’ Cousin Agnes, shares the back of the ambulance with her mother and Aletta, “a young Coloured nurse” who, as such, is medially situated by apartheid South African race-sorting as neither black nor white (and so legally also unentitled, at this time, to be served in a cafè reserved for white patrons). Johannes drives the ambulance. Just a week prior, Johannes and Aletta “had to rush a man from Loeriesfontein to Groote Schuur Hospital along with three fingers packed in ice in a cool-box, fingers he had lost in a mishap with a bandsaw” (145). Now they are repeating the trip, with Margot and her mother.

Like *In the Heart of the Country*, *Summertime* travels on plural passports resembling one another but also distinctively marked by national origin of issue. The U.K. and U.S. editions adopt, as part of their titling apparatus, similar advertising gestures on their dust covers, ignoring the risk of confirming our instinct, or that of Horkheimer and Adorno, that culture spoken of is culture for sale, culture become business: “WINNER OF THE NOBEL PRIZE” both front covers announce in close proximity to the author’s name; both back covers print locally-derived excerpts of “Praise for” particular Coetzee books, and both include a photographic author-portrait or passport photograph on the inside back flap.

JC is neither South American nor a Señor, but a South African it turns out (50): like Jacobus Coetzee from *Dusklands*; like J.M. Coetzee; like Magda and Margot whose name-initials echo the median “M” in and at the heart of JMC. This JC from *Diary*, despite internal mislabeling, is a (thematic) compatriot of that Mrs. C JMC calls “Elizabeth Curren,” and a (national) compatriot of “Elizabeth Costello.” This is a JC living in Australia, home to the latter Elizabeth C, whose name “Costello” according to James Joyce, is “a corruption, I think, of two Irish words meaning: beautiful foot” (374); one of the feet to be found? This *Diary* JC is one who admits having once been “a professor of literature” (191), and who claims authorship of a book entitled *Waiting for the Barbarians* and a “collection of essays on censorship” resembling the J.M. Coetzee text *Giving Offense* (171; 22).
“At Clanwilliam,” almost the half-way point in real-time, in real-life, “they stop for petrol” (145). Here, half-way to Cape Town in topo-fact and in ficto-fact, topography gives way to topology and tropology in exemplary fashion. From his thermos flask, Johannes—who like Aletta it should be said, though the novel does not say it, is also “Coloured”—offers Margot a cup of coffee, which she declines for multiple and almost unspecifiably nuanced reasons, although it can surely be said that these reasons, in all their nuance, are born of shame, many decades worth of it:

She would have liked to buy the two of them a cup of coffee at the café, would have liked to sit down with them in a normal, friendly way, but of course one could not do that without causing a fuss. Let the time come soon, O Lord, she prays to herself, when all this apartheid nonsense will be buried and forgotten. (145)

But despite the commercial similarities, despite the language-identity (no difference this time in how the various editions negotiate those bits of Afrikaans-language they contain), despite the passport photographs identifying the bearer (those author-portraits once engraved in books and situated alongside or on the title page), despite all these similarities, Summertime’s two textual identities begin to diverge. The U.S. edition, for instance, displays that most common and most commonly-circulated recent Coetzee portrait, the Bert Nienhuis photograph of Coetzee in his sixties standing outside, hands in pockets, relaxed and illuminated from the front and also from behind (by the summertime flowers of an ornamental shrub against which he stands). The U.K. edition, by contrast, shows a Coetzee in his thirties, using the same darkly intense interior portrait featured on the 1978 South African imprint of In the Heart of the Country. This edition, that is to say, resitutes its author as belonging to a darker time, a time perhaps since passed: a pre-Nobel time, a pre-post-apartheid time, a biographical time, an object-time of Vincent’s inquiry. All this even as it links, on its back cover, this past (hardly emblematic of a “summertime” in pictorial terms) with an autobiographical project by singling out as “Praise for J.M. Coetzee” commentary prompted by Boyhood and by Youth; (the U.S. edition instead promotes Disgrace, Slow Man, and Diary).

A different kettle of fish? Different strokes for different folks? Perhaps, though the differences seem more interesting than these geo-idioms can accommodate, more interesting than the differences between the idioms themselves.

Such nominative play of association by difference, or of difference among initials, of identification by non-identity or of idiomatic similarity in distinction, constitutes for Coetzee a dialectics in the valence Adorno gives that term: “the name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy.” More economically put, contradiction here “indicates the untruth of identity, the fact that concept does not exhaust the thing conceived”; or: “contradiction is nonidentity under the aspect of identity” and “dialectics is the consistent sense of nonidentity” (Negative Dialectics 5). Via Plato, Derrida arrives at a similar place under the name of Khôra, name-site alternating “between the logic of exclusion and that of participation” (89).
After admitting her mother to Groote Schuur Hospital, site (in fact) of the world’s first human-to-human heart graft, performed (as a matter of fact) by Christiaan Barnard, born and raised in the Karoo, Margot finds herself too late in ficto-fact to thank Aletta and Johannes, who have already doubled back so that they can wait and be on call for who knows what: for the next (white, yes only white) finger-loss, the next (white, yes only white) heart to fail. “When I get back” Margot promises herself, “When I get back to Calvinia”—where she works all week as an accountant for the local hotel while her husband is on the road driving freight so that together in their week-long separation they can earn enough to keep their farm going, a farm on which “if they chose to” the childless Margot and her husband could “scrape together a living” were it not that the farm is also home “to thirteen other souls as well,” were it not that wife and husband had “made up their minds long ago they would house their workers properly and pay them a decent wage and make sure their children went to school and support these same workers later when they grew old and infirm”—“When I get back to Calvinia I will make sure I thank them personally” (141–142).

In Adorno’s Lectures on Negative Dialectics—supplement grafted on to Negative Dialectics—the stakes for thought of a “dialectics not of identity, but of non-identity” are again presented in resistance to that “coercion on [and of] identity” Adorno (negatively) identifies with the sort of identity-thinking traditionally practiced by predicative logic (6; 8). Such dialectical thinking has critical and wide-ranging implications for the relationship between subject and its other, and for some possible reconciliation between human subjectivity and natural, phenomenal reality; but the immediately local issue for this moment of writing—in which editions, portraits, and initials are proliferating—is smaller, more modest, and at heart concerns the typo-rather than photo-graphic identity or constitution of “John Coetzee.”
When I get back I will become a better person, that I swear! She also thinks: Who was the man from Loeriesfontein who lost the three fingers? Is it only we whites who are rushed by ambulance to a hospital—only the best!—where well-trained surgeons will sew our fingers back on or give us a new heart as the case may be, and all at no cost? Let it not be so, O Lord, let it not be so! (146)

But it is, or was, so; officially so.

It is the abandon of sentences like these that Summertime as title syntactically abandons, but to which it remains linked by a nod and a wink, and to whose nuanced semantics it points in a gesture of belonging made especially poignant by the absence of the John Coetzee whose death becomes the reason such moments get articulated at Vincent’s prompting—get articulated at all—by way of this ruse, these grafts, this desire or compulsion to look back at what might have been Summertime (though surely not for all), from later, from Wintertime perhaps (though again not for all).

The most demonstrative sign of difference between the U.K. and the U.S. editions of Summertime remains the generic supplementarity afforded by the two subtitles grafted onto the title. The title-page of the London imprint appends “Scenes from Provincial Life” to that Summertime, thereby intimately (from the inside) linking it to the dust cover and title pages of Boyhood [] Scenes from Provincial Life and to the dust cover, at least, of Youth [] SCENES FROM PROVINCIAL LIFE (which omits the subtitle on its inner title page). These subtitles nod (and wink) at Flaubert’s Madame Bovary, Moeurs de Province, and anticipate the (revised) republication of all three ‘memoirs’ as Scenes from Provincial Life.

On both its dust cover and again on its title page, the New York edition more directly and more explicitly stipulates the genre to which it belongs: “Fiction by the author of DISGRACE” (dust cover); “Summertime [:] FICTION” (title page). No longer exactly a trivial matter of idiomatic custom then, this latter instance of ostensible exactitude, this identity claim and specification. Now perhaps (again) a legal matter rather than only a commercial or literary matter, a legal matter in at least a couple of different and more or less literal and literary senses.

Although it “serves the end of reconcilment” (ND 6), Adorno’s is not a dialectics which culminates in simple triadic or even Hegelian synthesis, registering instead the extent to which, as a matter of thought, a concept always gathers unto itself not only those “identical” characteristics of the elements it subsumes (the authority of last initial ‘C,’ for example), but also necessarily includes elements not thus integrated (the remainders initially visible in the first initials E[lizabeth] and J[ohn/uan] the would-be Don Juan, say, to mention only the immediately obvious): “the concept is always less than what is subsumed under it.” By corollary, when an ‘EC’ or a ‘JC’ is defined or identified as a ‘C,’ “it is always different from and more than” ‘C,’ the concept under which it is subsumed and to which it appears to belong. And this is a matter of thought, “the fibre of thought” itself, a contradiction thus implanted within concept, not merely between concepts (Lectures 6–7).
In the Margot interview, one of the earliest Vincent conducts (the first outside England) but also—in its revision—the very last-conducted (“December 2007 [Summer] and June 2008 [Winter]” [152]), and as previously noted, an internal interview positioned in about the middle of this book, the topography of the Karoo becomes part of a median and medially-situated tropology, topology, and polis to which the politics of the just-read sentences overtly attest, and wherein the various graftings and graphologies take their place: in a topos birth-marked with the authority of birth-place.

Situated by birth in this geo-political linguistic placement, Margot finds herself wondering “What are we doing in this barren part of the world”:

The part she means is not Merweville or Calvinia but the whole Karoo, perhaps the whole country. Whose idea was it to lay down roads and railway lines, build towns, bring in people and then bind them to this place, bind them with rivets through the heart, so that they cannot get away? (140)

Margot has lost her heart to this place: to which and in which she belongs, and also does not belong.

First, with regard to literary law: the genre-announcement “Fiction,” as Derrida points out with reference to that other common paratextual genre-designator, “A Novel,” is a mark “of belonging that does not belong”; is a designation, ‘fiction,’ that is not obviously fictional, though it could be; is a mark, a “remark” or a “re-mark” that participates “without belonging,” though it cannot be dismissed (“Law of Genre” 230). Second, now more mundanely and practically in a context numbed by litigation: the genre remark here is also a stipulation—“FICTION”—that could protect if need be against further scandals in the publishing media. (Scandal furnishes free advertising, but not without potentially serious risk.)

The media industries are indeed prone to epistemological and other sorts of scandal as they engage, sometimes in graft, with the building of their empires. One thinks, immediately, of journalists: not only of Vincent taking gross liberties with the text of Margot’s interview (“I had no idea you were going to rewrite it completely” Margot protests [91]), but of Janet Cooke from the Washington Post, for example, who won a Pulitzer Prize in 1981 on the record of work that included her story about an eight-year old heroin-addict who turned out to be her own invention. The Post did return the prize.

Adorno also insists, however, that “in a sense every concept is at the same time more than the characteristics that are subsumed by it.” In the current case, C[oe]tze is more than the unity of characteristics shared by all the ECs or JC this letter might subsume; it also (of course) contains a surplus that goes “well beyond” the initials, a surplus of authority in the first instance, a surplus that thus precisely manifests the non-identity previously registered as the key to an “identity” among these disparate “authorities.” The concept (‘C’) is “always both more and less than the elements included in it,” those elements that belong, but also do not belong to it. Hence the necessity for dialectical thinking “that does not presuppose the identity of being and thought” (Lectures 7–8; I pursue the issue of authority more explicitly in “Authority”).

Belonging is a complicated issue for white South Africans; as complicated as the relationships between title, work, and entitlement to. Belonging is complicated for the Coetzees, including John, Margot, and J.M.; and also for Martin, the sole male interviewee in *Summertime*, to whom Vincent reads from one of John Coetzee’s notebooks a fragment that breaks off at the mention of “white South Africanness.” The phrase is Vincent’s, and it leads to his opening question for Martin, who speculates that he and John shared an attitude: “our presence there was legal but illegitimate. We had an abstract right to be there, a birthright, but the basis of that right was fraudulent” (209). Title deeds show JMC’s original Cape ancestor established in the Stellenbosch area by the late seventeenth century (Kannemeyer 18). For how many centuries or years before his birth Martin’s family lived in South Africa he does not say, though he does note that, unlike John—who left South Africa in the 1960s, came back in the 1970s, and hovered between the U.S. and South Africa for decades before going to Australia—he, Martin, left “in the 1970s and never returned” (209). This latter ‘fact’ links Martin loosely to Jonathan Crewe (another ‘JC’); Coetzee and Crewe both interviewed for positions at the University of Cape Town in 1971. Both were appointed (though not in the novel). While these things can’t be measured, neither John nor Martin appears to have lost his heart to this place quite as thoroughly as Margot has.

One might think also of Jayson Blair, rapidly-promoted by the *New York Times* (in the interests of affirmative action it seems [Nwazota], though Bob Herbert of the *Times* insists that “the race issue in this case is as bogus as some of Jayson Blair’s reporting”). The Blair reportage that appears to have crossed one-too-many lines of the blind involves Blair plagiarizing a story about the family of a U.S. soldier in Iraq. Further inquiry unfolded a series of reportage graft: fabricated interview ‘quotations’ from people Blair had never met in cities to which he had not travelled; plagiarized material from other newspaper reports simulating interviews never conducted.

By positing negative dialectics as the methodology of a *critical theory* (rather than of a “literary theory” in Russian Formalist fashion)—a critical theory prepared to embrace non-identity rather than to resolve it—Adorno establishes for dialectics a third position: situated between the dialectics of an idealism Adorno thinks “has sunk to the level of a cultural fetish” and that of a materialism “degenerated into dogma” (*Lectures* 184).

Ordinary logic fails here to the extent that it is governed by the mandate of registering either the truth or the falsity of that which is being asserted; ordinary logic, that is, fails here to the extent it is governed by the law of contradiction. To assert an equivalence of identity between EC and JC is to produce the equation EC=JC, an equation as obviously false as the assertion that Señor Juan C ‘is equal to’ J[M]C[ötzee]. Under the law of logic we have no option but to dismiss the equation as self-contradictory, and thereby to put aside further pursuit of a real and interestingly contradictory relationship between these subject and predicate terms, and, more importantly, to abandon a really important and perhaps really rich contradiction in the thought reaching towards this relationship or to that between J.M. Coetzee and the late John Coetzee; thought reaching also, that is, for the heart of autobiography.
Margot’s heart has been grafted to this place. Insofar as she has lost her heart to this place, Margot is lost: not despite but because of her intimate familiarity with the place to which her heart has been riveted. Margot is lost and not lost in the same heart of the country that has corrupted Magda In the Heart of the Country; Magda who has been “corrupted to the bone with the beauty of this forsaken world” (266); Magda who, more egregiously than Margot, is “lost in the being of [her] being” (35), lost and not lost as a being in this place “on the road from no A to no B in the world, if such a fate is topologically possible” (“I hope I use the word correctly” Magda adds, “I have never had a tutor” [41]); this forbiddingly beautiful place, this “part of the world [in which] he who cannot burrow is lost” (236), this part of the world into which the eponymous Michael K will literally and literarily burrow, this place that the Coetzee-narrator of Youth will call the “country of his heart” (137), a place of more or less entitlement.

Blair currently practices as a ‘life coach’ in Virginia. To “life-coach,” it seems, at least according to an admittedly flagged set of digital pages from Wikipedia, the signature-free online encyclopedia, is to be entitled or auto-entitled to engage in one of several specialized instances of “coaching,” itself designated as “Today [a] recognized discipline used by many professionals engaged in human development focused on achieving results.”

To wit, or in wit, or as the late John Coetzee might put it, in agenbite of inwit (4): “Life coaching is a future-focused practice with the aim of helping clients determine and achieve personal goals.”

The ficto-fact instance of Summertime is more compelling, more graphically critical, than the case of Jayson Blair or any such media-graft scandal, perhaps even including the phone-hacking scandal that brought to an end 168 years of publication at The News of the World. For all the advertising exploited as part of the title apparatus, Summertime’s title remains something other than an entitlement to some crudely rationalized instrumental practice of achieving results.

He who writes, or ‘we,’ could of course adjust the copulative sign, substituting for ‘equal to’ the relation ‘implies’ (EC→JC, and so on); or substitute the equivalence relation (‘has the same last initial as’) with more flexible permutations derived from geometry and topology, or from typology and allegory (‘is similar to’ or ‘is congruent with’). Yet such alternatives still function as incorporative attempts to translate speech into logic rather than following Adorno’s attempt to enable or entitle logic to speak, in all its heterogeneous accents (Against Epistemology 40).

The vagaries of reference in Coetzee’s Nobel Prize Lecture, He and his Man, wherein mysterious connections and disconnections—not only pronominal—link and ink together, even as they distinguish, a group of writers—Defoe, Crusoe, Cruso, Coetzee, the one called “He” and the one called “His Man”—similarly and dissimilarly invite Adorno-conscious consideration. These disconnections could detain. But, for now: back to Doubling the Point, and to its bearing (one resonance of this book’s title, suggests Attwell, is a nautically mercantile allusion to “‘rounding the Cape’” [3]); the bearing it takes on the issue of generic identity by non-identity.
Voëlfontein photographs © Ben Maclennan, 2013.
Margot and Magda are and are not lost in this place, on this soil into which Margot imagines she will “so naturally” dissolve after death (129), this ground “approximately five feet” above which Magda imagines herself moving as a monologue (“if the ground does not turn out to be just another word, in which case I am indeed lost” [122]) on the road from no A to no B, on the page, surrounded by names and pronouns and punctuation marks and what Samuel Beckett’s richly titled Unnamable calls “other parts of blather” (331), the blather to which paper beings are subjected, as Margot additionally is by Vincent’s editing of her story from the original transcript, now “dramatized” and “fixed up” so that it might pretend to “read as an uninterrupted narrative spoken in [her] voice” (87). Many of the “fixed up” phrases are unfamiliar to Margot, who accuses Vincent of taking liberties and of making things up: “Multitudinous shades?” (88); “Now I must protest. You are really going too far. I said nothing remotely like that” (119); “You can’t write that. You can’t” (137). Nor does Margot understand why in this version of the interview she is referred to by the third person pronoun; she is not persuaded by Vincent’s explanation that “The she I use is like I but is not I” (89). She is not sure which pronoun belongs where.

Adorno’s Critical Theory was prompted, among other irritations, by “the observation that the semicolon is falling into desuetude” (Geuss 114; Adorno, Notes One 91 ff.). What fascinates Adorno about punctuation marks in general and the semicolon in particular (which “looks like a drooping moustache”) is the way such marks “constitute the opposite pole in language to names”: unnames they are, but not exactly unnamable. In the graphic weight of the punctuation mark, language most closely comes to resemble music: “only a person who can perceive the different weights of strong and weak phrasings in musical form can really feel the distinction between the comma and the semicolon” (91–92). It seems quite consistently the case that the little things in language matter a great deal; that, to support the claim of entitlement sought by the title, many—sometimes also graphic—small scale assistants are called upon: punctuation and the small words like prepositions and pronouns, for instance, indices all of linguistic fluency. For Adorno, linguistic capitulation “starts with the loss of the semicolon; it ends with the ratification of imbecility by a reasonableness purged of all admixtures” (95). Analogously, Coetzee’s JC at length bemoans the way the prepositional phrase “in terms of” is replacing and perhaps making redundant a rich range of particular prepositions (Diary 143 ff.).

In addition to its titularly doubled self-identification as a book about the doubling of two discursive genres (“Essays and Interviews” reads the subtitle), Doubling the Point brings forward a third, difficult, more or less fictive genre—autobiography—a genre not identical to the concept ‘fiction,’ not easily assimilable even to ‘genre’ as concept. Acknowledging the special difficulties involved in thinking of autobiography as a genre among other genres, Paul de Man is led to write that “Empirically as well as theoretically, autobiography lends itself poorly to generic definition” (68).
Magda might be more amenable than Margot to the possibilities of a she being like but not I, given her apparently intuitive embrace of that sense of identity predicated, for Blake, on contrariety (not negation), most explicitly so in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, precisely the Blake text whose words Magda occasionally mimics without apparently being aware of Blake’s existence, and precisely the Blakean source from which are grafted *In the Heart*, by some sort of Karoo transplant, utterances articulated (it seems to Magda) by voices emanating from the flying machine(s), voices that rehearse a Blake proverb of hell here and there (“Those who restrain desire do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained,” for example [259]). These voices say things, thinks Magda, that might have some bearing on her afterlife, so that if they were to stop speaking she feels she “will truly be lost” (249). This constitutes graftage in most if not all the usual meanings of graft as noun and as verb: horticultural and surgical hybridization or transplant; digging, labouring, working a deception; loosely speaking, engineering an implant, even linguistically. Young school children often have to transplant or transpose first-person to third-person discourse (and vice versa).

Coetzee’s interest in indeterminacies of genre and the play of pronominal deixis is confirmed by the two ‘memoirs,’ the first of which he annotates in manuscript as “Not a memoir but a novel,” later expressing satisfaction to his publisher that “Boyhood has floated in a rather indeterminate way between the classification Fiction and the classification Biography & Memoirs,” the second for which he contractually requested fictive status on legal grounds, adding to his publisher that he’d nevertheless “be disappointed if it were to be marketed unambiguously as such—as Youth: A novel, for instance” (Kannemeyer 505; 509–510). In both books, the focalizing protagonist-subject is articulated in the third person. Such play operates in *Summertime* also; in the prefatory gloss Vincent gives the notebook fragment he reads to Martin, for instance: “I suspect it was intended to fit into the third memoir, the one that never saw the light of day. As you will hear, he follows the same convention as in Boyhood and Youth, where the subject is called ‘he’ rather than ‘I’” (205). And, again, in the editing of Margot’s interview. Also, finally, in the way *Summertime* establishes a deictic context of reference with which to embody or bring ‘to the light of day’ and so also into typo-graphic existence an “intriguing idea” JC has in *Diary*: “to write a novel from the perspective of a man who has died” (158). Salman Rushdie adopts the same pronominal strategy in his 2012 memoir of a self who might have and might still die under *fatwa*.

Nevertheless, and perhaps not so perversely so, Coetzee asks from the outset of this *Doubling* book that his essays “be seen as part of a larger autobiographical text” (vii). Attwell promises that the interviews interpolated among Coetzee’s essays will “fashion the selection” of essays “into the shape of a writer’s intellectual autobiography,” going on to explain that “the notion of ‘doubling the point’ relates, in the first instance, to the kind of autobiography the collection represents” (2). To demonstrate his point, Attwell provides “the relevant illustration” from Coetzee’s *Foe*. In this novel, Foe reveals a strategy of his to the castaway Susan Barton (who has solicited his help in writing her autobiography). Foe’s strategy is “to plant a sign or marker in the ground where I stand, so that in my future wanderings I shall have something to return to, and not get worse lost than I am” (135–136).
As its title quickly insinuates, *Summertime* is grafting time: from the hard graft John Coetzee undertakes ‘inside’ the interviews “to overthrow the taboo” on whites doing manual labour (61;114, and him “‘an artist to boot’” [65]), to Vincent’s graft in choosing, assembling, and editing interviewees and transcripts at the conceptual edges of the narrative—“Changing the form should have no effect on the content” he disingenuously says to Margot (9)—on to the supra-level of inventive grafting-chicaneries by J.M. Coetzee, chief architect, who like his internal namesake appears to believe that “our life-stories are ours to construct as we wish, within or even against the constraints imposed by the real world” (227; external constraints like death, or self-imposed constraints like writing in rows, or like composing in counterpoint: ‘learned counterpoint,’ it was called in Bach’s day).

A reader could quite easily lose herself or her heart in all this graft, could quite easily lose his feet in this fictive foot-finding auto-biography. And this is likely enough because the ones grafting here are the ones we usually turn to as ‘authoritative guides’: not only those whom Joyce Carey’s Gulley Jimson calls “art crickets,” but also that ostensibly reliable guide to the real, the biographer, whom Jimson cunningly calls the “biografter” (183). Nor is there much hope here of relying in the usual way on information straight from the horse’s mouth, for the simple reason that *Summertime* is and is not information, and the horse in this case is practising autobiograftery.

Doubling the point, Attwell marks “Coetzee’s writings on literature, rhetoric, popular culture, and censorship” as Coetzee’s “personal markers” and announces hereby his own strategy of planting the essays and interviews in such a way as to underscore that the “intensity and accomplishment of Coetzee’s life in literature and scholarship are borne out finally in the novels” (2).

Lest anyone get lost, Attwell emphasizes that “autobiography is secondary to fiction” (3).
My account of graft and grafting in *Summertime* and elsewhere has compiled a set of notes towards a sketch of how the title stands, a set of notes and graphics taking place in the marches or borders of territory occupied in the first instance by Attwell, who has thus helped shape these notes; other valuable accounts have recently taken their places also, and will continue to do so. In 2012, on the typographic front, the first authorized and so legally entitled biography of J.M. Coetzee, subtitled “A life in writing,” was published in South Africa (in the original Afrikaans and in English translation), in Australia, New Zealand, and in the Netherlands, though not in the U.S.; a U.K. release appeared in 2013. Written by the South African academic John Kannemeyer, who publishes under the initials J.C. (yet another JC) and who unexpectedly died on the 25th of December 2011, shortly after finishing the biography, this book grapples at length, not always successfully, with the slippery slope between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ as it traverses overlapping territorial states of bio, auto, and autre-biography, ground in some ways made more treacherous than it initially was for Attwell by the publication of the memoir-novels, *Boyhood*, *Youth*, and *Summertime*, and by the later 2009 interviews Kannemeyer conducted with Coetzee specifically for the biography.

![Sheep tracks—finger-hoof-feet-prints—in the mud of the Voëlfontein dam. © Ben Maclellan, 2013](image)

Despite or because of his markers, the prioritizing beacons working to stipulate and to fix conceptual bio-divisions among categories of the personal, scholarly, novelistic, and historiographic, Attwell gets lost, or partially lost, his familiarity with the Coetzee oeuvre as it then existed notwithstanding. Despite or because of the typological landmarks he chooses in a topology of boundary and division rather than interrelation, Attwell loses sight of Coetzee’s insistence that “all writing is autobiographical” (17; 391), loses sight of the curious identity of reference in autobiography, an identity predicated on non-identity and the sometime equivalence, sometime non-equivalence, between what Coetzee, alternately speaking of himself in the first and in the third person during the last interview in *Doubling* identifies as a slippage, one could say graftage, in and out of—between—auto- and autrebiography (394).
And, on the graphic front: Adam Chang, Shanghai-born Australian artist, has won title to the 2011 Archibald Prize People’s Choice Award for his striking portrait of the artist, the artist J.M. Coetzee, that is, who long since has established his feet, feet by now so long ago found that they visually no longer need to appear.

Were there space and time for one last Shandean turn, I would now tropingly turn—neither to Tristram Shandy nor exactly to Sterne himself, but—to the composition of a coda ficto-informed in its musical pretentions by Frenhofer from Honoré de Balzac’s Unknown Masterpiece. In this story, which Balzac revised and republished over a period of six years from 1831 onwards, Frenhofer is a fictional character in a mostly historical cast including the graphic artists Mabus, Porbus, and Poussin. Frenhofer is the legendary albeit fictional seventeenth-century painter who would later come to fascinate or to haunt Picasso, Cézanne, Matisse, Rilke, de Kooning and others, including (less directly) Schoenberg (see Ashton).

Frenhofer has for a decade been working on his final and crowning painting—a portrait of the also perhaps fictional courtesan Catherine Lescault—though when the painting is at last seen by the painters Poussin and Porbus, they can see “Nothing” or
only “colors daubed one on top of the other and contained by a mass of strange lines forming a wall of paint”—a mess, not a masterpiece—until, coming closer to the painting, they unexpectedly see “in one corner of the canvas the tip of a bare foot emerging from this chaos”: “a delightful foot, a living foot!” (Balzac 40-41). Among others, Dore Ashton takes the Balzac story as a fable for modern art, a grounding instance of modernist versions of less mimetic or non-objective instances of representation. Indeed, perhaps here Modernism precociously takes a stand, finds a foot and its footing, so to speak.

Alec Guinness, playing the role of Gulley Jimson in the cinematographic version of The Horse’s Mouth directed by Ronald Neame from a screenplay by Guinness, finds—with the help of a match—a foot in ‘his’ canvas, Adam and Eve. Painting by John Bratby: Oil on canvas (1958) 6’x 8’. Private collection. Reproduction from The Horse’s Mouth courtesy of the Criterion Collection / Janus Films.
Works Cited


