Under the Shadow of a Self-Sufficient Writer

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The Critic and J. M. Coetzee

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ISBN 978-91-984451-3-8 (Print)
ISBN 978-91-984451-4-5 (PDF)
http://hdl.handle.net/2077/55266

Cover: Maria Björk
Printed by Reprocentralen Lorensberg, University of Gothenburg

To Svante

Abstract

Ph.D. Dissertation at University of Gothenburg, Sweden, 2018
Title: Under the Shadow of a Self-Sufficient Writer: The Critic and J. M. Coetzee
Author: Evelyn Prado
Language: English
Keywords: literary criticism, critical distance, phenomenological criticism, rhetorical approaches to narrative, autobiographical writing, *Disgrace*, *Summertime*

J. M. Coetzee's writing has consistently challenged the work of the critic, questioning the principles of literary criticism and preempting its ordinary procedures. A distinguishing trait of this challenge is the solipsistic dimension of Coetzee's writing, described here as a form of self-sufficiency in relation to the role of the interpreter. This dissertation examines Coetzee's interrogation of literary criticism and the response produced by the dominant strand in the scholarship on his works. The work of the critic is conceived in the phenomenological terms of proximity, which presupposes an empathetic and celebratory stance in relation to the author, and distance, commonly associated with detachment and impartiality. A rhetorical approach to narratives as communicative acts provides the theoretical framework to gauge Coetzee's implied views about the work of the critic.

Three central issues intersect in the argument presented here. The first is Coetzee's role in paving the way for a fundamentally proximal response to his works, a response that is often deferential. The second is the consolidation of this celebratory practice in Coetzee scholarship and its tendency to ignore the resistance to critical paraphrase and containment performed by his works. The third issue is the disempowering effect of the self-sufficient dimension of Coetzee's oeuvre on the critic's interpretive authority.

Self-sufficiency is projected by the scope of Coetzee's literary project, which includes prose and criticism, and it becomes particularly evident in the context of his later self-referential or autobiographical works, two of which are discussed here: the novel *Disgrace* and the memoir *Summertime*. The self-sufficiency of Coetzee's writing disempowers the critic in two ways. First, the continuities between both spheres of his oeuvre give rise to a potentially self-explanatory relationship between them because the critical pieces indirectly provide a congenial explanatory framework to elucidate the fiction. The critic's intellectual autonomy becomes, therefore, a questionable issue. Second, Coetzee's works enact what can be described as a preemptive awareness of critical procedures that undermines the critic's interpretive authority by throwing into relief the inescapable bias and flaws of the interpretive process.

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Acknowledgements

I could not have completed my doctoral studies and written this dissertation without the generous support of several people and institutions, for which I would like to give them my warmest thanks. This project owes a lot to the intelligent scholarly advice and the dedication of my supervisors, our late Professor Marcus Nordlund and Docent Hans Löfgren. Both of them have patiently listened to my not very well connected ideas more times than they deserved, and continuously helped me sharpen my thinking and develop my writing. It has been a privilege to learn from them and a pleasure to enjoy their affectionate friendship.

I am also indebted to Professor Maria Olaussen, who kindly took care of the formal arrangements and preparations surrounding the final stage of this project, and to Professor Ron Paul, who has given me much good feedback in our seminars. Thanks are also due to Professor Gunhild Vidén, for her friendly guidance on a number of research-related issues. I owe a special debt of gratitude to our former Professor Gunilla Flörby, for her gentle encouragement in the beginning of my doctoral studies.

Three expert readers have examined my text in detail and given me invaluable advice, for which I am very thankful: Dr. Richard Walsh (University of York), Associate Professor Gerald Gaylard (University of the Witwatersrand), and Docent Ashleigh Harris (Uppsala University). I am particularly grateful to Docent Harris, who has read my drafts carefully twice. Her constructive comments have helped me argue with more clarity and consistency.

My sincere thanks also go to the members of the English WIP seminars at the Department, who have followed the development of this project and contributed to making it better, and to Maria Björk and Thomas Ekholm from Reprocentralen Lorensberg, for the good-humored openness with which they have shared their technical expertise.

I would also like to acknowledge the financial support of the following institutions: The Knut and Alice Wallenberg Foundation, the Johan & Jakob Söderbergs stiftelse, the Kungliga och Hvitfeldtska stiftelsen, the Stiftelsen Olle Engkvist, and The Donation Board at the University of Gothenburg.

The Jonseredsstiftelsen granted me a one-month writing retreat at the beautiful Villa Martinson that was much appreciated!

On a more personal level, my most heartfelt thanks go to lovely colleagues who have become dear friends along the years, especially Sofía, Viktoria, Fredrik, André, Jenny, Anna, Linda, Gaby, Houman, Joakim, Eduardo, Ester, Andrea, and Evie; to The Luncheonists, for memorable conversations about (sometimes) lofty and (most often) not so lofty subjects; to my warm and supportive Swedish family Karin, Bertil, Britta, Mikael, Nora, Vilgot, Nils, and Kristina; to my mother Nayde, for her optimism and confidence; to my son Ivan, who thinks I'm an expert in English Literature; and to Svante, for his faith in me and in this project. His love, care, and endurance mean more than I can say here.

Introduction

In an essay that considers the future of British and Anglophone contemporary fiction, Thom Dancer identifies a challenge to the prevailing practices of literary criticism in the works of Zadie Smith, Ian McEwan, David Mitchell, Kazuo Ishiguro, and J. M. Coetzee. In different ways, these authors "challenge the habitual understanding of the relationship between the act of criticism and its object", rejecting the traditional principles of distance, detachment, and neutrality, and welcoming instead a form of literary criticism that attends primarily to "the effect of the story's work" on the reader (132, 5). Dancer calls this mode of response a "criticism of presence rather than distance"(132). The argument that he rehearses is familiar: at the heart of a criticism of presence is the belief that reading is "an event irreducible to the processing of information alone" because a text produces "a 'thought' that is 'never transferable, recognizable, paraphrasable, expoundable, or illustratable – meaning that [this thought] cannot be detached either from the text itself or from the moment of reading" (135, 6). All too often, however, Dancer continues, criticism fails to do justice to the unique experience of each individual work because its primary goals are to describe and evaluate the qualities of the text for the sake of a broader and more schematic knowledge of literature. Distance creates an "asymmetrical relationship of agency between the text and the critic", a relationship of "emotional separation and intellectual mastery" (133). Presence, on the other hand, acts "as an injunction against the will to impose abstract concepts" upon the text (135).

Dancer gives an example of the kind of criticism that can respond to the literary text in a more affective, or less intellectually removed, way by looking into Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007). He discusses a passage in which Coetzee's narrator describes his intense reaction after reading a chapter in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. The passage in question, which makes the reader-narrator sob "uncontrollably", is the famous one where Ivan Karamazov "hands back his ticket of admission to the universe God has created" (*Diary* 223). Dancer finds in this reader-narrator's powerful reaction to the text a model for mutual agency between the critic and the author. The narrator's tears are an indication "of an intense event of reading", brought

about by "a transformation effected by the text". The reader-narrator of Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year* cries, he continues, because of the power of literary language: "Dostoevsky speaks well; he is able to transform the reader, to make [Ivan's] anguish and arguments real" (140).

Dancer is correct to identify in Coetzee's writing a call for a critical practice that adopts a more open, receptive, and dialogical stance towards the text. His argument ties in with the critical consensus that Coetzee's works carry out an interrogation of the grounds and the authority of knowledge. The key word in this interrogation is positionality: discourses of knowledge, understood as shared and recurrent assumptions about a specific object of inquiry, can never claim to be truly detached and unprejudiced because they issue from a subject who is inevitably embedded in a given context, and implicated with the cultural forces that act within this context. From this perspective, both what Dancer describes as a criticism of presence and Coetzee's authorial discourse emerge as fundamentally suspicious of distance as a guarantee of autonomy or neutrality. But apart from this interrogation of distance that is detectable in Coetzee's writing, concepts such as presence, proximity, and mutuality dominate the mainstream scholarship on his novels, of which the works of David Attwell and Derek Attridge are the foremost examples. The criticism of presence intersects with Coetzee twice, as it were: as Dancer suggests, his writing seems to lend itself naturally to a defense of a more personal, proximal, and contingent mode of engagement with the literary work, as opposed to a purportedly detached and impartial engagement; his major critics in turn, having identified this peculiarity of Coetzee's writing, have responded by adopting and accommodating presence, proximity, and mutuality in their approach to his work.

While it is certainly true that the principles of the criticism of presence attach both to Coetzee's writing and to its reception, I will argue here that another defining trait of his authorial discourse is precisely the very rejection of proximity and above all mutuality between author and critic. Critical proximity depends on empathy: the critic seeks to identify with the authorial discourse manifest in the work in the effort to understand it as fully as possible. The ultimate goal of the critical work based on proximity is mutuality between author and critic, which presupposes in theory a symmetrical balance of discursive authority between both. Mutuality entails both commensurability and interdependence between literary and critical discourse: the discourse of the critic would offer an excellent explanation or paraphrase of the discourse

of the author, and the authorial discourse would in turn function as a perfect example of the critical discourse.

Empathy, or proximity, as a defining feature of a very influential strand of the criticism of Coetzee's works, carries significant implications for the prevailing perceptions of Coetzee's writing and for the relationships among critics. One of the implications addressed here is the deference with which Coetzee is often treated and its consequences for the current understanding of his authorial discourse. The practitioners of critical proximity often invoke an ethical imperative to justify respect and admiration for the writer. Indeed, proximity departs from the assumption that the artistic expression is a token of an individual's singularity, which must therefore be respected and preserved by the critic. The most apparent interpretive risk of this kind of approach is a loss of critical authority in relation to the author and the work, that is, the loss of the capacity to scrutinize and interrogate literary discourse. Yet proximity impacts on critical authority in more elusive ways as well. Proximity can allow such a degree of insight into the discourse of the author that the critic can absorb its distinguishing characteristics and convert them into theoretical principles or methods for the practice of literary criticism. In other words, proximity is no guarantee that the literary discourse will be preserved, that is to say, not reduced to an illustration of critical principles or concepts. On the contrary, proximity can also be a means of taking possession of the uniqueness of the literary discourse.

Furthermore, considering that criticism entails not only a relationship with the authorial discourse but also with the work of other critics who share an interest in the author's work, proximity affects the critical community at a larger scale too. The problem here is not proximity as such, but what it can give rise to once it circulates among critics and establishes itself as a dominant attitude or method, or indeed as a critical habit. Accompanied by expressions of admiration (out of genuine respect or adulation), proximity helps establish a culture of reverence which fuels the tendency of refraining from a sharper scrutiny of the discourse of the author. Finally, for the advocates of proximity who achieve a position of distinction among other critics, authority becomes a very dubious concept as it travels from the sphere of the relationship with the author to the sphere of the relationship with other critics. These distinguished practitioners of proximity become authoritative critics in the field, prominent names who affirm the value of the concept, but, ironically, their authoritativeness rests precisely on a principled resistance to the exercise of

authority. In theory at least, proximity makes a promise that criticism is fundamentally averse to authority and domination, for the critic does not want to engulf the literary discourse, but go hand in hand with it, complement it, produce a response that is commensurate with it. Obviously, this principled resistance to the exercise of authority contradicts itself in the broader context of the exchange of authority among critics.

In the particular context of Coetzee scholarship, yet another issue arises in relation to proximity and the desired mutuality, or the balance of authority, between critical and literary discourses. Proximity underpins a particularly influential form of critical engagement with his works, but it also sits uneasily with his authorial discourse, especially with respect to the desired mutual agency between author and critic. The point here is not an apparent contradiction; rather, what brings the predominance of proximity and the rejection of mutuality together is Coetzee's defense of fiction against critical containment. At the heart of Coetzee's critique of criticism lies a consistent assertion of the discursive authority of his writing, grounded on a view of writing as a unique and inviolable creative act. The call for critical proximity constitutes one facet of this assertion; the rejection of proximity and mutuality constitutes another.

The resistance to critical containment that is characteristic of Coetzee's authorial discourse brings me to what I call here the self-sufficiency in his writing. One manifestation of self-sufficiency is the dialogue internal to Coetzee's novelistic and critical practice. Coetzee is mainly known as a novelist, but he also has an extensive critical production. The continuities between his novelistic and his critical writings, noted by a number of critics, imply a degree of self-explanation, insofar as one illuminates the other. Typically, Coetzee's criticism has served as a point of departure to elucidate his novels. In fact, there is a relationship of mutuality or complementarity between literary and critical discourse at stake here, but this mutuality is internal to Coetzee's writing, and therefore it constitutes the self-sufficiency of the authorial discourse. The other manifestation of self-sufficiency is evinced by Coetzee's awareness of his reception and the way in which he undermines the activity of the interpreter. This aspect becomes particularly clearer in his later works, whose recurrent thematic feature, as I will show, projects him as a remarkably solipsistic writer.

The argument about the self-sufficiency of Coetzee's writing will be developed here in two steps. First, I will examine how and why the principles

of proximity and mutual agency between literary and critical discourse have come to be so pervasive in Coetzee scholarship. This strand of my argument will focus on how Coetzee has indirectly appealed to a more dialogically open, sympathetic, and responsive attitude in relation to the text, and how the works of his major critics both respond to this appeal and, by means of their intellectual influence in the critical field, legitimize a proximal approach to Coetzee's text. The second step hones in on the notion of self-sufficiency. I begin by exploring the potential self-explanatory capacity of the writing and then move to an interrogation of the appropriateness of critical proximity and mutuality. I show how Coetzee brings under fierce scrutiny the reasons behind one's investment in proximity and mutuality with the discourse of the author.

Coetzee and the Critic: The Question of Discursive Authority

Coetzee has voiced his dissatisfaction about the relationship between author and critic a few times. In a well-known interview, for instance, he comments in a somewhat dispirited tone: "what is criticism, what can it ever be, but either a betrayal (the usual case) or an overpowering (the rarer case) of its object? How often is there an equal marriage?" (*Doubling the Point* 61) This comment on his part can be taken as an encouragement to a more generous and intense approach to the literary work. In other words, Coetzee seems to resent an "asymmetrical relationship of agency" between the literary work and the critical response, to borrow Dancer's phrase once again (133). Another interview is more telling, however, in the context of a reflection on the ideal of mutual agency between authorial and critical discourse. Coetzee dismisses an intense literary response on the grounds that intensity does not belong with criticism: "you have to remember what is and what is not possible in [critical] discursive prose [as opposed to poetic language]. In particular you have to remember about passion, where a strange logic prevails. When a real passion of feeling is let loose in discursive prose, you feel that you are reading the utterances of a madman" (*Doubling* 60).

Since Coetzee is a creative writer, it is not surprising that he defends the rhetorical power of literary language as a token of its uniqueness, and as something that escapes the critical parlance. Not even a passionate critical discourse, in his view, would therefore measure up to the power of literary

language: novelistic discourse, he continues, "allows the writer to *stage* his passion: Magda, in *In the Heart of the Country* [his second novel], may be mad … but I, behind her, am merely passionate. … In the medium of prose commentary I can't be passionate without being mad" (60, italics in original).

For Coetzee, criticism cannot say as much as literary language; put differently, criticism can be said to be an inferior discursive mode in comparison to literary language. This recognition of inferiority, or insufficiency, lies at the heart of what motivates the intensity, generosity, presence and, most importantly, the proximity of the criticism of presence. As I indicated previously, what Dancer calls criticism of presence does not formulate a new theoretical position about the study of literature. Rather, it rearticulates critiques of methods of literary criticism posed by, for instance, the phenomenological critics of the Geneva school, who viewed the critical work precisely as a balance of proximity and distance. Their premise for a critical work that does not "[smooth out] turbulent irregularity, scandal, contradiction, … [into] themes of a calm and coherent discourse", as Jean Starobinski puts it, is the opposite pole of distance: their method relies on proximity, conceived as a remarkable identification of the discourse of the critic with the authorial discourse manifested in the work (*The Living Eye* 122)[1]. Among the Geneva critics, Starobinski deserves closer attention because his conception of the critical work brings to the fore the crisis of identity that affects literary criticism, and with which it attempts to cope by changing its principles: from distance, detachment, and objectivity, which might engulf the literary work, to proximity, empathy (or identification), and mutuality, which would presumably be more just grounds on which to claim interpretive authority. Yet these premises do not release the critic from the predicament of authority; they just shift the terms that create the predicament in the first place.

The criticism of presence wants to avoid subjecting, or seizing control over, the work; therefore, it conceives of itself as sympathetic and generous. At the same time that it recognizes the power and the uniqueness of the literary discourse, however, it also recognizes its own inescapable limitations, or what it lacks in comparison with literary discourse: simply put, the critic

[1] The Geneva school critics are Marcel Raymond, Albert Béguin, Georges Poulet, Jean-Pierre Richard, and Jean Starobinski. Their sources in earlier criticism, as J. Hillis Miller notes, stretch back to "the critics of the *Nouvelle Revue Française* … and behind them through Proust to mid-nineteenth-century writers like Pater and Ruskin, and so back to romantic criticism" (305).

does not dispose of the same wealth of rhetorical resources that the novelist can access. The anxiety of the criticism of presence becomes clear in Starobinski's writing: in its reverence and openness to the unique energy of literary discourse, it aims at such a degree of proximity that it might find itself completely assimilated, reduced to an auxiliary or accessory form of discourse, an appendix that might have some interpretive value but is not indispensable.

Ideally, the critic should both embrace the transformation brought about by the work and differentiate himself. But what does "differentiate" mean in this context? Neither Dancer nor Starobinski is clear on the notion of difference between author and critic. Dancer wraps up his discussion of *Diary of a Bad Year* with the very suggestive phrase "the artist as critic", which is meant to capture how the critic's imaginative sensibility can be enhanced, or inspired, by the creative writer's power. In the context of Coetzee's novel, the phrase is very appropriate: Dancer presumes that the reader-narrator of *Diary*, a model critic of presence, is a creative writer in fact, a recognizably autofictional Coetzee in the world of the narrative (139). The exemplary mutual agency is perfectly illustrated because writer and reader, equally sensitive and responsive, are indeed the same in Dancer's reading. Starobinski concludes his thoughts about the critical work by suggesting that it must eventually promote itself as "a work of literature in its own right", which is also a dubious formulation in the context of difference, even though it apparently reclaims interpretive authority (*Eye* 127). At precisely this point, however, the criticism of presence might find itself back at square one. Starobinski also insists that criticism must be an act of "assimilation" or "active appropriation" in order to secure its discursive authority (*Eye* 224; *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* xxvii). What such a move implies, consequently, is that the "asymmetrical relationship of agency between the text and the critic", which the proximity and receptiveness of the criticism of presence set out to remedy in the first place, might be introduced once again (Dancer 133).

What emerges from Starobinski's discussion of the critical relation is that proximity and mutuality are certainly desirable and engaging principles; yet they can also make the line between a sensitive but independent intellectual reflection, and a more or less elaborate echo of the authorial discourse, quite indistinct. Dancer is also aware of this, as he notes "the profound theoretical and practical difficulty" that a generous criticism faces (136). Coetzee, who speaks not only as a creative writer but also from his experience as a literary scholar, is even more skeptical of literary criticism. As he puts it, criticism

usually betrays or overpowers the literary work and, when it opens itself too much to the power of literary discourse, it might lose both its interpretive authority and its sense (producing "utterances" that liken the ones of "a madman"). This is an extravagant formulation, but Coetzee has also spoken about the deficiencies of criticism in a more sober manner. In the passage below, for example, he returns to the point of how constrained and limited critical writing seems to him, in comparison with novelistic writing:

> If I were a truly creative critic I would work toward liberating [critical] discourse – making it less monological, for instance. But the candid truth is I don't have enough of an investment in criticism to try. Where I do my liberating, my playing with possibilities, is in my fiction. To put it in another way: I am concerned to write the kind of novel – to work in the kind of novel form – in which one is not unduly handicapped (compared with the philosopher) when one plays (or works) with ideas. (*Doubling* 246)

Coetzee's view here is similar to Martha Nussbaum's famous argument for the superior "many-sidedness" of narrative prose, which allows it to explore the complexities of ethical questions with more richness and fullness than traditional argumentative writing (Nussbaum 283). This many-sidedness is a function of the discursive medium itself, that is, of the fact that form and content are inseparable: "forms themselves express a content and that content cannot be prized loose, without change, from the form in which it is expressed" (289, 90). The nub of Nussbaum's argument, as well as of Coetzee's view, is that creative writing is a superior form of discourse; the academic (the moral philosopher or the literary scholar, for instance) can learn from the creative artist. Essentially, there is indeed a form of mutuality involved here, but not commensurability as far as discursive authority is concerned.

From Mutuality to Self-Sufficiency

I trace Coetzee's relationship with the reception of his works throughout his oeuvre, dividing it into two major phases in accordance with a salient thematic shift in the works. The first phase comprises the novels produced in apartheid South Africa between 1974 and 1990. Their overall thematic focus can be described as chiefly political: these works engage, in different ways and to different degrees, with the national situation, and their initial reception by a number of South African critics in particular was generally negative, on the

grounds that the narratives did not take a clear stand against apartheid oppression. Coetzee considered this kind of political approach to literature utilitarian or instrumental, and voiced his discontent about the reception of his novels, which hence paved the way for a critical approach more attentive and sensitive to the distinctness of his literary production. Sympathy and mutuality with Coetzee's authorial discourse saw the light of day with David Attwell, who contributed a new view of the political potential of the novels. Later, critical proximity consolidated itself among scholars when Derek Attridge, partly in response to the political orientation of the critical discourse, brought to the fore the ethical content of Coetzee's writing.

The second major phase of Coetzee's oeuvre is more significant in the context of my argument that his authorial discourse rejects mutuality and can be described as self-sufficient. This second phase coincides with the period in which critical proximity became the dominant approach among scholars. In contrast with the earlier oeuvre, this second phase, which comprises the works produced between 1990 and 2009, can be described as predominantly self-referential and autobiographical, in the sense that the narratives put Coetzee's life, to a greater or lesser extent, at the center of their interpretation. The change in the subject matter of the novels is key to my argument against critical proximity and mutuality, as well as to my description of Coetzee's writing as self-sufficient. This self-referential or autobiographical thematic focus could be deemed particularly suitable to the creation of a natural environment for critical proximity, as though these works required or invited a critical engagement that is intrinsically more intimate. But it is also possible to approach their thematic orientation from a diametrically opposed perspective: Coetzee's investment in self-referentiality could be taken as an indication of the works' independence from, or indifference to, interpretive discourses, as though the novels were epistemologically self-sufficient. This is not to say that they cannot accommodate critical explanation, but rather that these novels are deliberately refractory to interpretation insofar as their autobiographical configuration is concerned.

I elaborate on this self-sufficiency from two different angles: one is the sense of completeness of the authorial discourse, manifest in the dialogue between Coetzee's critical and novelistic writings; the other is the undermining of the interpreter. I bring those perspectives to bear on *Disgrace* (1999) and on *Summertime* (2009). An essential point of reference for my argument about both works is Coetzee's essay "Confession and Double

Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky" (1985). This essay plays a central role in the context of the self-referential later works in two ways. First, it probes how self-examination can be compromised by the constant doubt about whether one is, in fact, completely clear-eyed about oneself. Second, Coetzee's argument confronts directly the notion of mutuality in that he treats soul searching as a thoroughly private and solipsistic project. From an ethical point of view, self-examination, which an autobiographer carries out by means of writing, can be valid as a form of pursuit of an essential truth about the self. As far as its epistemological validity is concerned, however, Coetzee argues that soul searching is potentially endless and, therefore, inconclusive. Truth remains beyond the bounds of an autobiographical narrative; it cannot be treated as a proposition set forth for acceptance or refusal "because the basic movement of self-reflexiveness is a doubting and questioning movement … [It] is in the nature of the truth told to itself by the reflecting self not to be final" (*Doubling* 263). This displacement of truth is not only exclusive to the inward look of the autobiographer. Insofar as truth is also of interest to the one who reads an autobiographical narrative, the inconclusiveness of this "doubting and questioning movement" is also a potential predicament for the critic. Put simply, the argument of "Confession and Double Thoughts" challenges the epistemological authority of critical discourse, and therefore the desired mutuality between author and critic, by rehearsing a commonsensical argument: one interpretation can, in theory at least, always dislodge another.

I read *Disgrace* and *Summertime* in light of the idea that self-examination is fundamentally a solipsistic and inconclusive project. In the fictional frame of *Disgrace*, Coetzee not only reenacts the problems of soul searching pointed out in the essay, but also represents the potential closure of self-examination that, as he argues in the essay, is deferred indefinitely. To borrow the words that he uses in a passage quoted above, the novel allows him to "play with ideas", something which the logical argumentation in a critical piece cannot accommodate to the same extent (*Doubling* 246). In the reading of *Summertime* I address the other facet of the self-sufficiency of his authorial discourse, the radical skepticism of critical proximity and of its claims to interpretive authority. The focus of my reading is twofold: I explain how *Summertime* keeps Coetzee's autobiographical truth hopelessly out of reach for its interpreters and how it discredits the process of interpreting a life narrative. In this respect, my reading of *Summertime* will project Coetzee as the only one who can have a say about the story of his life.

Insofar as the two major phases of Coetzee's oeuvre are concerned, my perception of a thematic shift resonates with the developmental features pointed out both by Attwell and by Jarad Zimbler. What I am calling the first phase coincides with Attwell's argument that Coetzee's works from *Dusklands* (1974) to *Age of Iron* (1990) are positioned in relation to "key discourses produced by colonialism and apartheid". *Age of Iron* represents in this context "both summation and departure", in the sense that it develops "the questioning of narrative authority" posed in *Foe* (1986) (*Politics of Writing* 6, 120). Zimbler also notes a shift from *Foe* to *Age of Iron*. Focusing both on style and on Coetzee's reputation, he argues that *Foe* represents "a kind of watershed or fulcrum in Coetzee's career" as a function of its "purposefully antiquated prose". Besides, "by 1986", he continues, "Coetzee was no longer a marginal upstart, but an internationally recognized novelist and critic. His fictions had changed the very shape and structure of South African literature" (23). The novels that followed *Foe* "are likewise marked by further shifts in mode, and in particular a concern with generic boundaries and the distinction between works of fiction and works of fact" (24). Among these later novels, Zimbler distinguishes the memoirs from *Elizabeth Costello*, *Slow Man*, and *Diary of a Bad Year*, which share a thematic orientation "towards a new literary environment, that of Australia" (24). Finally, he notes that a possibly new phase begins with *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013). Indeed, the sense of indeterminacy that prevails in *The Childhood of Jesus*, or "the spirit of limbo", as Urmila Seshagiri describes it, appeals to an allegorical mode of reading, harking back to works such as *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life and Times of Michael K*. "Coetzee invokes the allegorical" in *The Childhood of Jesus*, Seshagiri continues, "only to thwart its symbolic correspondence with the real" (646).

Proximity and Mutuality among Critics

The implications of critical proximity when one deals with Coetzee's texts have not been given any extensive consideration by scholars. At most, what has caught the eye of a few commentators is the degree of proximity and complementarity between Coetzee's view of the writer's work as ethical and creative and Attridge's view of the critical work as also ethical and creative. Attridge mirrors the work of the critic in Coetzee's account of creative writing as an act of openness to the unknown. He conceives of authorial and critical agency as mutual and commensurate, insofar as both issue from an ethical

commitment to being creative. Creativity is understood in this context as a willingness to let one's mode of thinking be reshaped in the process of engaging with a literary work. Chapter 1 provides a discussion of this aspect of Attridge's work, as well as of the influence of Attwell's work in paving the way for critical proximity among Coetzee scholars.

The fact that critical proximity has been noticed but not interrogated is worth looking into because of what it reveals about the diffuse manner in which power circulates in the field, often embedded in structures or practices that normally go unquestioned. Pierre Bourdieu's view of the nature of the power relationships within the field of cultural production, of which the literary field is part, is useful here. Bourdieu describes the field of cultural production as a field of "competitive struggles" for what he calls "symbolic capital", that is, "recognition and consecration" (*In Other Words* 141). Insofar as the relations among the participants in the field are fundamentally competitive, they are relations of power. Yet even though these are competitive relations, they cannot be described as being entirely based on "a genuine strategic intention" to accumulate capital (*The Logic of Practice* 62). Rather, for Bourdieu these relations are permeated chiefly by a "system of dispositions" or inclinations that he calls "habitus" (54). It is the habitus that "produces [the] individual and collective practices" particular to the field, regulating competition, as it were: habitus entails that all participants in the field have a common point of departure (for all share an interest in the symbolic capital) and a common understanding of how the relations among them develop. Habitus, he continues, guarantees "the 'correctness' of practices and their constancy over time" (54).

As far as agency is concerned, what follows from Bourdieu's habitus is the assumption that the agents in the literary field do not consciously and deliberately engage in shaping it; as he puts it, there is no "coherence-seeking intention or an objective consensus" behind perceptions and practices that have become dominant (*The Field of Cultural Production* 34). This amounts to saying that power is not explicitly exercised by someone with the aim of enforcing a specific view, method or theory; yet the views, methods or theories which attain recognition do exercise an important influence in the way the relations among the participants in the field will develop. Put differently, power transcends individual agency to a certain extent, but it is, nevertheless, felt on the agents in the field.

Among reviewers of Coetzee's novels, for instance, Zimbler has noticed a form of "mutual influence" that is illustrative of the dynamics of power in the literary field:

> It is certainly possible that Coetzee's reviewers were responding to one another, rather than to the novels themselves, and that the similarities of their judgements were therefore produced by mutual influence … it would be naïve to imagine that reviewers are unaffected by their predecessors and by the marketing efforts of publishers. Particular adjectives may well proliferate because they are sanctioned by the blurb and, seemingly, the author himself. (4)

We can assume, following Bourdieu's habitus, that what prompts reviewers to produce similar responses is *both* a shared disposition *and* the general perception that, if this disposition receives a particular orientation, it is more likely that the responses will attain recognition. As he puts it in *The Logic of Practice*, habitus does not presuppose the "simple mechanical reproduction of [an] original conditioning", but it does set limits for the "production of thoughts, perceptions, and actions" insofar as the dispositions that constitute it are "historically and socially situated" (55). Bourdieu also refers to habitus as a "sense of the game", which he explains as "a form of well-understood interest which does not need to ground itself in a conscious and calculated understanding of interest" (*In Other Words 109*).

A similar line of reasoning can illuminate the influence that Attwell and Attridge, whose approaches to Coetzee are distinctly empathetic and proximal, have exercised on the work of other critics, an influence that has contributed to giving the field certain features (though without limiting the field to such features). Given their prominent position in relation to other critics, empathy and proximity can be described as powerfully effective means of claiming one's share of the symbolic capital that is particular to the field. The relations among critics are essentially relations of force: all, regardless of the position that they occupy in the field, strive for recognition and prestige. This is not to say that the effort to attain recognition and prestige necessarily entails that one deliberately discredits or undermines the achievements of others in order to dislodge them from their position of distinction (even though this kind of attitude cannot be ruled out entirely). One's intervention in the literary or critical field is informed both by natural dispositions and by a degree of calculation of interest. In other words, these dispositions, which constitute what Bourdieu calls habitus, are more likely to be granted

recognition when they are oriented in a certain direction. This is why he can say that habitus creates "a relatively constant universe of situations"; it "tends to protect itself from crises and critical challenges by providing itself with a milieu to which it is as pre-adapted as possible" (*The Logic of Practice* 61).

In more ordinary terms, one could say that the relations among critics are both relations of cooperation and competition. A critical response usually entails giving credit to one's peers but it also changes the configuration of power in the field (redistributing the symbolic capital, as it were) because it impacts on the positions occupied by all the participants in the field. One could, for instance, take the first monograph produced on Coetzee's work, Teresa Dovey's *J. M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories* (1988), as a starting point to illustrate what critical dialogue entails: on the one hand, recognizing the merits and building on the work of one's predecessors is inescapable; on the other hand, much of the critical work itself is also about exposing the weaknesses of previous works. With hindsight, two aspects of Dovey's work have retained their significance for the study of Coetzee's novels: her recourse to poststructuralist theory as an interpretive framework and her identification of the characteristic self-consciousness of Coetzee's writing that is key to understand how it anticipates and preempts the critical engagement. These aspects of Dovey's work have also been an important point of departure for Attwell's argument in his book, *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (1993). As he explains, he responds directly to Dovey's claim that the polarization between those critics who read Coetzee for "political resistance and historical representation" and those who attended to the postmodern and poststructuralist dimensions of his writing "overlooks the potential area between the two, which is concerned to theorize the ways in which discourses emerging from different contexts, and exhibiting different formal assumptions, may produce *different* forms of historical engagement".[2] One of the major premises of his study, as Attwell himself defines it, is that "Coetzee's novels are located in the nexus of history and text [and] explore the *tension* between these polarities" (2, 3 italics in original).

Attridge has also engaged with the kernel of Dovey's argument in his chapter "Against Allegory", whose title is revealing of his disavowal of the terms she has proposed to read Coetzee.[3] His position relative to Attwell's

[2] Dovey, "Introduction" 5, quoted in Attwell, *Politics of Writing* 2.

[3] By the way, as Mark Sanders notes, Attridge is "profoundly consonant with Coetzee on the matter of allegory" (643).

work, however, is more difficult to pin down in terms of agreement or disagreement, which attests to the dual, and even ambivalent, nature of the critical dialogue. In the beginning of the 1990s, Attwell publishes his *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*; about a decade later, Attridge compiles the essays that he has written on Coetzee during the 1990s in *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (2004). While one critic chooses "politics" and "writing", the other chooses "ethics" and "reading". Taken together, these weighty and highly complex terms create a conceptual framework in which they are both complementary and opposite. "Politics" can be seen as complementary or opposed to "ethics", just as "writing" can be said to be complementary or opposed to "reading".

For other Coetzee critics, however, the connections between the terms "ethics", "politics", "writing", and "reading", which are the terms inextricably attached to Attwell and Attridge, have created a stable, constant environment in which innumerous articles and books have been produced engaging precisely with these terms. It is obvious that this extensive production of knowledge has carried the understanding of Coetzee's writing further; but where does one draw the line between influence, which creates a point of departure or a common ground for dialogue, and circularity, which, by perpetuating prevailing views and practices, also discourages sharper or more fundamental disagreements? Once again, to say that these terms are dominant does not amount to saying that each and every critic of Coetzee has been forced to address them in order to be a Coetzee critic. Nevertheless, it is also true that no substantial challenge has been posed to the predominance of these terms and, therefore, to the influence of the critics who first appropriated these terms in Coetzee criticism. The titles of two recent important monographs, for instance, are indicative of how their authors follow in the footsteps of Attwell's account of Coetzee's political discourse in *Politics of Writing*, written more than two decades ago: the monographs are Patrik Hayes's *J. M. Coetzee and the Novel: Writing and Politics after Beckett* (2010) and Jarad Zimbler's J. *M. Coetzee and the Politics of Style* (2014).

Another potential ambivalence that is characteristic of Coetzee scholarship is manifest in the frequency with which his fiction is read in light of his nonfiction. More often than not, this is indeed a very fruitful way of understanding the complexities of his writing. Nevertheless, discomfort about the circularity of the method and the excessive respect for Coetzee surfaces time and again. Stefan Helgesson, for instance, in a review of Hayes's *Writing*

and Politics after Beckett and of Carrol Clarkson's *J. M. Coetzee: Countervoices* (2009), notes how this method, despite its indubitable value,

> also illustrates the difficulties in finding the appropriate critical distance to Coetzee … [which] is aggravated by the vertiginous precision and self-reflexivity of his work, and can result in a culture of reverence that risks a tautological reproduction of Coetzee's own, strikingly canonical, values instead of engaging with them in a more agonistic fashion (446).

As mentioned previously, the discussion of the exemplary features that Attwell's and Attridge's works exhibit and of the interpretive challenges that they face will be carried out in Chapter 1, given the decisive roles that both critics have played in promoting and consolidating critical proximity. In this section, I want to prepare the ground for my discussion in two ways. First, I want to tease out the most apparent continuity between the interrogation of impartiality, neutrality, and objectivity that Dancer reads in Coetzee's recent work (and with which I opened this Introduction) and the long-standing influence of Attwell's and Attridge's approach to Coetzee. Second, I will also examine briefly a number of works that converge with my focus on critical proximity either by practicing it, notably by reading Coetzee's fiction alongside his scholarly writings, or by acknowledging Coetzee's awareness of how his critics work.

In *Politics of Writing*, Attwell identified in Coetzee's novels "a mode of fiction that draws attention to the historicity of discourses, to the way subjects are positioned within and by them, and finally, to the interpretive process, with its acts of contestation and appropriation" (20). He coins the concept "situational metafiction" to describe this characteristic of the novels. The key word in Attwell's argument that resonates with Dancer's reading of Coetzee is "positioned": if the critic is positioned within a historical context or moment, criticism surely cannot define itself as a neutral or disinterested practice. After Attwell, it was Attridge who took up the issue of positionality in Coetzee's writing again and rethought it in depth, expanding specifically on what it entails for the critic. In consonance with Attwell, Attridge reasserts how Coetzee's novels consistently scrutinize "the many interpretive moves that we are accustomed to making in our dealings with literature, whether historical, biographical, psychological, moral, or political". He calls such interpretive moves "allegorical", in the general sense that "they take the literal meaning of the text to be a pathway to some other, more important, meaning". Positionality surfaces clearly in Attridge's thought when he proposes a mode

of reading that aims to counter the allegorical by being "grounded [on] the experience of reading as an *event*" (italics in original):

> That is to say, in literary reading … I do not treat the text as an object whose significance has to be divined; I treat it as something that comes into being only in the process of understanding and responding that I, as an individual reader in a specific time and place, conditioned by a specific history, go through. (*Ethics of Reading* 39)

Dancer's thinking about literary reading as "an event irreducible to the processing of information alone" is clearly indebted to the prominence of Attridge's work (135). To be sure, Attridge was not the first one to think of reading as an "event", but the currency that the concept enjoys among readers of Coetzee is undoubtedly inextricable from the impact of his work on the field.

After Attwell's intervention in the critical field in the beginning of the 1990s both with *Politics of Writing* and with *Doubling the Point*, the immensely influential volume of interviews with Coetzee that contextualize several of his scholarly writings, Attridge was one of the first scholars who shifted the terms of the debate towards ethics, reading Coetzee via the works of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida. In 2004, he released *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* in conjunction with *The Singularity of Literature*, in which he proposes his ethical and creative theory of literary reading.

Coetzee's academic and public acclaim peaked in the 2000s, and he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003. Since then, a number of works have appeared which adopt a broad perspective into his oeuvre, often by addressing important theoretical or contextual issues and by reading the fiction with the nonfiction as well. Among those that adopt this broad perspective, with contributions from several prominent scholars, is *J. M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual* (2006), edited by Jane Poyner. Another is Dominic Head's *The Cambridge Introduction to J. M. Coetzee* (2009), which has a particularly valuable final chapter on Coetzee's reception up to 2006. Also in 2009 *J. M. Coetzee in Context and Theory,* edited by Elleke Boehmer, Robert Eaglestone, and Katy Iddiols, came out, a volume that brings a variety of contributions by several leading Coetzee scholars. Especially worthy of attention in *Context and Theory* is the editors' response to Coetzee's "elusive and indirect comments" on the "literary critic and [on] theoretical discourse" (2).

In the introduction to the volume, Boehmer, Eaglestone, and Iddiols reflect on how they aim to tackle critical "suspicion and bad faith". What prompts their reflection is a comment made not by Coetzee himself, but by the autofictional JC of *Diary of Bad Year,* who objects to the principle that "in criticism suspiciousness is the chief virtue, that the critic must accept nothing whatsoever at face value" (*Diary* 33). The editors make it clear that "it is important not to confuse the author J. M. Coetzee with the author JC", but wish, nevertheless, to take this objection into account. The position they adopt is familiar. In a typical statement of how one reads with respect for the discourse of the author but also strives for intellectual independence, they acknowledge the necessity of moving from the intensity of the spontaneous response to a questioning of the work:

> When we read, rather than simply being swamped by affect … we are also, surely, by necessity involved with thinking through, responding to, engaging with, questioning, the work we are reading: intellection, as well as emotion, is part of the way that literature, in Kafka's phrase, breaks the frozen sea within us. This … might also be called facing a work with one's whole self, or with all one's faculties. The position of the dividing line between bad faith suspicion and good faith engagement is a question of judgement. We hope that these essays demonstrate the latter rather than the former. (2)

Another important work that brings texts by well-known scholars such as Attridge, Mike Marais, Sue Kossew, and Carrol Clarkson and addresses dominant themes in the scholarship is *A Companion to the Works of J. M. Coetzee* (2011), edited by Tim Mehigan. Clarkson's contribution to the *Companion* is of particular interest, since it intersects with my perspective into Coetzee's relationship with criticism. She pursues two closely connected lines of inquiry in the chapter entitled "Coetzee's Criticism": "the first line", as she presents it, "is to ask, what does a reading of Coetzee's critical work hold for us?" The second expands on the first by reflecting on "the ways in which Coetzee explores the relation between creative and critical modes of writing", which she sees as culminating in "an unsettling question: where does one draw the line between fiction and criticism in Coetzee's writing?" (223, 4) The main focus of interest in Clarkson's argument, in the context of my study, is her claim that "it is problematic to assume in advance that criticism is always secondary to literature" (230). A distinction must be made between her claim and my discussion of criticism as an inferior discursive mode in comparison with literary discourse. Clarkson argues that it is problematic to treat criticism

as secondary to fiction insofar as Coetzee's own literary production is concerned (and indeed, as she notes, Coetzee's body of criticism fills five volumes). Essentially, her point concerns the dialogue internal to Coetzee's writings as a whole, which was first pointed out by Attwell in *Doubling the Point*. This dialogue between Coetzee's fiction and nonfiction eventually leads her to pose the question as to whether it is worthwhile to draw a line between the novelist and the scholar.

My approach to the relationship between literary and critical discourse differs from Clarkson's in that I focus primarily on criticism *of* Coetzee, rather than *by* Coetzee. Yet her hesitation to draw a sharp line between Coetzee the writer of fiction and Coetzee the scholar also converges with my conclusions about the superior discursive authority of the creative writer. Clarkson touches on fictional works such as *The Lives of Animals*, which not only pose relevant questions for criticism, but that also function as pieces of critical writing.[4] As she suggests, "to consider [texts such as *Lives*] as dialogical and creative acts of criticism, rather than as fictions raising philosophical questions, is to consider Coetzee's oeuvre in an entirely different light … [in which] literary and critical texts would have a parallel and mutually dependent existence, alongside other texts in literature and philosophy" (232, 3). Similarly, the conception of "the artist as critic", with which Dancer synthesizes the ideal mutuality between literary and critical discourse, issues from a vantage point akin to Clarkson's (Dancer 139). From my perspective, both Dancer and Clarkson allude to a sense of completeness of Coetzee's authorial discourse, which ties in with what I refer to as a form of self-sufficiency in relation to other explanatory discourses.

Clarkson's chapter in the *Companion* is a smaller scale reworking of the argument of her monograph *J. M. Coetzee: Countervoices* (2009). Her discussion in the book is "an extended thinking through of the ethics and aesthetics of literary address", which she understands as part of what she calls Coetzee's "seriousness", borrowing the concept from Coetzee himself. "Seriousness", as he defines it, is "an imperative uniting the aesthetic and the ethical" (1, 2). More specifically, by approaching Coetzee "more broadly as a *writer*, rather than exclusively as a novelist", Clarkson explores "the *link* between Coetzee's explicit preoccupation with language from the perspective of the linguistic

[4] I will also present a reading of *The Lives of Animals* in Chapter 1.

sciences on the one hand, and the ethical force of his work, from a literary-philosophical perspective, on the other" (2, 3 italics in original).

Besides Clarkson's *Countervoices*, two other recent monographs examine Coetzee's scholarly writing in search for its connections with the fiction. I have mentioned them previously: Patrik Hayes's *J. M. Coetzee and the Novel: Writing and Politics after Beckett* (2010), and Jarad Zimbler's J. *M. Coetzee and the Politics of Style* (2014). Clarkson's, Hayes's, and Zimbler's monographs, in their holistic approach to Coetzee's writings, attest to the path-breaking influence of Attwell's case for the continuities between Coetzee's fiction and scholarly writings in *Doubling the Point* more than twenty years ago. Besides, as Helgesson points out in his review, both Hayes and Clarkson are preoccupied with the ethical seriousness of Coetzee's work. Hayes in particular shows "how one of its distinctive features is the irruption of the comic – the bathetic, the foolish, the absurd – in his fictions" (Helgesson, "Review" 447). Zimbler's *J. M. Coetzee and the Politics of Style,* apart from illustrating the critical habit of reading Coetzee with Coetzee, attends to the reading effects of his works, which are also important for my view of Coetzee's authorial agency. Zimbler examines the "stylistic qualities" of the novels in order to "show what it is about the work that affects us and why this manner of being affected is important" (Zimbler 7). His perspective, hence, as he puts it, has affinities with "socio-linguistics, pragmatics and narrative rhetoric" (6). Pragmatics and narrative rhetoric, as I will elaborate on in the next section and in Chapter 1, are also central to my theoretical apparatus.

Insofar as my recourse to narrative rhetoric is concerned, another monograph is worthy of mention here, if only because its title might misleadingly suggest a similarity with my approach: Gillian Dooley's *J. M. Coetzee and the Power of Narrative* (2010). Dooley also looks into the nonfiction as well as into the fiction, but her focus is mainly thematic, and she does not bring any definite theoretical framework to bear on the novels. Her project, as she presents it rather loosely, consists not "in examining the 'what' or even the 'why' of Coetzee's work in any detail", but in "[discovering] the 'how': whence does Coetzee's work derive its power" (2).

Finally, the two biographies of Coetzee produced thus far can also be seen from the vantage point of the biographers' treatment of their subject. In 2012, the first authorized biography of Coetzee, J. C. Kannemeyer's *J. M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing*, was published. In 2015, Atwell's *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing* came out. If the titles of both biographies are similar, the approaches

adopted by the biographers are, however, radically different. As Boehmer notes, Kannemayer writes "in the manner of a historian: his self-appointed task is not only to produce a biographical narrative about his subject but also to enlist that subject in a national history". His approach is traditionally "chronological, genealogical, and nationalist, sometimes even hagiographical" ("Reading between Life and Work" 441). Since the biographical subject in question is Coetzee, a writer who has explored "in depth … the fine connections between writing a life, life-writing, and writing fiction", Boehmer continues, Kannemeyer's "empirical and even unliterary approach" is a problem because of "the uncomplicated relation that it assumes between fact and fiction or narrative" (444). Attwell's biography, unsurprisingly, engages with Coetzee's life and writing in a completely different way. In fact, his approach is almost the perfect opposite of Kannemeymer's: whereas Kannemeyer privileges "fact over writing", Attwell's assumption is that "the writer's art encodes the negative of the personal stuff, the mould, or imprint but *not* the substance" (442, my italics).

In light of the argument that I will develop in the following chapters, namely, that Coetzee is very keen on preserving the integrity of his authorial discourse, Boehmer makes an interesting comment about his awareness of the kind of approach that a literary historian such as Kannemeyer would adopt. Her point is that Kannemeyer "does not himself feel qualified to offer critical commentary", which, Boehmer suggests, might have suited Coetzee particularly well:

> The degree to which Kannemeyer as his first biographer subscribes to a severe, even minimalist portrayal of the writer raises the speculation that the self-protective Coetzee may have felt drawn to Kannemeyer as his first biographer precisely because he was aware that by doing so he might keep his writerly persona *and* his personal privacy relatively intact (with the added advantage of being reclaimed for his birth-nation at a time when he was widely perceived to have abandoned it) … The irony that follows from this is that [Kannemeyer's] knowing autre-fictional subject always keeps in some sense one step ahead of the biographical narrative … ("Reading between Life and Work" 444,5 italics in original)

Unlike Kannemeyer's, Attwell's focus lies "on the life, *and* on how the art encodes the life, no matter how obliquely; on how the self is woven into, and then out of, the work" (italics in original). His project is clearly an interpretive one, since "he approaches each of Coetzee's published fictions armed with a set of working hypotheses, like provisional road maps or navigational devices"

(446).[5] Once again, proximity is his guiding principle: Attwell follows in the tracks of Coetzee's slipperiness and rehearses it once again, reinforcing the widely known view of how the author's life informs the writing in all but a straightforward way. This view, it is important to note, is first and foremost Coetzee's own, most expressively conveyed in his memoirs, especially *Summertime*, as I will show in Chapter 3. Most telling, however, is the persistent impulse, or imperative, to pay a tribute, to lift Coetzee to the pantheon of great authors (as though a Nobel Prize of Literature did not suffice to do so). As in *Politics of Writing*, the tone of deference and homage is present in several passages of *Life of Writing*, like the one below:

> Most ordinary readers, among whom I include myself, remain fascinated by biography, especially the insights it affords into the creative processes that produce the fictions we treasure most. When I introduced *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* twenty years ago, I said that I was uncertain whether the book was a tribute or a betrayal, 'infinitely wishing' that it were the former. I am caught in the same quandary today. I respect the novels as public documents no less that I did then, but my admiration has undergone a major change, from the finished work to the immense labour, and the openness to the difficult and the strange, that have produced one of the exemplary authorships of our times. (22, 3)

Coetzee is unanimously respected and admired by his readers and critics, and this admiration is certainly just. But, once again, the return to a celebratory approach when one is dealing with a remarkably authoritative and by now widely celebrated writer (who, besides, is so skeptical of the critical industry) raises the question of the extent to which criticism can indulge in passion. To be sure, Attwell is writing a biography, so his objective is primarily to understand Coetzee's creative process, rather than interrogate it. Nevertheless, given the overflow of critical recognition that Coetzee has received through the years, what does deference add, at this point, to the shared critical project of establishing a dialogue with the literary discourse, testing its principles and assumptions, casting new light upon them, and refining the understanding of literature?

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[5] Note that Attwell himself distinguishes his biography from his previous criticism: "Now, twenty years [after *Politics of Writing*], I take an entirely different approach, a step back in order to look again, this time not as a literary critic would, which is to say at the finished works, but at the authorship that underlies them: its creative processes and sources, its oddities and victories – above all, at the remarkable ways in which it transforms its often quite ordinary materials into unforgettable fiction" (18).

Celebration of the author, as I will discuss in the next section, can be seen as a matter of principle. The writing of a literary work is a unique individual act, and this individuality, as the phenomenological critics of the Geneva school advocated, must always be recognized and asserted. This is the reason why proximity must inform the critic's approach: without coming close to the author, one cannot detect his or her uniqueness. In the end, however, the critic should strive to see the author and the work from a certain distance, put both into a wider perspective and, most importantly, say something different from what the author says. The mutual agency between author and critic, in Starobinski's conception, is grounded on difference.

With Coetzee, proximity is particularly problematic because, writing as a critic as well, he indirectly furnishes his interpreters with the terms to read his novels, which makes the ultimate differentiation between author and critic particularly ambiguous. As far as the mutual agency between author and critic is concerned, Coetzee projects and protects the integrity of his writing to such a degree that the critical dialogue, as I will argue in connection with his autobiography, does not seem to be welcome. The next section develops the theoretical framework I employ to identify the internal contradictions of a criticism based on proximity and to address Coetzee's preemptive awareness of his reception. Those two issues require two different, but complementary, theoretical perspectives: phenomenological criticism, which dwells on proximity and distance, and rhetorical narrative theory, which accounts for how authorial views can be gauged with basis on narrative input.

Author and Critic: Phenomenological and Rhetorical Perspectives

The phenomenological critics of the Geneva school practiced a form of criticism that aimed to gain access to the unique interiority of the artist. Despite the idiosyncrasies in each critic's thought, their approaches converge around identification, indeed coincidence, between the critical and the authorial consciousness that is manifested by the work. The dominant feature of their thinking is empathy, the passive act of letting oneself be taken over and transformed by the other. It is by means of an empathetic reading that the other is made familiar to the critic. As Hillis Miller puts it, the phenomenological criticism of the Geneva school aimed to bring the inner life of the creative artist "into the interior space of the critic's mind" (307).

The emphasis on identification and coincidence between the authorial and the critical consciousness comes from the work of George Poulet, who is a common formative influence for the Geneva critics. Poulet subscribes to a Cartesian view of the creative consciousness as "intransitive [and] preconceptual", a mode of consciousness that "precedes any consciousness *of* something" (Morrissey xxvii, italics in original). His objective is to identify totally with this pure consciousness, so that criticism in effect redoubles it, or becomes an extension of it. Empathy and complete coincidence do not only inform his thinking about criticism from beginning to end; in fact, they are the very end, or the goal, of the critical practice that he advocates.

Jean Starobinski has a different conception of the end of the critical work: he imagines it as a trajectory from proximity, which encompasses the empathetic reading, to distance, in which there is a differentiation between the critical and the authorial consciousness. This difference stems from his conception of the creative consciousness. Unlike Poulet, Starobinski adopts an essentially anti-Cartesian, that is to say, relational view of consciousness. In this respect, his critical work is typically phenomenological: there is no pure consciousness that is not inextricably intermingled with the world, no consciousness that is not already consciousness of another. The theoretical consequence of this stance necessarily leads to differentiation between author and critic. For Starobinski, the initial empathetic moment of reading provides the critic with a vantage point into the other as other and, hence, into the self as other to the text. Therefore, the task at issue for the critic cannot simply involve, and end with, identification. The recognition of difference is already in place, so that the critical work cannot limit itself to being a simple extension of the creative consciousness.

An empathetic reading, as Starobinski argues in a long explanation of Rousseau's *Confessions*, incurs the risk of ending in an interpretive tautology. To use the object of interpretation as a model for the interpretive method applied to it implies that "a single discourse travels, reverberating back upon itself … always certain of confirmation by its object" (*The Living Eye* 224). To a great extent, circularity is inescapable: "our theories are turned back upon themselves, in which everything begins and ends with what we say but only after passing through our object, which functions much as a crystal does when it diffracts a beam of particles or rays focused upon it" (224). This circularity to which Starobinski refers is that of Gadamer's hermeneutic circle, which "begins with a particular, distinctive, significant occurrence and ends with the

same occurrence, only now legitimized in its particularity and significance" (227). The idea is that interpretation also presupposes above all a dialogical thought process in which "it is not my discourse that assimilates and absorbs the object, but the object that elicits and absorbs my discourse" (227).

Yet Starobinski's conception of the critical work as ultimately a *linear* trajectory from proximity (or heteronomy, as he calls it) to distance (autonomy), rather than a circle, undoubtedly indicates that distance from the authorial consciousness is imperative in order to avoid the appropriation or subordination of the critical discourse by the authorial discourse. It is the assertion of difference that grants the critical work interpretive authority by preventing it from being a tautological second-hand reflection of the literary work. If criticism does not change its relation to the literary text from the "spontaneous sympathy" of the first reading, in which the critic "[tries] to identify quite closely with the law of the work", towards a "free" or "autonomous reflection about the work and the history of which it is a part", it limits itself "to the role of providing a sensitive echo, an intellectualized reflection of the work, docilely obedient to the uniquely seductive qualities of each individual text, … whose evocative magic [one has] endured without resistance and without reflective examination" (113, 14, 17).

More than a trajectory, Starobinski envisions the critical work as an encounter of two unique creative personalities, one artistic and the other critical, on an equal footing. He borrows a concept from stylistic analysis, the *écart*, in order to provide the theoretical basis for the equality between author and critic.[6] As Morrissey explains, the *écart*, a notion that applies both to the production and the interpretation of literature, signals a deviation from the norm, an individual's "refusal to be determined by the structures in place":

> From the point of view of production or writing as an existential act, the *écart* is a divergence implying the revolt of the individual against the norm. … Here writing is, in its very essence, an "oppositional act" in that, on the one hand, it expresses the adhesion to an acceptance of the norm and determining structures inherent in language and, on the other, it reveals *at the same time* an intention of refusal or revolt, be it conscious or not. (xviii, italics in original).

As a token of the individuality of a creative consciousness, the *écart* functions on a theoretical level as an index of balance between the two unique

[6] The *écart* is a concept from the theory of stylistic analysis proposed by the German scholar Leo Spitzer.

personalities of the author and the critic. From the perspective of the critic, the *écart* is a kind of guarantee of autonomy; it distinguishes the critic's refusal to be assimilated by that to which he or she responds.

From a theoretical point of view, the critical trajectory from proximity to distance, which leads eventually to the perfect encounter between two unique intellectual sensibilities, is extremely attractive. Thus conceived, criticism is ideally a movement from the initial commitment to letting the intense experience of a text pervade and guide the response, which opens the critic to a unique creative sensibility and celebrates the "existential act" of an individual, as Morrissey put it in the quote above, towards reflective freedom. Starobinski theorizes an "ideal critical work" that, in his words, "seeks both to abolish difference (through an inclusive and totalizing discourse) and to preserve distance (by understanding the other as other)" (*Eye* 227). One could argue that, by describing it as an "ideal" criticism, Starobinski is not only articulating what is most desirable, but also already indirectly communicating that this trajectory is potentially unachievable in practice. Nevertheless, what emerges most clearly from his writing is that his phenomenological criticism proposes for itself a very difficult task when it attempts to reconcile passion, from which it originates, and power, which it must in the end exercise. Starobinski moves back and forth in his thinking, at times underscoring the need to do justice to the work and the author by recognizing and celebrating their singularity, at times safeguarding the authority of criticism, which, as a posterior existential and individual act, cannot be secondary in the sense of being submissive or thoroughly passive. For instance, criticism must, on the one hand, "wed the work and avoid becoming a 'celibate machine'" (and this metaphor of a marriage between author and critic is one which Coetzee also uses). The critic, though, "is never more than the prince consort of poetry, and the offspring of their union cannot inherit the throne" (124). Obviously, as the "prince consort", criticism is in a subordinate position; Starobinski, thus, shifts the balance of power with another metaphor: "My reading must breathe life into the work … I must bring the work back to life in order to love it; I must make it speak in order to respond to it … Hence one might say that the work always begins as 'our dearly departed', awaiting resurrection through us" (124).

At the end of "The Critical Relation", Starobinski raises the critical work to such heights that it loses itself, becoming its beloved other:

> If criticism is to be up to all of its tasks, … then it cannot remain within the confines of verifiable knowledge. It must become a work of literature in its own right, and incur the risks associated with any such work. Hence it will bear the stamp of a personality, but a personality that has been subjected to the impersonal ascetic discipline of "objective" knowledge and scientific technique. It will be knowledge about language incorporated into a new language of its own, an analysis of the poetic "event" that becomes an event in its own right. By delving into the material substance of the work, by exploring the details of its construction, its formal makeup, its inner harmonies and extrinsic relations, criticism enhances its capacity to recognize the trace of an action. Rehearsing that action in its own way, it judges and thereby bestows upon it a heightened meaning … (127, 8)

At this point, Starobinski comes precisely to the change of nature aspired by Dancer's criticism of presence, encapsulated in the ambiguous phrase "the artist as critic", with which he synthesizes the kind of imaginative, creative sensibility required from (or desired by) the critic (Dancer 139). But neither Dancer nor Starobinski seems able to sustain the aspired mutuality between author and critic. Dancer's phrase suggests that this superior creative and analytical sensibility is the *artist's*, not the critic's. Starobinski, in contrast, restores the imbalance of power, putting the critic once again in the higher position from which he "judges and thereby bestows" meaning upon the work.

Looking into the criticism of presence through the lens of phenomenological criticism, mutuality between author and critic is unattainable. As I will show in Chapter 1, Attridge's ethical and creative criticism, inspired to a great extent in Coetzee's work, also rests on similarly very attractive but unstable grounds: it purports to aspire to mutuality and commensurability between both, but also ends up with an ambiguous differentiation between same and other. Furthermore, in Chapter 3, I will examine one instance of Attridge's practice and argue that it takes over Coetzee's literary discourse (or, to borrow Coetzee's phrase, it "overpowers" the work).

I will also explore mutuality from the perspective of Coetzee's authorial discourse, which brings me to the theoretical concepts that enable me to do so. My argument about Coetzee's views about proximity and mutuality presupposes that narratives can communicate authorial views. In other words, I assume that the elements that constitute a narrative can serve as a basis for inferences about an author's views on a given subject. This orientation of my argument can be described as rhetorical, for it places emphasis on the

communicative dimension of Coetzee's writing. Such emphasis naturally introduces a concern with the intentional component of the authorial communication, that is to say, with the assumption that the author deliberately shapes the text with the aim of communicating something in particular. Approaches to narrative as a communicative act have, in diverse ways, dealt with this assumption under the rubric of authorial intent. The much-debated concept of the implied author, for instance, testifies to the attention that authorial intent has received from theorists, as well as to the disagreements that prevail about the premise that a text can be approached as a vehicle of its author's prior communicative intentions.

In the context of Coetzee's literary production, one of the most salient aspects of his creative process poses a challenge to the concept of authorial intent: Coetzee has made manifest that the potential meanings of his works exceed his conscious participation in, and control of, the creative process. A crucial feature of his communicative act, in other words, is precisely the emphasis on the author's abdication, as it were, of influence over the meanings of a text, which implies a shift from the focus on authorial intent to the implication of the interpreter in the creation of those meanings.

This aspect of Coetzee's view of authorship requires an understanding of authorial agency within a rhetorical framework that strikes a balance between two poles. On the one hand, it must subscribe to the commonsensical principle that a text communicates an authorial desire to express something (otherwise, it could not approach a text as a communicative act). On the other hand, this rhetorical perspective must also make explicit that what it reveals about Coetzee's views on the subject of critical proximity and mutuality is the product of inferences that have arisen as a consequence of the specific context in which his novels are read.

The claims about Coetzee's authorial agency made here rely, therefore, on an interpretive context in which certain inferences about his views emerge as more likely to be accurate than others. Broadly speaking, this shift from intentionality to context has affinities with what Jerrold Levinson defines as hypothetical or constructive intentionalism. A hypothetical intentionalist view attaches meaning primarily to the context in which an utterance is produced and received, which includes, apart from "directly observable features of the utterance", also "something of the characteristics of the author who projects the text, something of the text's place in a surrounding oeuvre and culture, and possibly other elements as well" (223). Intention is, as Levinson puts it,

"optimally hypothesized", so that the meaning of an utterance is tied to "our best appropriately informed projection of author's intended meaning" (224). As far as the interpreter is concerned, Levinson also conceives of something like an optimally hypothesized reader that he calls, simply, "an appropriate reader … versed in and cognizant of the tradition out of which the work arises, acquainted with the rest of the author's oeuvre, and perhaps familiar as well with the author's public literary and intellectual identity and persona" (228).

From a specifically rhetorical perspective, a hypothetical intentionalist view on the authorial communicative act resonates with Richard Walsh's approach to narrative production and reception. Walsh's primary concern is with fictionality, which he distinguishes from the common understanding of fiction as generic category. In order to propose a conception of fictionality "as a particular way of meaning", Walsh sees the communicative exchange between writer and reader from the perspective of the pragmatics of communication, whose emphasis lies on the context in which a communicative act occurs (6). A pragmatic approach to communication understands intention in minimal terms as the intention to communicate; as for what is communicated, meanings of utterances are gauged with basis on literal content (what is said) and, most importantly, with basis on the so-called non-literal content of an utterance, which comprises inferences produced within the specific context of communication.

The minimal take on authorial intent and the attention to contextual meaning provide the foundation for my understanding of Coetzee's communicative act and, therefore, for my claims about his implied views about the activity of the critic. This perspective informs the argument as a whole, but it becomes particularly clearer in the literary chapters when I account for the responses to *Disgrace* and to Coetzee's memoirs. The point of departure for the discussion of these works is the assumption that the authorial communicative act can be discerned in tandem with the configuration of narrative elements, relevant extratextual sources, and responses to the works in question. In the case of *Disgrace*, these three elements reveal the provocative dimension of Coetzee's communicative act that is an important piece in my characterization of his resistance to critical containment or appropriation. In the case of the memoirs, the element that initially defines the authorial communicative act is absolute truthfulness, or "truth-directedness", which is a concept coined by Coetzee himself. As the

Swedish Academy puts it in its Press Release, Coetzee is a "scrupulous doubter", a statement which attests to the shared critical view of his autobiographical writing as extraordinarily honest ("The Nobel Prize in Literature to John Maxwell Coetzee"). My own perspective into the configuration of the memoirs, the extratextual sources that illuminate them, and into the responses that they have elicited prompt me, however, to characterize the authorial communicative act in different terms. In line with my description of Coetzee as a provocative writer, the autobiographer that emerges in the memoirs is markedly refractory in relation to the critic; more than a truth-directed writing, what Coetzee produces in his autobiographical narratives is a writing that interrogates and rejects the work of the critic.

Rhetorical narrative theory also plays an important role in my reading of *Summertime* as a work that evinces Coetzee's rejection of critical proximity and mutuality. *Summertime* is a narrative that forces the reader to scrutinize the purported proximity between its fictitious character narrators and the autobiographical subject, that is, Coetzee. To be read as a memoir, *Summertime* requires that the reader take these fictitious character narrators as authorial voices. My reading focuses on the extent to which these character narrators can be taken as spokespersons for Coetzee, as well as on the implications of the assumption that *Summertime* is the memoir of a truth-directed writer. In order to do this, I build on the work of two narratologists: Susan Lanser, who reflects on how the authority of a character narrator as an authorial voice is construed throughout the narrative by means of mimetic and diegetic factors; and James Phelan, who addresses the inescapable unreliability that is intrinsic to character narration.

In part, Coetzee's relationship with critical proximity and mutuality can be described as a progression, insofar as it is possible to identify the emergence and the consolidation of these concepts. A bird's eye view over his works and their reception reveals the broad contours of two different phases in this relationship, in which his authorial agency in relation to proximity and mutuality changes. Yet insofar as Coetzee's works keep eliciting responses, the relationship between author and critic can also be thought of as a recursive one, for the grounds and the terms of this relationship keep on changing.[7]

[7] The idea of a recursive relationship that involves "authorial agency, textual phenomena, and reader response" is a cornerstone in Phelan's conception of narrative as a rhetorical act (*Living to Tell About* It 18, 19).

The overview of the chapters that follow specifies the function of each chapter in my characterization of this relationship.

Overview of the Chapters

I begin Chapter 1 with a discussion of the emergence and the consolidation of critical proximity and mutuality among Coetzee scholars by looking into Attwell's and Attridge's works. As regards the emergence of proximity and mutuality, two aspects are significant: the intellectual climate in South Africa and Coetzee's dialogues with Attwell in *Doubling the Point*. Attwell is keen to tell his readers in the introduction to the book that his proximal engagement with Coetzee does not "install" the author as "the final authority" on the issues discussed (3). Yet a closer look into their exchanges reveals that the balance of authority between both is questionable. When Attridge publishes *Ethics of Reading* and *The Singularity of Literature* about a decade after Attwell's intervention in the field, he consolidates proximity as a congenial method to read Coetzee. Mutuality in particular is the focus of attention in my discussion of Attridge's work, since his theory of reading seems to be the perfect counterpart to Coetzee's authorial discourse. The question that arises is whether a writer such as Coetzee would welcome a theoretically ideal reader, someone who not only understands the work perfectly but who can paraphrase its singularity and, therefore, potentially erase it. Turning from the critics to look more closely into Coetzee's authorial discourse, I examine some of his fiction and nonfiction and start outlining the picture of the self-sufficient writer, keen on preserving the integrity of his writing against certain types of reading. This aspect of my discussion pivots on the analysis of the self-referential later oeuvre and of the specificities of the autobiographical contract proposed by Coetzee. I conclude that, with "Confession and Double Thoughts", Coetzee effectively furnishes the interpretive framework for his autobiography. Most importantly, if one abides by the argument of the essay to read his autobiography, one must account for the way in which Coetzee discredits the interpreter by conceiving of interpretation not simply as fallible or provisional, but as self-interested too. This aspect of his authorial discourse is the kernel of what I refer to as his rejection of critical proximity and mutuality.

From proximity and mutuality in Chapter 1, I move to self-sufficiency in Chapters 2 and 3, and offer two different perspectives into Coetzee's authorial

discourse as self-contained. Chapter 2 presents a reading of *Disgrace* in light of "Confession and Double Thoughts". I read *Disgrace* as a conversion narrative in which the protagonist's inward look reenacts the oscillation between truth-directedness and the double thought that are central to Coetzee's analysis of confession and truth in the essay. But the novel does not simply reproduce the argument of the essay; it also responds to it by configuring the protagonist's journey towards a secular form of grace in such a way as to present the possibility of closure for his self-examination. From this point of view, one can argue both for mutuality and self-sufficiency within the authorial discourse. It is possible to think of a degree of mutual agency between novel and essay, as though Coetzee had first explored the problems of self-examination and truth in "Confession and Double Thoughts" and then reimagined them in *Disgrace*. However, insofar as the novel contains within its narrative form a possibility of closure that escapes real-life soul searching, it offers what could be described as a fuller and perhaps even more satisfactory treatment of the problems of self-examination and truth. In other words, the discourse of the novel suffices to expose and to show the way out of the impasse of self-examination.

Chapter 3 addresses the self-sufficiency of Coetzee's autobiographical writing. I begin by discussing how his memoirs *Boyhood* and *Youth* have been read, and devote special attention to Attridge's reading. This part of the argument returns to the question posed in Chapter 1 about the implications of an ideal Coetzee reader. I argue that Attridge claims such proximity to the story of Coetzee's life as to overinterpret it, as it were, removing the ambiguity of the oscillation between truth-directedness and the double thought that is the defining feature of all of Coetzee's self-referential writing, fictional or autobiographical. I then read *Summertime* as Coetzee's critique of proximity when one interprets his life writing. Coetzee's autobiographical truth, told by all but himself in the narrative, seems to be everywhere and nowhere at the same time: the truth about him is depicted as assumptions, beliefs, judgment calls, all of which are tainted by the very close attachment of the interpreters to the author. By discrediting the interpreters of his life writing in *Summertime*, Coetzee seems to propose a form of readerly engagement with his autobiography in which the reader has no say, or no interpretive authority. The dialogical dimension of his autobiographical writing seems to disregard the interpreter: it is confined to the writer and the medium. In this sense, the authorial discourse can be thought of as self-contained.

The conclusion sums up the main arguments developed in each chapter and considers where Coetzee's self-sufficiency and the inescapable ambivalences of proximity, both in relation to the authorial discourse and to the dynamics that prevails in the critical field, leave the Coetzee critic at this point.

Chapter 1 – Proximity and Mutuality: Critical Ambitions, Authorial Limits

This chapter addresses the reasons why proximity and mutuality create very unstable grounds to engage with Coetzee. First, I examine why it has once made sense to adopt a proximal approach to his writing: to a great extent, proximity with Coetzee can be justified on the basis of historical context. The particular context of reception of his writing contributed to making proximity something close to an intellectual imperative. Yet the dynamics of the critical field also comes into play here, compelling critics to respond to one another in such a way as to establish proximity as an almost irrevocable principle to read Coetzee. My tracing of the origins of proximity and my effort to understand its rationale do not overlook what I consider the main challenge to a proximal approach to Coetzee, namely, his characteristic resistance to criticism. The second half of the chapter elaborates on this aspect of the argument in greater detail. I discuss two instances of Coetzee's nonfiction, his Nobel lecture, and *The Lives of Animals*. Finally, I consider the self-referentiality of Coetzee's later works and the way it projects the self-sufficient author.

The Political Discourse about Coetzee's Novels: Before and After Attwell

In a few words, one can describe the impact of Attwell's work as follows: in *Politics of Writing*, he does a great deal to undermine the assumptions about Coetzee's writing that prevailed during the 1980s; in *Doubling the Point*, the volume of interviews with Coetzee in which Attwell is the editor, he paves the way for a new kind of critical engagement with Coetzee.

The change of perspective that *Politics of Writing* and *Doubling the Point* brought to Coetzee criticism must be seen against the background of the South African literary scene in the 1980s. Literary criticism in South Africa at that time was marked, as Michael Chapman puts it, by "the binaries of apartheid/liberation politics": a novelist's social commitment to the struggle for liberation was measured against the degree to which literature explicitly

bore witness to the state oppression. The realist text was considered a bearer of political truth, whereas texts which employed more figurative or less mimetic techniques allegedly "reduced content to formal device", with the result that their authors were often found "guilty of social irresponsibility" on the grounds of a refusal to engage with historical events ("The Case of Coetzee" 105). In this polarized setting, it is not surprising that Coetzee's early works produced between mid-1970s and mid-1980s, intricate and oblique metafictional narratives, were generally deemed politically evasive or downright socially irresponsible. In contrast, as has been exhaustively pointed out, Nadine Gordimer's realist novels were taken as a more straightforward or undisguised challenge to apartheid politics.[8]

Dominic Head also comments on this polarization of South African criticism. By the mid-80s, there were critics who believed Coetzee's works, and the earlier novels in particular, to be "either complicitous, or weak, in a political sense, an inadequate response to the horrors of apartheid South Africa and its legacy". Other critics, however, identified a more imaginative critique of the South African situation in his works, arguing from the late 1980s onwards that "where issues of complicity are treated …, they are treated self-consciously, as part of the writer's project" (*Cambridge Introduction* 95, 6). With hindsight, this literary political agency of Coetzee's writing during the 1980s could be described, as Stefan Helgesson suggests, as disruptive: given that "representational convention itself" was part of the problem of responding to the crisis of the 1980s, Coetzee (but also writers such as Njabulo Ndebele or even Nadine Gordimer) deliberately disrupted "representational and generic expectations" upon the fiction (*Writing in Crisis* 4).

Before I go on to examine the impact of Attwell's work, I want to acknowledge here (if only to dismiss it in the end) a widely debated and complex issue that hovers over my brief discussion of Coetzee's insertion in the South African context. I am referring to the debate about the literary agency proposed by writers who were suspicious of struggle literature and its socio-political realism. It would be impossible for me here to account for the complexity of the South African situation in this respect, let alone to address the South African situation against the backdrop of what could be described

[8] See also Michael Chapman's "Coetzee, Gordimer and the Nobel Prize", and Kelly Hewson's "Making the 'Revolutionary Gesture': Nadine Gordimer, J. M. Coetzee and Some Variations on the Writer's Responsibility".

as a much broader African context in which writers from other African countries have explored the possibilities of writing as a reaction to European domination. What is relevant for the specific argument about criticism advanced here is the present consolidated view about the nature of the intervention made by Coetzee's postmodern/poststructuralist kind of writing in apartheid South Africa: in other words, many scholars would agree by now that the critique of realism embedded in his early writing was all but apolitical.

Attwell's book *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* responds directly to the critical consensus that prevailed in the 1980s about Coetzee's political slipperiness. Attwell gives a powerfully persuasive account of the political import of Coetzee's postmodern strategies in the fractured South African context. He focuses on the novels' peculiar combination of basic plots that explore the national historical narrative of colonialism and decolonization with a general sense of indeterminacy that undermines the truth claims and political certainties of the realist postcolonial novel. *Dusklands* (1974) and *In the Heart of the Country* (1978) begin the historical narrative of colonialism by depicting the violence of the colonizer and the settlement. *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1981) portrays the state of uncertainty at the end of colonial imperialism. Civil war provides the backdrop for both Michael K's and Mrs. Curren's narratives, in *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) and *Age of Iron* (1990), respectively, whereas *Foe* (1986) calls into question the power and authority of the metropolitan canon. Even though these novels elicit readings that privilege the historical context depicted or alluded to in the narratives, or that surrounds their production, they also disrupt responses that align the text with an external historical reality.[9] In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, for example, Coetzee gives no clear indication of when and where the story unfolds, and the novel's main characters have no proper names, being simply referred to as the Magistrate or the barbarian girl. Michael K, wandering in a country in turmoil, resembles "a kind of Derridean trace, refusing to occupy a fixed place in the system", as Attwell suggests in *Doubling the Point* (245).

The claim that author and narrative are inevitably implicated in questions of power, representativeness, legitimacy and, above all, cultural authority in South Africa was a major turning point in Coetzee criticism: it went a long way towards redressing the accusations of political evasiveness or complicity

[9] Head reiterates Attwell's argument: Coetzee "puts his readers through the experience of being enticed to overlay a work with a template of meaning before realizing the incompleteness or even complicity of such readings" ("A Belief in Frogs" 104).

leveled at him. Undoubtedly, this change in the perception of Coetzee's writing must, to a great extent, be attributed to the impact of Attwell's work, but what has given this perspective into Coetzee's novels almost unquestioned authority was Coetzee himself. *Politics of Writing* marks a change in Coetzee criticism because the new critical perspective that Attwell offers in his book is sanctioned by Coetzee in the interviews that he gives to Attwell in *Doubling the Point*. As Attwell himself put it in a conversation with Elleke Boehmer, *Politics of Writing* and *Doubling the Point* were "mutually reinforcing" projects ("Doubling the Writer" 59). The mutual reinforcement between both works is evident in the context of the key argument about positionality. In *Politics of Writing*, Attwell explores what he describes as Coetzee's "reflexive examination of the constitutive role of language in placing the subject within history" (3). In *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee describes himself as "not only blind but, written … as a white South African into the latter half of the twentieth century, disabled, disqualified – a man-who-writes reacts to the situation he finds himself in of being without authority, writing without authority" (392).

One can begin examining the impact of Attwell's work in *Doubling the Point* by addressing two different but interrelated aspects: the significance of the interviews for Attwell's career as a Coetzee scholar and the significance of the interviews for scholarship on Coetzee. Not only does *Doubling the Point* lend considerable credibility to the new political discourse about Coetzee that is shaped in *Politics of Writing*, but it also distinguishes Attwell as the critic who has made Coetzee speak. When *Doubling the Point* came out, Coetzee was known among literary scholars as a tight-lipped intellectual who did not welcome questions about the diverse ethical, political, aesthetic, and philosophical issues taken up in his novels. Against the background of this recalcitrance with interviewers, itself a token of his wariness of critics who either "betray" or "overpower" the literary work, the responses to Attwell in *Doubling the Point* offer extraordinary insight into his fiction (61).[10] The second aspect, the significance of the interviews for scholarship on Coetzee, reveals how Attwell's work in *Doubling the Point* has transformed Coetzee criticism to a greater degree than his work in *Politics of Writing*: Attwell identified the formative role of Coetzee's academic background in his novelistic writing, an insight that still generates productive interpretations of his oeuvre. Attwell

[10] Coetzee published other collections of essays as well. Before the work with Attwell, he had published *White Writing* (1988). After *Doubling the Point*, *Giving Offense* came out in 1996; *Stranger Shores*, in 2001; and *Inner Workings*, in 2007.

promotes Coetzee's fiction as a consolidation of his academic expertise, capturing two different facets of his intellectual activity that were unknown at the time: "The intensity and accomplishment of Coetzee's life in literature and scholarship … as linguist and stylistician, critic of metropolitan and modern South African literatures, translator, essayist in popular culture, reviewer, polemicist, and autobiographer … are borne out finally in the novels" (2).

Given Coetzee's aversion to interviews, the fact that Attwell has managed to prompt elaborate and sometimes even lengthy responses from him is worth looking into. It is clear that Attwell had read extensively in preparation for the interviews; he shows that he is well acquainted not only with Coetzee's writing, but with its sources too, which testifies to his effort to create an intellectual common ground for the exchanges. Typically, Attwell inquires into Coetzee's work from a theoretical angle; Coetzee responds by showing that he knows the theory and then offers a more personal response that evinces his experience of literary works and novelistic writing. The fact that Coetzee does speak to Attwell as he had not done to any other interviewer or critic at that time is, undoubtedly, proof of the success of Attwell's approach. However, one can also wonder to what extent Coetzee speaks not only because he meets a genuinely interested interlocutor, but also because he is not faced with any real resistance on Attwell's part. Put differently, Attwell does not seriously disagree with Coetzee's views in any moment. Aware of the trap that such an accommodating attitude sets up for a critical work, he is careful to define his critical agency in terms of resistance both in *Doubling the Point* and in *Politics of Writing*. In his view, the dialogical nature of his approach goes beyond a restatement of Coetzee's views (which is irresistibly suggested by the word "doubling") insofar as he strives to "conduct a conscientious inquiry in which Coetzee is not installed as final authority" (*Doubling* 3). From Attwell's perspective, "doubling" is meant to capture Coetzee's characteristic reflexive self-consciousness that, prompted by the interviews, adds another layer of meaning to his authorial discourse (2, 3). In *Politics of Writing,* Attwell assures his readers that despite the ambiguous historical engagement of the novels, he will "read Coetzee 'against the grain' … [asserting] again and again the historicity of the act of storytelling [and] continually reading the novels back into their context" (6, 7).

I want to touch on two issues which attach to Attwell's accommodating critical attitude. Most immediately, one can consider whether and to what extent it would be correct to assume that Coetzee is not installed as the final

authority in a project such as *Doubling the Point*. The book is, after all, *Coetzee's*, not Attwell's. The words of Frank Kermode on the back cover of the book make it clear: the interviews "give a strong impression of the author on his own view of what he is trying to do". The second issue is the reverberation of critical proximity in the interpretive community of Coetzee scholars. While it would be inaccurate to claim that all critics have simply avoided disagreeing with Coetzee's views, one must nevertheless consider whether "doubling" has not become an apt description of the scholarly tendency to come back to the theoretical questions and literary themes explored in the interviews, a tendency often accompanied by admiration for Coetzee's intellect. To be sure, after *Doubling the Point* Coetzee was met with a storm of disagreement and even disapproval by his readers when *Disgrace* came out in the end of the 1990s. This disapproval, however, has not shaken or undermined critical admiration, on the contrary. With the increase of his readership and of the scholarship on his works since *Disgrace* and the Nobel Prize, Coetzee's intellectual authority has only grown. In 2010, that is to say, almost a decade after the publication of *Doubling the Point*, the critical doubling of Attwell's approach to Coetzee was one of the issues that Boehmer put to Attwell in an interview. She referred to the far-reaching impact of the narrative that he created about Coetzee's intellectual development: "Here we find ourselves reading Coetzee through Attwell reading Coetzee; we regard him through the lens of your former critical perceptions of Coetzee developed in the interviews with him" ("Doubling the Writer" 60). Attwell recognizes that a "community of readers" has been formed, and adds that "there are surprisingly few serious schisms" in this community (60).

Finally, one can also reflect on the extent to which admiration, insofar as it distorts critical vision, might serve dubious purposes. I am not suggesting here that Attwell's admiration for Coetzee serves dubious purposes; the issue at stake here is whether admiration is a dubious element in the work of the critic. Put differently, could turning a blind eye to the vehemence of the attacks on literary criticism carried out by works such as *The Lives of Animals* and *Summertime*, for instance, both of which I will discuss further on, involve some kind of gain for the critic? Apparently, it should not, because blindness is disempowering. But if a measure of blindness is calculated and contributes to create a special attachment to the author, it becomes in effect an instrument of power in relation to other critics.

Among the responses that Attwell's work in *Doubling the Point* and in *Politics of Writing* has generated, Derek Attridge's books *The Singularity of Literature* and *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, published as companion volumes in 2004, are surely among the most notable. My use of the word "response" implies here, as I anticipated in the Introduction, both a development and a reaction. Attridge shares with Attwell the attempt to do justice to Coetzee's interrogation of the social role of literature. He also complements Attwell's argument that Coetzee's novels explore the tension between narrative and reality with his own case against literary instrumentalism, or "the treating of a text … as a means to a predetermined end: coming to the object with the hope or the assumption that it can be instrumental in furthering an existing project … [such as] a political or ethical cause" (*Singularity* 7, 8). In the terms that Attridge poses for his inquiry, however, one can also infer a reaction to the impact that Attwell's work has exerted on the field: whereas Attwell's monograph addresses "the politics of writing", Attridge's project is dedicated to the "ethics of reading".

Regardless of whether one sees the dialogue between both critics in terms of complementarity or opposition, I want to call attention to the fact that they have a clearly distinct conception of critical agency *in theory*. Attwell aligns critical agency with difference when he proposes to resist Coetzee's authorial discourse by reading him "against the grain", or by reading the novels "back into their [historical] context" (*Politics of Writing* 7). When it comes to practice, however, this allegedly resistant agency becomes a lot more ambiguous. As I will show, Attridge's theory of criticism put forward in *The Singularity of Literature* and illustrated with his readings of Coetzee's novels in *Ethics of Reading* puts emphasis not on agency, but on its opposite, passivity, as the prerequisite for the mutuality and agreement that his approach aims at. Essentially, though, both critics invest primarily in proximity with Coetzee's authorial discourse. Attwell showed that proximity could be a very rewarding method of exploring Coetzee's writing; Attridge, in turn, legitimized it as an ethical approach to literature, and a congenial approach to a writer such as Coetzee.

Finally, it is important to note that the shift from a political (post-Attwell) discourse to an ethical discourse about Coetzee's novels is closely related to the thematic shift in the novels themselves towards a mode of self-referentiality that, on the surface, favors or prompts a notion of mutuality between author and critic. The last section of this chapter will examine the

self-referential focus of Coetzee's later works and consider its main interpretive implications. The next section reflects on Attridge's response to Coetzee's work and on what it entails for other readers of Coetzee.

Attridge's Ethical Discourse about Coetzee's Novels: Passivity vs. Agency

Attridge's conception of the critical work is openly indebted to Levinas' and Derrida's ethical thinking about the asymmetrical encounter of the self with an alterity that demands a response. More specifically, he views both the writer's and the reader's contact with a literary work along the lines of the Derridean hospitable welcoming of the other into "the existing configurations of an individual's mental world" (*Singularity* 19). Attridge begins by exploring authorial accounts that describe the literary creation as engendered by an unknown and irresistible force. This encounter impels an authorial "relinquishment of intellectual control", as well as receptiveness to "hints of relationships, to incipient arguments, to images swimming on the edges of consciousness", which eventually "[break] down the familiar" (24, 23, 26). He then builds on the argument that the creative process opens an author to this inscrutable force that escapes authorial intention and control in order to urge the reader to adopt an equally receptive stance towards the literary work. By engaging the literary work with a "passive, though alert consciousness", and being therefore ready "to have one's purpose reshaped by the work to which one is responding", the reader or critic engages in what Attridge calls a "creative reading" (26, 80).[11]

Attridge's theory of an ethical readerly engagement shares a great deal with the progression from proximity to distance in Starobinski's phenomenological criticism. What he sees as the passive openness of the self to the other amounts essentially to the initial moment of heteronomy in Starobinski's trajectory, in which the critic should seek complete identification with the authorial discourse. Unsurprisingly, Attridge also has to address the interpretive tautology intrinsic to the closeness between author and critic. First, he rearticulates the phenomenological situatedness of interpretation with

[11] Attridge's alterity is a situated one and, in this respect, it clearly differs from the Levinasian absolute other. He has a specific concept to describe this situatedness: *idioculture*, on which I will elaborate in the following pages. For definitions of the concept, see for instance pages 21 and 22 of *The Singularity of Literature*.

his concept "idioculture", that is, "the deposit of our personal history as a participant in a number of ill-defined and often conflicting cultural fields, overlapping with or nested within one another".[12] He then goes on to conceive of the contact between an author's and a critic's idiocultures in terms reminiscent of the phenomenological fusion of horizons: "Any text we read – like any person we encounter – is the product of a unique cultural formation of this kind; the process of reading, therefore, is the process of subjecting my assumptions of the cultural fields that make up my own distinctive idioculture to those which the work embodies" (82). This encounter with the work is also recognizably phenomenological in its transformative aspect. Attridge conceives of it as an "act-event", a "movement into the unknown … experienced as something that *happens* to the reader" and that "opens new possibilities of meaning and feeling (understood as verbs)" (59, italics in original).

In the notion of an act-event that happens to the alert passive reader within a particular cultural, social, and political configuration reside both the appeal and the ambiguity of Attridge's ethical and creative criticism. The appeal of the creative reading originates in an ethical stance of openness to the unknown, a willingness to let the literary work "[remold] the self" (*Singularity* 24) On the other hand, the unknown is not coming from nowhere, but from an idioculture. For the critic, the alterity encountered always emanates from a creative consciousness whose particular prejudices and interests are "never entirely insulated from the contingencies of the history" of which it is part (59). Reviewers of Attridge's book have taken issue precisely with the act-event, raising the question of a critic's interpretive horizon and autonomy in relation to the situatedness of the discourse of the author, and thereby remarking on the critic's excessive assent to the author's agenda. For Rob Pope, the event "as pure (or mere) 'happening' … is ultimately fraught with respect to matters of agency … [because] it tends to neglect historical change and lack political direction" (385). For Tzachi Zamir, the problem is the "horizons and limitations" which Attridge's creative critic has to step beyond:

[12] What Gadamer calls "hermeneutical situatedness" is the very condition of knowledge in phenomenological thinking. Gadamer's concept is grounded on the phenomenological view of understanding as determined by the interpreter's prior involvement with that which is to be understood, as well as by the object of inquiry itself. Seen in this way, prior involvement is not a barrier to understanding, but a condition that enables it. Gadamer assigns a positive role to prejudice as pre-judgment, or foreknowledge, rather than as a bias that has to be minimized or eliminated.

"[We] are never in the hypothetical location Attridge requires us to inhabit in order to appreciate the singularity of literature … Intellectual maps are imposed and, once this is conceded, pressing us to look for the singularity of literature in remolding boundaries sounds more unstable than what first meets the eye" (420).

As with Starobinski's ideal critical work, Attridge's choice of words when he defines creative criticism creates a double bind between abolishing difference and preserving distance. His creative reading "must simultaneously bring [the work] into the field of the same – so that readers for whom it is a blank can begin to appreciate it – and affirm and sustain its otherness – so that readers can register its power" (*Singularity* 118). It is interesting to notice that, whereas Starobinski's use of "ideal", insofar as it hints at an unreality, almost immediately suggests a conflict between theoretical aspirations and practical achievements, Attridge's preference for "creative" evokes a more possible, or attainable, critical engagement.[13] Essentially, however, his creative reading cannot confine itself to sympathy with the authorial discourse if it is to secure interpretive autonomy; it must betray it: a creative reading is also in fact "a necessarily unfaithful reading … that is not entirely programmed by the work"; its aim is to convey "the singularity of the experience of reading for a given reader, a singularity that lies in its resistance to the very interpretive methods that give it its existence" (80, 118).

It is clear that there are significant affinities between Starobinski's phenomenological criticism and Attridge's ethical and creative approach. A significant difference, however, concerns how explicitly both critics tackle the tension between passivity and agency. In Attridge's writing, this tension is obscured by the ethical focus of the argument. He envisions a pacific coexistence between passivity and agency in the authorial creative process *and*, by implication, assumes that this pacific coexistence should prevail in the reader's engagement as well:

> Most of the time, our accounts of [the creative] process have to veer between narratives that suggest the energetic reshaping of existing configurations in order to produce the new – forging it in the smithy of one's soul, for instance – and narratives that suggest the passive experience of the other's irruption into the settled order – the most common of which

[13] It is difficult not to hear Coetzee in Attridge's choice of "creative". "If I were a truly creative critic", Coetzee tells Attwell in *Doubling the Point*, "I would work toward liberating that discourse – making it less monological" (246).

> has been inspiration by the Muse or some other external and inscrutable power. Thinking creatively about creation means thinking of these as two sides of the same coin. (*Singularity* 24, 5)

Attridge is primarily interested in the ethical potential of the literary response, and he elaborates on this potential by mirroring the critical agency on the authorial agency. To put it differently, he is interested in how a relationship (an ethical and creative one) can be established between writer and reader via the literary work. In order to illustrate how Attridge builds on this relationship, I will draw a brief parallel between hospitality, which is a defining aspect of his conception of authorial and critical agency, and the unconscious as a source of inspiration. Walsh pursues a similar line of reasoning, though from a rhetorical angle, when he discusses the unconscious in terms of how authors usually attribute to it the openness and the richness of the creative process. When both writer and reader recognize that inspiration (or the unexpected) is a significant aspect of creation, Walsh argues, a "common frame of reference" is created within which both can engage with the work on similar grounds (133). In Attridge's creative criticism, hospitality, understood as the opening of the self to the unknown other, constitutes this common frame of reference for authorial and critical agency; it becomes the shared mode of engagement with the literary work that establishes a mutual agreement or pact between author and critic.

Attridge's conception of hospitality and what it can potentially offer to the reader is also closely connected with his experience of Coetzee's writing and, because of this, it carries specific implications for readers of Coetzee. Attridge is explicit about this influence. For instance, when he describes the creative impulse arriving "in fits and starts", "a gradual process of false starts and wasted efforts, erasures and revisions, slowly inching nearer to an outcome that, one can only hope, will be the desired one", he quotes Lurie's opera emerging "astonishingly, in dribs and drabs" in *Disgrace* (*Singularity* 25; *Disgrace* 183). In other passages of Attridge's writing, one notices that Coetzee's presence is subtler, though not less formative. This is so, for instance, when he characterizes the creative impulse as an act of resisting the "mind's inclination toward repetition, its tendency to process any novelty it encounters in terms of the familiar" (*Singularity* 18). This formulation is noticeably reminiscent of Coetzee's much cited account of writing as

> … an interplay between the push into the future that takes you to the blank page in the first place, and a resistance. Part of that resistance is psychic, but

> part is also an automatism built into language: the tendency of words to call up other words, to fall into patterns that keep propagating themselves. Out of that interplay there emerges, if you are lucky, what you recognize or hope to recognize as the true. (*Doubling* 18)

There is plenty of evidence in Coetzee's novels to sustain Attridge's emphasis on the connection between hospitality and creation. In this sense, not only does Attridge build on the novels to formulate his theory of literary response; most obviously, he identifies and elucidates a defining feature of Coetzee's writing (another facet of the *écart*, as it were). Hospitality speaks directly to a recurrent motif in the novels: that of the writer as medium for what Coetzee calls "the true", a kind of channel for creation, rather than an actively creative agent (*Doubling* 18). This is the case in, for instance, *The Master of Petersburg*, in which the protagonist Dostoevsky, after spending almost all of the novel trying to conjure up the other (his deceased stepson Pavel) as his inspiration, finally lets himself "[follow] the dance of the pen" urged by an immaterial presence in the room (236 – 42). The writer Elizabeth Costello draws on the same metaphor when she introduces herself as "a secretary of the invisible, one of the many secretaries over the ages. That is my calling: dictation secretary. (…) I merely write down the words and then test them, test their soundness, to make sure I have heard right" (*Elizabeth Costello* 199). In a similar vein, Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* wishes to be "the medium, the median … Neither master nor slave, neither parent nor child, but the bridge between, so that in me the contraries should be reconciled!" (133). When David Lurie composes his Byronic opera in *Disgrace*, he likewise imagines himself as "being held in the music itself" (184).

It would be possible to imagine a degree of coincidence, more than mutuality, between Attridge and Coetzee within the common frame of reference that they share as intellectuals who have engaged with the South African literary environment (in Attridge's terms, this coincidence could be described as an overlap between his and Coetzee's idiocultures). Even though Attridge has not pursued his career in South Africa, where Coetzee experienced that several of his novels were read in a reductive or instrumental way, it makes sense that a theoretical discourse about literature based on the experience of Coetzee's writing should be premised on the opposite of appropriation, that is, hospitality. Yet the degree of proximity between the ethical foundation of Coetzee's authorial discourse and Attridge's critical theory inevitably brings up the issue of its impact on "the community of

readers" of Coetzee, as Attwell refers to it ("Doubling the Writer" 60). Head, for instance, comments on "the apparently close fit between Attridge's theory of responsible reading … and Coetzee's own implied views":

> Attridge's construction of the critical reading as an ethical event finds its perfect exemplar in Coetzee, whose novels seem, in a way, to agitate precisely for the critical school that Attridge advocates. Is this 'the equal marriage' between critic and work that Coetzee implies is virtually impossible – or something close to it? It would appear to be so … Yet we must also wonder whether or not such an equal marriage is desirable. For many academic literary critics this will surely indicate a loss of proper critical distance. (*Cambridge Introduction* 103, 4)

Head himself, however, does not think that there is a problem with critical distance in Attridge's case, and he raises two objections to potential charges. One is "the academic impulse to reject the close fit between a critic and a writer", which he takes as proof of the prevalence of "the instrumental professionalism that Attridge and Coetzee are both at pains to resist".[14] Another is the fact that this perfect attunement between the critical response and the literary work, according to Head, "may become more or less visible" in accordance with "the shifting emphases in successive works" (104).

Brian May, another Coetzee scholar who has reviewed Attridge's *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, the companion volume to *The Singularity of Literature*, has also remarked on the "almost perfect aligning of sensibilities" between Attridge and Coetzee, and he goes farther than Head towards interrogating it. Hospitality, in May's view, equates with naïveté: reading creatively and responsibly as Attridge advocates amounts to reading as "we all tend to read, naturally or … more or less 'naïve[ly]'". He also argues that the inextricable attachment of Attridge's criticism to Coetzee's authorial discourse creates something akin to a model reader of Coetzee: "The properly naïve reader of Coetzee", he continues, "is the properly 'responsible' (ethical) one" (634).

The potential creation of a model reader of Coetzee has a direct bearing on the extent to which other critics negotiate the presence and the influence of this exceptionally tuned interpreter when they engage with Coetzee's works.

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[14] In a review of Attridge's *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, Mark Sanders also hints that Attridge does not detach himself from Coetzee as much as he should: "For all its consonance with Coetzee's writing project, there is at times something overprotective about *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, which stops Attridge's writing from letting itself go" (643).

Yet it also prompts one to consider how the existence of an ideal critic could be viewed from an authorial perspective. An ideal critic, more than an ideal reader, would not only understand the work perfectly, but would also project himself (at least in theory) as someone who could elucidate the work completely, incorporating, as Starobinski puts it, "into a fabric of comprehension the very rips it reveals, [and] thereby abolishing them" (*Eye* 122). How would a creative writer perceive the proximity of such an interpreter? In particular, how would a creative writer such as Coetzee, who is so protective of his writing's integrity, perceive it? The following comment by May is particularly suggestive in this light: "In the future it will be hard to think of Derek Attridge without thinking of Coetzee; it may be hard to think of Coetzee without thinking of Attridge" (630).

The remaining sections of this chapter elaborate on my view of Coetzee's position in relation to critical proximity. This discussion cannot be carried out fully in this chapter, and I will return to it in Chapter 3 to develop two strands of my argument. First, I will examine Attridge's reading of Coetzee's first two memoirs, *Boyhood* and *Youth*, having in view what Coetzee refers to as a betrayal or overpowering of the authorial discourse. Second, I will propose a reading of the third memoir, *Summertime*, and argue that Coetzee is thoroughly skeptical of proximity. The next section prepares the ground for my examination of his authorial agency by presenting the central rhetorical aspects of my perspective.

Coetzee's Authorial Agency: From Ethics to Rhetoric

Passive receptivity to the unknown, as Attridge shows, accounts for *one* dimension of creative writing, by which the broadening of an author's creative horizon is set in motion. Nevertheless, an author must also determine to what extent those ideas that have exceeded an original creative plan will in reality shape the work and, thus, by being allowed into the sphere of the reader's response, pave the way for a specific kind of reading. This other aspect of the creative process, it is important to notice, is not secondary to what Attridge calls hospitality in any temporal sense; passivity and agency are, as he puts it, "two sides of the same coin" (*Singularity* 25). But this other side of the coin does involve the author's awareness of his readership, that is to say, it entails

that there is a degree of purposeful authorial intervention in the interpretations that a narrative might generate.

Narrative theorists have given this issue a great deal of attention, in particular after Wayne Booth described a narrative as consisting essentially of "an elaborate system of controls over the reader's involvement along various lines of interest" (123). Since Booth, the debate about the best way of attaching narrative meanings to authorial design has taken many turns. Yet there is consensus among narratologists about the inescapability of bringing those two poles to bear on each other. Theorists such as James Phelan, for instance, share Booth's view to a great extent. His rhetorical theory emphasizes the role of authorial intention in narrative understanding, and he is particularly attentive to how a narrative's construction guides, more or less implicitly, readers' ethical judgments. For him, the reader's apprehension of a narrative as an organic whole that articulates a set of ethical principles entails the identification of someone who, by having started and sustained the creative process, has raised those ethical issues in the first place.[15] An author's stylistic choices, the use of the narrator, and the management of the progression all reveal what Phelan calls the "ethics of rhetorical purpose" intrinsic to the narrative, delineating "the ethical dimension of the overall narrative act" (*Experiencing Fiction* 11 – 15). Cognitive narratologist David Herman adopts an approach that is, in many ways, different from Phelan's, but his point of departure is fundamentally the same. For him, literary interpretation hinges necessarily on inferences about authors' communicative intentions (*Narrative Theory: Core Concepts* 44 – 50).

The common denominator for these approaches is that the text is the product of the author's prior communicative intentions, which constitutes a problematic point of departure for an account of Coetzee's authorial agency. A defining feature of his communicative act is precisely the claim that a prior creative plan is secondary to the discovery of unexpected meanings during the writing itself. In other words, by detaching the author from the potential meanings that a text can generate, Coetzee attributes conscious intention a minimal role in the production of those meanings. An account of his authorial agency cannot, therefore, have intention (understood as a prior, conscious,

[15] Porter Abbott also addresses intentionality as "a fundamental necessity in our ethical thinking" in "Reading Intended Meaning where None is Intended" (478).

deliberate plan) as its central term, but it must certainly factor in intentionality as part and parcel of his communicative act.

A more suitable rhetorical standpoint to gauge Coetzee's authorial agency could be provided by a perspective on narrative production and reception such as the one that Walsh adopts for his project of a rhetoric of fictionality. The merit of his understanding of rhetoric lies in its shifted emphasis from the intention supposedly behind (or underlying) a communicative act to the effects than an utterance produces within a specific context. Walsh approaches rhetoric from the perspective of the pragmatics of communication. Along general lines, pragmatics deals with the meanings of utterances as inferred in a specific context. A pragmatic approach to communication engages with the basic facts of an utterance by means of so-called "ampliative inference", that is, "induction, inference to the best explanation, … or [the] application of general principles special to communication" (Korta and Perry, "Pragmatics"). The basic facts surrounding an utterance include when and where it was produced; knowledge of relevant conventions that apply to it; and knowledge of facts about the speaker, such as his or her identity, which beliefs he or she holds, to whom he or she speaks and, crucially, knowledge of information on which inferences about what the speaker intends to communicate can be made. On this account, intention is minimally understood as the intention to communicate.[16] As for what is communicated, this is tied both to the literal content of the utterance (what the speaker says) but, most importantly, to its non-literal content, that is, the implicatures that the utterance, produced within a context shared by speaker and hearer, generates. Inferences about what the speaker means belong, therefore, in the domain of the implicatures (Korta and Perry, "Pragmatics").

Context, which is a term almost synonymous with pragmatics given its centrality for the pragmatics of communication, requires some explanation. Broadly speaking, *context* is commonly understood as "a matter of common

[16] Paul Grice's theory of conversation is a classic example of a pragmatic approach to communicative acts. Grice made a distinction between what the words used by a speaker literally mean and what the speaker means or intends to communicate by using those words. What the speaker implicates is bound to rational principles or maxims that govern successful communication. In his conception, communicative intentions have the following minimal properties: "they are always oriented towards some other agent, the addressee; they are overt, that is, they are intended to be recognized by the addressee; their satisfaction consists precisely in being recognized by the addressee" (Korta, Kepa and Perry, John, "Pragmatics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*).

ground" or "shared beliefs that serve as common presuppositions for the interpretation of assertions". In practice, it applies to "the indefinitely large surrounding of an utterance, from the intentions of the speaker to the previous topics of conversation to the objects discernible in the environment". One usually makes a distinction between narrow and wide context. Narrow context refers to "the list of parameters … that correspond to basic facts about the utterance", such as "speaker, place, and time". Broad or wide context, in contrast, "is understood as all other kinds of information, in particular, information relative to the speaker's communicative intention", that is to say, information that can serve as basis for inferences about the speaker's communicative intention (Korta and Perry, "Pragmatics").

Put simply, the interpretive context on which I base my assumptions about Coetzee's authorial agency is the same that every informed reader of Coetzee has in view: his fiction and his nonfiction. The texts chosen make it possible to understand another major defining aspect of his writing, from a perspective that, to a certain degree at least, is opposite to Attridge's. Alongside the ethical thinking epitomized in the notion of openness to the other as an essentially enriching experience for the self, another characteristic that brings a distinct sense of coherence to Coetzee's authorial discourse is resistance to having one's individuality accommodated, appropriated, or subverted by the other. The remainder of this chapter expands on this claim. I begin the next section by briefly discussing two essays in which he speaks of writing in terms very different from passivity and openness, namely, direction and purpose: writing can also consist of a deliberate effort to subvert certain types of reading in order to open up possibilities for other types of reading. I then move on to two fictional texts that unsettle and manifest suspicion of the proximity and mutuality between writer and reader. Finally, in the last section, I consider the self-referentiality of Coetzee's later works as a particularly difficult challenge to critical proximity and mutuality.

"Into the Dark Chamber", "The Novel Today", "He and His Man", and *The Lives of Animals*

Among Coetzee's nonfictional writings of the 1980s, the period when his quarrel with the politics of the South African literary environment was probably most intense, one finds two pieces that project his authorial agency

in terms radically different from the passive openness to meanings that is often portrayed in his fiction.[17] The essays "Into the Dark Chamber: The Writer and the South African State" (1986), included in *Doubling the Point*, and "The Novel Today" (1988) are deeply embedded in the specificities of Coetzee's situation in South Africa, attesting chiefly to his refusal to have his works put to use for ideological ends, or read as a kind of historical record.[18] Coetzee is concerned with the autonomy of novelistic discourse in relation to "master-form[s] of discourse" whose interpretive authority lies in the consensus that they command about the significance of the literary work (qtd. in Attwell, *Politics* 14).[19] In "Into the Dark Chamber", he addresses the so-called obscenities of the torture room, known by all and yet "accessible to no one but the participants" (*Doubling* 363). When the apartheid state bans such obscenities from the novelist's eyes, it "unwittingly creates the preconditions for the novel to set about its work of representation" (364). It does so because such obscenities exert an irresistible fascination over the novelist's imagination. Yet if novelists let themselves be seduced by the dark room, "making its vile mysteries the occasion of fantasy", and thereby produce representations of what happens in the torture room, they surrender their creative authority to the state (364). Therefore, "the true challenge" that Coetzee poses for the novelist "is how not to play the game by the rules of the state, how to establish one's own authority, how to imagine torture and death on one's own terms" (364).

In "The Novel Today", Coetzee launches a similar attack on this secondary representational role ascribed to the literary work. A novel that provides the reader "with vicarious first-hand experience of living in a certain historical time, embodying contending forces in contending characters and filling our experience with a certain density of observation", only supplements the discourse of history (qtd. in Attwell, *Politics* 14). Coetzee emphatically rejects this ancillary role of novelistic discourse; he wants "a novel that operates in terms of its own procedures and issues in its own conclusions, … that evolves its own paradigms and myths … that is prepared to work itself out" of pre-established frameworks of meaning (qtd. in Attwell, *Politics* 14).

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[17] Another such moment was of course the late 90s, when *Disgrace* came out. I will have more to say about this in the next chapter.

[18] "The Novel Today" was first given as an address in 1987 and, surprisingly, not included in *Doubling the Point*.

[19] Quoted in Attwell's *South Africa and The Politics of Writing*, p. 14.

Among Coetzee's fiction, I want to single out two texts that strengthen the assumption of an authoritative creative agent skeptical of the claims, procedures, and ambitions of interpretation: the Nobel lecture "He and His Man" (2003) and *The Lives of Animals* (1999). "He and His Man" is a very suggestive piece that allegorizes the encounter with the otherness of a literary work, alluding to a kind of commensurability between writer and reader in this encounter, along the lines of Attridge's argument. On a closer look, however, the lecture also lends itself to a reading that subverts this alleged equivalence, presenting the author as the one who takes a privileged precedence in this encounter: the writer is, in fact, the first one who encounters the other, or, as Coetzee likes to express it elsewhere, "the true" (*Doubling* 18). Coetzee returns to the displacement of authorial control represented with the metaphor of the medium in *In the Heart of the Country*, *The Master of Petersburg*, *Disgrace*, and *Elizabeth Costello*. He borrows from Defoe once again as he had done in *Foe* and creates what reviewer D. J. Taylor has called a "devious little metafictional fragment", inverting the roles of Crusoe and Defoe (*The Guardian*, 13 December 2003). In Coetzee's Nobel lecture, Crusoe becomes the historical writer and Defoe becomes his creation, referred to as "his man". Robinson's man is thus depicted as a kind of second self to the historical author, a literary persona or agent who goes out into the world and brings the materials for the stories that Robinson, the historical author, will eventually write.

Coetzee in effect blurs the degree to which Robinson and his second writer self are and are not the same, equivocating who is at the service of whom.[20] The idea is familiar: the historical author, subjected to the distinct exigencies of the writing practice, is more of a channel for creation; his role is less controlling than instrumental. Once again, it is possible to make a parallel with his reflections in *Doubling the Point*. In one of the interviews, he suggests that it is the writing which "writes" the writer, for it "shows or creates (and we are not always sure we can tell one from the other) what our desire was, a moment ago" (18). In the Nobel lecture, Robinson's deference to being an instrument, or channel, in this way is evident when his man, that second writer, writes through him:

[20] Hilary Mantel's apt description of the affinities between Coetzee and Costello, for example, also applies to the relationship between the writer and "his man" in the Nobel lecture: there is no "perfect fit" between both, but they come "unnervingly close" to one another ("The Shadow Line", *The New York Review of Books*).

> How then has it come about that this man of his, who is a kind of parrot and not much loved, writes as well as or better than his master? For he wields an able pen, this man of his, no doubt of that. *Like charging Death himself on his pale horse*. His own skill, learned in the counting house, was in making tallies and accounts, not in turning phrases. *Death himself on his pale horse*: those are words he would not think of. Only when he yields himself up to this man of his do such words come. (n. pag. Web. italics in original)

Robinson, the historical author, is in effect the first reader of the narrative brought to him. Attridge has not missed the interpretive potential of the metaphor of the writer as first reader: "It is only when the event of this reformulation [of existing norms] is experienced by the reader (*who is, in the first instance, the writer reading or articulating the words as they emerge*) as an event … that we can speak of the literary" (*Singularity* 59, my italics).[21] In the context of Attridge's readerly hospitality, the metaphor of the writer as first reader surely strengthens the argument that the reader's and the writer's agency in relation to the literary work can be commensurate. In particular, it strengthens his invitation to the reader to adopt a creative stance similar to the author's. In the context of Coetzee's defense of the writer's intellectual authority, however, the metaphor of the writer as first reader is an oblique manifestation (in Coetzee's typical fashion in his fiction) of the author's precedence in the encounter with the other, understood as the internal laws of the narrative that are determinant for its interpretation, and therefore of the author's privileged and superior role in passing on to the reader/critic the new (perhaps even the "true") meanings.

On a more general level, one could also read a challenge to the mutuality between the creator and the interpreter in a narrative technique that Coetzee makes frequent use of, namely, the focus on one single narrating consciousness, which captures the impossibility of transcending the limits of the self and encountering the other. His predominantly self-centered protagonists, who, unsurprisingly, are usually intellectuals or writers, time and again misread the other. Works such as *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Age of Iron*, and *Disgrace*, to mention but a few, revolve to a great extent around the failure of understanding the other, or the other as undecipherable. In *Waiting for the*

[21] Walsh also sees the possibilities of the metaphor of the writer as first reader: "The novelist as medium is a kind of privileged first reader – privileged with a selectivity and control over the narrative which is analogous to the privilege, in another sphere of narrative creativity, of a lucid dreamer; engaged in a teasing out, an elaboration and development, according to laws or imperatives already in place, but only to be fully unearthed in the process of writing" (131).

Barbarians, for example, this failure of interpretation often evokes some form of reading. The Magistrate cannot read the script in the poplar slips that he believes tell a story about an ancient barbarian settlement (15, 16). In several passages, he imagines the barbarian girl's body as an impenetrable surface whose marks of torture, "the traces of a history her body bears", are symbols "beyond comprehension" (33; 44 – 46; 52; 70). In other passages, he thinks of his efforts at understanding his involvement with the girl with metaphors that could apply to textual interpretation: he "[swoops] and [circles] around the irreducible figure of the girl, casting one net of meaning after another over her" (89); he refuses to find "meanings and correspondences" between himself and her torturers (47 – 49). In *Disgrace*, one of the first passages in which Lurie questions Lucy about her motives for not reporting the rape presents his attempt to see things from her perspective. Significantly, the passage captures how it starts to dawn on Lurie that there might be a parallel between what Melanie Isaacs experienced with him and what his daughter has undergone at the hands of the three rapists. When he alludes to this correspondence, however, Lucy replies categorically: "This has nothing to do with you, David. … [As] far as I am concerned, what happened to me is a purely private matter. … It is my business, mine alone." When he tries another explanation, she responds emphatically again: "No. You keep misreading me." (111, 12)

One text in particular imparts a great deal of skepticism about the premises and the ambitions of proximity and mutuality: *The Lives of Animals*, which comprises the two 1997 – 98 Tanner Lectures delivered by Coetzee at Princeton University.[22] The lecture that Coetzee reads for his audience offers a philosophical reflection on the way human beings treat animals, but the conventionally rational, explanatory, and argumentative philosophical thinking is embedded in a cleverly contrived metafictional narrative. Coetzee puts Elizabeth Costello, a renowned novelist who performs at least partly as his alter-ego (like the reader-narrator of *Diary of a Bad Year*), before an academic audience disconcertingly like the audience he has before himself at Princeton University. Costello is about to deliver two honorific lectures at Appleton College but declines to talk about the areas of her expertise, namely, literature and literary criticism, venturing instead a passionate argument for animal

[22] *The Lives of Animals* was published in a single volume in 1999 and later included in *Elizabeth Costello* (2003).

rights. A committed vegetarian (like Coetzee himself), Costello urges her academic fellows to change their attitude towards the animal industry, censuring them for taking part, however indirectly, in "a crime of stupefying proportions" (*Lives* 69).

Costello mounts a case against the abstractions and universal standards of traditional philosophical thinking which accords more value to a human life than to an animal life because humans have the capacity to reason. For her, the moral deliberation that must underlie one's attitude towards animals cannot be exclusively based on the assumption that animals, as one of her interlocutors puts it, "live in a vacuum of consciousness" (44). As opposed to "thinking" and "cogitation", she proposes "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" (33)[23]. Therefore, she entreats the members of her audience to stretch the bounds of what she calls their sympathetic imagination and "think [their] way into the existence of … any being with whom [they] share the substrate of life", making themselves present, even if in a surrogate manner, to the embodied reality of an animal about to be butchered (35). Costello opposes sympathy, presence, and mutuality, ultimately by means of the concrete effort of walking side by side with the animal, to intellectual detachment:

> 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)

The ethical argument presented in passages like the one above gains complexity in light of how the narrative is constructed; more specifically, it gains complexity in light of how Coetzee's exposition of a philosophical argument is embedded in the fictitious Costello's exposition of her moral convictions. Just as Costello urges her audience to share the being of an animal and sympathize with its fate, so does Coetzee prompt his readers to

[23] Costello explains her conviction not as a moral imperative, but as "a desire to save her soul" (43). David Lurie in *Disgrace* also often resorts to this kind of religious vocabulary.

vicariously think themselves into Costello's emotional confusion, to sympathize with her grief, and finally to weigh it as a significant component that makes her ethical position legitimate. Coetzee makes Costello a frail ageing intellectual who refuses to put up with academic protocols because she feels that "[she does] not have the time any longer to say things [she does] not mean" (18). When challenged by interlocutors, she does not have the energy to defend her point of view in a manner that they consider satisfactory. To her son John, she breaks down:

> I no longer know where I am. … I must be mad! Yet every day I see the evidences. The very people I suspect produce the evidence, exhibit it, offer it to me. Corpses. Fragments of corpses that they have bought for money. … Calm down, I tell myself, you are making a mountain out of a molehill. This is life. Everyone else comes to terms with it, why can't you? *Why can't you?* (69, italics in original)

Although Costello is a sharp and highly articulate thinker, her attacks on philosophical reasoning have only a limited effectiveness. It is against the background of the particular circumstances of her life, circumstances out of which she acts and tries to persuade an audience of skeptical academics, that her ethical vegetarianism emerges as strong and compelling. A crucial aspect of the legitimacy of Costello's radical and arguably irrational moral choice is that it springs, to a great extent, from a more visceral than intellectual perception of the worth of the lives of animals.

First and foremost, however, the legitimacy of Costello's moral choice rests on a significantly more radical claim for the superior ethical authority of fiction and, thus, the superior discursive (and moral) authority of the creative writer. For Costello, the imaginative faculty that enables one to be present to the being of another is exercised most powerfully by the creative artists, who can furthermore sensitize their readers to the value and place of emotion in ethical reflection: "The poets" can "return the living, electric being to language" (65). Her point, which concerns the capacity of literature to offer a perspective into ethical questions that the conventionally disinterested and analytical philosophical discourse cannot adopt, has been made before. Martha Nussbaum, for instance, makes a lengthy and elaborate case for fiction's invaluable contribution to moral philosophy. "Certain literary texts", she argues,

> are indispensable to a philosophical inquiry in the ethical sphere: not by all means sufficient, but sources of insight without which the inquiry cannot be

> complete. … Certain truths about human life can only be fittingly and accurately stated in the language and forms characteristic of the narrative artist … [and] only the style of a certain narrative artist (and not, for example, the style associated with the abstract theoretical treatise) can adequately state certain important truths about the world, embodying them in [the shape of the narrative] and setting up in the reader the activities that are appropriate for grasping them. (5, 6, 23-24)[24]

Costello's and Nussbaum's positions imply initially a degree of complementarity between analytical and creative narrative discourse in their grappling with ethical questions, that is, a mutual ethical agency between the philosopher and the creative artist akin to the mutuality between the critic and the author. On this view, philosophical inquiry can profit from the attention that literature devotes to local, particular, and practical contexts that affect important moral choices. But both Nussbaum and Costello take their arguments further: certain truths about life are indeed explored with more depth, density, subtlety, and complexity by narrative than by abstract logical prose. Costello imparts that the writer's art has more power and authority than analytical discourse when she attributes to "the poets" the power of developing a special sensitivity to, or a distinct kind of perception for, the particular.

The defense of the superior ethical authority of fiction becomes more evident if one puts Costello's argumentative agency as a moral persuader in the narrative world side by side with Coetzee's real-world authorial agency as the author of *The Lives of Animals*. Although Costello comes across as a passionate defender of the value of a sympathetic engagement with animals, all she does is argue (rather unsuccessfully) before her audience. Coetzee, in contrast, by proposing a more humane treatment of animals in an academic lecture inside his fictional narrative, outsources the theoretical or abstract philosophical argument about a highly divisive issue to his fictitious protagonist. His own persuasive work as the author of *The Lives of Animals* is realized in the narrative of Costello's personal history that he has created, a narrative in which the emotional commitment he has given her, although it prompts her to speak in affect and undermines her authority before her

[24] As Anton Leist and Peter Singer put it in their introduction to *J. M. Coetzee and Ethics: Philosophical Perspectives on Literature*, Coetzee is "surely" a writer who "provokes philosophers to read him". More specifically, they detect three characteristics in Coetzee's novels that make them "philosophical: First, an unusual degree of *reflectivity*, meaning thereby a reflective distance to the conventional understanding of everything … [Second], a [deep]-layered intellectual attitude of *paradoxical truth seeking* … [And finally], *an ethics of social relationships* that is especially at the thematic center of most of his stories" (1, 6-8, italics in original).

audience, makes her an authoritative surrogate proponent of his argument to the extent that it elicits our sympathy for her. Within the sphere of novelistic discourse, the inappropriate or awkward fervor with which Costello advocates ethical vegetarianism is persuasive. Narratives, like moral persuasion, invest in attitude formation. As Ward E. Jones observes, moral persuasion hinges at least as much on the "attitudinal element" of our engagement with the persuader as on the argument itself (218):

> Exposure to a narrative is exposure to the narrative creator's (perhaps pretended) view of her characters. As such, a narrative necessarily manifests attitudinal evaluations of its characters in the various ways that it invites spectators to follow what they do and what happens to them. One of the richest mechanisms that a narrative creator can use to influence her spectators to take an attitude toward the narrative's characters is that of encouraging the spectator to respond with certain emotions. … This invitation to emotion both reveals the narrative's attitude toward the characters and calls upon spectators to share that attitude, along with the evaluative desires and thoughts that are a part of that attitude. (210, 11)

Coetzee's persuasion work in *The Lives of Animals* hinges finally on his rhetorical skill to elicit in the reader an intense, reciprocal, generous response to Costello's moral choice, a rhetorical skill that Costello lacks in the narrative world that he creates for her. The appeal to Costello's experience is a call for a sympathetic readerly engagement with her struggle; it is an appeal for the reader to engage with her ethical position in its fullness, a position that is "grounded, embedded, embodied in [the] messy particulars" of her life (Dancer 141). From this perspective, *The Lives of Animals* celebrates proximity and mutuality: the sympathetic imagination that Costello demands from her predominantly academic audience epitomizes the generous, open, receptive attitude on which proximity and mutuality depend.

From another perspective, however, the text can also make a very different claim: proximity can be deceitful. One of Costello's most mistrustful, indeed hostile, opponents in the audience is her daughter-in-law Norma, a philosopher whose name is suggestively evocative of the systematic, more evenly ordered and composed qualities of academic discourse. In theory, the close nature of their family connection could naturally open up for a more sympathetic understanding, on Norma's part, of Costello's plight. Unlike the other members of the audience, Norma does have a private or more direct access to the reasons that have led Costello to bare her personal anguish the way she does. The narrative itself, however, gives clues that Norma exploits

this closeness to betray Costello. Sitting in the audience, she listens with impatience to her mother-in-law's digressions: "She is rambling. She has lost her thread." (*Lives* 31) At the honorific dinner hosted by the university, she addresses Costello by her first name, unlike the other guests, out of cunning and treachery; the narrator signals that she claims "intimacy" before leading Costello "into a trap" (42). Norma launches a fierce attack on vegetarianism on the grounds of being an expression of power, "a quick, simple way for an elite group to define itself" (42). Ultimately, Coetzee makes Norma show no sympathy for Costello's unrestrained speech: "It has nothing to do with sincerity. She has no self-insight at all. It is because she has so little insight into her motives that she seems sincere. Mad people are sincere." (67)

Norma's depreciative words about the passion and energy with which Costello speaks are also worthy of attention for another reason: they resemble Coetzee's own words about the inappropriateness of "a real passion of feeling" in critical discourse, which makes it sound like the disjointed "utterances of a madman" (*Doubling* 60). In *The Lives of Animals*, the academy is not the place for emotions. When Costello presents her philosophical argument with passion, she does not bring her interlocutors closer and persuade them; rather, she estranges, alienates, or even antagonizes them because they perceive her vehemence as incoherence or irrationality. In the sphere of creative novelistic writing, by contrast, in which Coetzee offers *The Lives of Animals*, Costello's passion of feeling is potentially more powerful than her argument. The authorial consciousness projected by the text seems acutely aware of the rhetorical power it can exercise within the domain it chooses to speak: Coetzee does not develop a passionate ethical argument as a scholar, but as a novelist. In ethical matters, one can conclude from reading *The Lives of Animals*, the discourse of the novelist is more powerful than the discourse of the scholar.

To further my claim that a rejection of the mutuality between author and critic is a defining feature of Coetzee's authorial discourse, I will look into his later oeuvre, which comprises the essentially self-referential and autobiographical works written between 1990 and 2009, in the last section of this chapter. To be sure, these works also hark back to the earlier, more explicitly political ones in that they call for readings which unavoidably bring the real-world context surrounding the fiction to bear on its interpretation. Their affinities with life writing, however, align them primarily with the biographical project *Doubling the Point*, as though they were a natural

development of the project.[25] The focus of my discussion lies on how the concept of autobiographical truth at stake in them goes against the principle that the meanings of an autobiography are established by means of a pact, or agreement, between writer (or autobiographer) and reader, itself another expression of the aspired mutuality between both.

One can think of this turn to a self-referential or autobiographical mode of writing along the lines of the phenomenological, or more precisely, relational terms explored both by Coetzee and Attridge. Nevertheless, the relational aspect of writing that in theory makes the mutual agency between author and critic possible can also acquire a wholly different significance. The text, as a manifestation of otherness, is understood in phenomenological thinking as an object that "calls to us; it needs a reader to 'realize' itself – to mean something it must mean something *to*", as Morrissey explains the relational grounds of Starobinski's criticism (xix, italics in original). If the author takes precedence in this encounter with the textual other, then the critic might indeed be conceived of as secondary from a relational perspective, for the text would be realized first to its own authorial consciousness. Self-referentiality would therefore literally indicate the author's exercise of self-understanding, as though the dialogical dimension of writing were restricted first and foremost to the author and the medium. On this view, the communicative dimension of writing that involves the reader or critic would play a second-hand role in autobiographical examination.[26]

Coetzee's Later Oeuvre: Against Mutuality

Coetzee turned to autobiographical issues as early as 1990 with the confession of the fictitious Mrs. Curren in *Age of Iron*.[27] In the works that have followed, fiction and autobiography converge on his persona. *The Master of Petersburg* (1994) is a fictive account of a period of Dostoevsky's life that explores thematic issues characteristic of Coetzee's own writing. His memoirs are fictionalized: *Boyhood* (1997) and *Youth* (2002) recount episodes of his past life in the third person and in the present, and *Summertime* (2009) employs several

[25] *Disgrace* deserves special attention in this context: it is a self-referential work (as I will argue in the next chapter) with a very strong political appeal.

[26] I will develop this particular point towards the end of this chapter, when I discuss how Coetzee indirectly presents himself as a particularly authoritative autobiographer.

[27] To be sure, the focus on one consciousness that examines itself is also present in earlier works such as *Dusklands*, *In the Heart of the Country*, and *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

character narrators as authorial voices. In *Disgrace* (1999), he employs the same narrative technique of *Boyhood*, published two years earlier, which accentuates the autobiographical undercurrent in the characterization of David Lurie. *The Lives of Animals* (1999), *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), *Slow Man* (2005) and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) are all works of a slippery autobiographical or autofictional nature, in which Coetzee attributes to the fictitious writers Elizabeth Costello and Señor C, with whom he allegedly has a number of ideological affinities, the authorship of some of his own lectures and books.

The self-referential common thread among Coetzee's later works binds them together as so-called "life narratives" or "life writing". Scholars of autobiography employ those terms sometimes interchangeably, sometimes with slightly different connotations, on the basic assumption that authors are supposed to pay some respect to the self-referential rule. In reality, the extent to which those narratives are indeed autobiographical, and therefore the claim their authors make upon autobiographical truth, varies considerably in form and scope. Paul John Eakin actually includes "the entire class of literature in which people tell life stories" in his definition of life writing (1). Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson employ "life writing" as "a general term for writing that takes a life, one's own or another, as its subject" (*Reading Autobiography* 4).[28] Elsewhere, they prefer "autobiography" as the umbrella term for the "widely diverse kinds of life narrative … literally dozens, that engage historically situated practices of self-representation" ("The Trouble with Autobiography" 357). Starobinski also remarked on the breadth of the defining criteria of autobiographical writing, criteria which in fact "do no more than establish a rather ample frame within which a wide variety of particular styles may be practiced and exhibited … leaving it up to the writer to choose a particular mode, tone, rhythm, extent, and so on (*Eye* 172).[29]

On account of the vagueness of generic criteria, it is the relational quality of the classical autobiographical pact between writer and reader proposed by

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[28] They continue: "Such writing can be … explicitly self-referential and therefore autobiographical. The autobiographical mode of life writing might more precisely be called *self life writing* [which they find clumsy]. … We employ the term *life writing* for written forms of the autobiographical, and *life narrative* to refer to autobiographical acts of any sort" (*Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* 4, italics in original).

[29] The entry on autobiography in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* also adopts a very broad perspective: "In a wider sense all fictional writing is autobiographical". From this sweeping description, it proceeds to define autobiography against that which it is not: it is "a comprehensive non-fictional narrative in prose" distinct from biography (Löschnigg, Martin. "Autobiography". *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*).

Philippe Lejeune that still functions as the common denominator among all the different types of life narratives, offering the author's intentions as a guarantee that the narrative articulates some kind of truth. Put differently, the reader assumes that the author's particular way of handling narrative conventions is that which conveys some form of truth. The reader's part in the contract is to recognize the authorial commitment to autobiographical truth and avow (or disavow) the veracity of the narrative. This complementarity between writer and reader is fundamental to the genre. As Starobinski points out, autobiographical writing depends on "requirements of an ethical and 'relational' order" (*Eye* 172). Similarly, for Smith and Watson, autobiographical truth itself is the product of an "intersubjective exchange about the meanings of a life" (*Reading Autobiography* 16).[30]

Coetzee's autobiographical contract does not depend on this kind of exchange because it contains two clauses that secure him a great deal of control over autobiographical truth (even if, at first sight, those clauses seem to be antithetical). First, he urges his informed readers to look beyond the generic conventions of fiction and nonfiction in his writing: "All autobiography is storytelling, all writing is autobiography" (*Doubling* 391). In part, this is essentially a restatement of the widely held view that autobiography partakes of the same creative quality of fiction insofar as it requires that narrative coherence be imposed upon a collection of scattered memories. Therefore, the truth claims of nonfiction in general should be kept under scrutiny, for all writing is subordinated to the constructive dimension of narrativity (or "storytelling", as Coetzee calls it). He does not, however, simply discredit the truth claims of one genre (autobiography/nonfiction) in order to accredit the truth claims of another (fiction). Rather, he communicates that all of his writings can manifest some form of truth when he grants to otherness, that mysterious force that he welcomes into his creative process, the power of revealing "what you recognize, or hope to recognize, as the true. … Truth is something that comes in the process of writing, or comes from the process of writing" (18). Here Coetzee is not simply expressing an ethical commitment to the openness of the creative process and celebrating its transformative potential on his authorial consciousness; he is also making a rhetorical move,

[30] For Smith and Watson, autobiographical truth can encompass "fidelity to the facts of their biographies, to lived experience, to self-understanding, to the historical moment, to social community, to prevailing beliefs about diverse identities, to the norms of autobiography as a literary genre itself" (*Reading Autobiography* 15).

namely, imparting that truth in his narratives surpasses the limitations of his authorial outlook and conscious intervention. This clause gives a distinct outline to his authorial agency, and even more so as autobiographer: it serves to empower the integrity of his commitment to autobiographical truth, and thus to assure the reader that the text can articulate the truth about the author *despite* himself.

I will now look at two examples of how the reader's response is affected both by Coetzee's handling of generic conventions and by his comments on the peculiarities of his writing. In a review of *Youth* for *The New York Times*, William Deresiewicz notes with some consternation that Coetzee "has turned his back on the entire autobiographical tradition" by narrating the memoir in the third person and in the present (July 7, 2002). Albeit exaggerated, Deresiewicz's reaction is in fact not unjustifiable. As Smith and Watson point out, a significant indication of the appeal to veracity in an autobiographical narrative is the first person narration that conveys "intimacy and immediacy" to the reader ("Trouble with Autobiography" 361). Towards the end of his review, Deresiewicz concludes that the third person and present narration in *Youth* (as in *Boyhood*) signals a breach of the autobiographical contract because it evades "the tension between the 'then' of the event and the 'now' of recollection", which is a typical token of an autobiographer's effort to enact the complexity of self-examination. Deresiewicz seems unsure if Coetzee is honoring the autobiographical pact: although he resents the disregard for the generic conventions of autobiography, he recognizes in *Youth* the narrative perspective with which Coetzee usually depicts his protagonists' self-examination: "An isolated consciousness driving ever deeper into itself, an extreme psychological situation followed to its bitter end – it sounds like a novel by J. M. Coetzee".

Attridge has a different understanding of the kind of communication between writer and reader apparently at stake in Coetzee's fictionalized autobiographical pact. At first sight, his reading is perfectly attuned to Coetzee's conviction that truth "comes from the process of writing", as well as to his own argument for hospitality in the author's and in the reader's engagement with literature (*Doubling* 18). He claims that "we read *Boyhood* and *Youth* … to experience the pleasures of language being shaped and arranged to capture, for its author, for its readers, a certain form of truth" (*Ethics of Reading* 161). Attridge does not take the fictional qualities of Coetzee's autobiography as a disclaimer of truthfulness, but as a token of the author's unique way of

conveying autobiographical truth. In other words, he does not attach the concept of truth primarily to the generic affiliation of the narratives (which is, by the way, ambiguous, because the memoirs are offered as fiction), but to Coetzee's use of language.

Before I examine in greater detail the rhetorical implications of Attridge's response, I want to turn briefly to Mark Sanders's reflections on truth and on the concept of implication, both of which chime in with Attridge's view of what is involved in an intersubjective exchange such as the one required by autobiographical writing. Sanders's focus is not autobiography, strictly speaking; rather, he discusses the role of South African intellectuals during apartheid and the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. These are issues which inevitably intersect with the criticism of Coetzee's works, but what is worthy of attention here is the natural continuity between the theoretical orientation of Sanders's argument and Attridge's, a continuity which entails a degree of reciprocal strengthening of their views. Once again, Bourdieu's concept of habitus (discussed in the Introduction) is illuminating. The affinities between Sanders's and Attridge's works with respect to truth and implication attest to the ways in which intellectual dispositions shared by scholars of a given field create an environment in which certain views or practices tend to cohere and contribute to their mutual consolidation.

As regards "a certain form of truth", in Attridge's words, that implicates both teller and listener, the relevant parallel with Sanders's work concerns the notion of a "personal and narrative truth" in the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Personal and narrative truth "is never quite defined" by the commission, Sanders notes, but it is clear that the concept is meant to capture something in the victims' testimonies which exceeds factual truth. More specifically, he argues, the TRC's goal seemed to be to restore "human and civil dignity … to the teller through storytelling"; what was told, in other words, was secondary to the act of telling: "what is important is not so much *what* is told (which has to be verified, and is thus suspect), but rather *that* telling occurs" (*Ambiguities* 152, italics in original). Yet the TRC's actual commitment to implicating itself with, or taking responsibility for, the truth produced in (and by) the victims' testimonies, Sanders continues, is subject to doubt. In his view, despite the apparent openness to a personal account of truth, the commission tended to treat the stories of victims "as it would the statements of perpetrators. Although [the TRC declared] itself hospitable to

storytelling, it [proved] more at ease with statements that [could] be forensically verified or falsified" (153).

When it comes to the key aspect of implication, which Sanders finds lacking in the TRC's final position in relation to the testimonies of victims, I want to call attention to the very broad and generalized conception of human responsibility that he develops out of the notion of complicity. Sanders goes far beyond the narrow sense of complicity as allowing some injustice to happen or taking part in some injustice or crime. By drawing mainly on Derrida and Heidegger, he arrives at the ontological notion of "a folded-together-ness (*com-plic-ity*) in human being (or the being of being human)" (*Complicities* 5, italics in original). In the specific context of how South African intellectuals have negotiated their involvement in apartheid, the crucial insight provided by complicity as folded-together-ness is that "when opposition takes the form of a demarcation *from* something, it cannot … be untouched by that to which it opposes itself. Opposition takes its first steps from a footing of complicity" (9, italics in original). This is a perspective that can be fruitfully applied to works such as *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Age of Iron*, for instance, but it also impacts on my critique of Attridge's implication in Coetzee's autobiographical truth (which will be developed in greater detail in Chapter 3). Insofar as what Sanders understands as complicity functions as a minimal condition of possibility for intersubjective relations, complicity understood as a form of responsibility that implicates all would be the ontological foundation of the stance that Attridge adopts in relation to Coetzee's autobiography.

What I want to examine here, however, is the rhetorical basis of Attridge's understanding of Coetzee's use of language in his autobiography. Recently, Walsh has put forward an argument that can accommodate an assessment of truth in fictional narratives such as the one that Attridge makes. He disputes the notion of fiction as a generic category that does not lay claim to truth and argues instead for fictionality as a rhetorical resource or communicative strategy. On this view, an author's recourse to fictionality does not necessarily signal a non-commitment to truth, but a unique way of conveying meaning that depends on a contextual negotiation between writer and reader. More specifically, Walsh claims that the concept of truth in fictionalized narratives attaches primarily to the contextual inferences made about the authorial communicative act, rather than to the literalness of the fictive utterances. He builds on the pragmatic theory of linguistic communication proposed by

relevance theorists, according to which we produce and expect utterances that are primarily relevant to ensure successful communication.[31] In the case of an autobiography, the authorial communicative act is inextricably tied with the assumption that it is committed to autobiographical truth, but when one engages with the utterances of the communicative act, one does so expecting that they are first of all *relevant* for the apprehension of autobiographical truth, rather than literally or unambiguously true in themselves. Therefore, truth does not necessarily have to be attached to the literal content of the utterances themselves (that is to say, to the text), but it always attaches to the assumptions made about the communicative act, insofar as those assumptions express how one accounts for what the speaker intended to communicate:

> The propositional criterion of truth is a subordinate consideration to the contextual, pragmatic criterion of relevance. This is not to say that the truth or falsehood of assumptions is a matter of indifference (as one might be tempted to say, precipitously, is the case with fiction): rather, it is decisively to detach those criteria [truth or falsehood] with regard to assumptions from any necessary direct relation with the encoded form of an utterance. (27)

To detach truth from the narrative itself, as Walsh suggests, impinges directly on the autobiographical contract because truth becomes not so much an issue for the autobiographer as for the reader, who expects to find the relevant clues which lead to autobiographical truth not necessarily in the narrative itself (in the fictionalized utterances) but in a much wider interpretive context. In other words, the reader is thus compelled to gauge authorial agency, or the expression of the autobiographer's commitment to veracity, by looking for input that exceeds the text itself.

In essence, the underlying logic of Attridge's reading is the notion of an "intersubjective exchange" between author and reader, as Smith and Watson referred to it (*Reading Autobiography* 16). It is, however, in the context of a communicative exchange between writer and reader that the second clause of Coetzee's autobiographical contract will function, as I will argue below, as a potential instrument of authorial control over the meanings of his autobiography. This second clause undermines the very principle of a pact by directly disavowing the reader's significance in the so-called intersubjective exchange.

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[31] See Walsh, p. 23 – 32.

The essay "Confession and Double Thoughts", included in *Doubling the Point* and underscored by Coetzee himself as a "pivotal" piece for his intellectual development in that transitional phase of his career, is an indispensable extratextual source that touches upon two central aspects for the interpretation of the later, self-referential works (*Doubling* 392). It provides a very specific frame of reference for the concept of autobiographical truth and it functions as an instrument that, in principle, disempowers the reader or critic. The kernel of the argument brings together the political/allegorical earlier oeuvre and the self-referential later one (the mere fact of its publication in *Doubling the Point* puts the essay strategically in between those two phases). "Confession and Double Thoughts" recaptures essential conceptual issues of Coetzee's novels from *Dusklands* to *Foe* but also anticipates the relationship between fiction and autobiography as modes of writing and narrative understanding that predominates in the later works. The self's inscription in history and the problem of cultural authority that preoccupied the earlier novels is articulated in the essay as a problem inherent, and particularly acute, in autobiographical writing as well. Autobiographical writing as textual representation of the history of the self cannot in principle attain a position of authority from which the truth about the self can be narrated.

In "Confession and Double Thoughts," Coetzee argues that truth-telling in autobiography is encumbered by the potential endlessness of self-knowledge, which results in a problem of closure. He finds the parameters of self-examination in Augustine's *Confessions*. Augustine relates a childhood episode in which he stole pears from a neighbor's garden for the excitement of committing a forbidden act. What troubles the adult Augustine when he tells this story is the knowledge that what in fact motivated him was a desire for shame. Awareness of this desire for shame brings Augustine even more shame, and yet it feeds and satisfies this same desire endlessly. Augustine seeks in his confession an essential truth about himself but his self-consciousness unfolds indefinitely, always finding behind one explanation another one, always deceiving itself, thus not allowing him to reach the truth that could release him from guilt.

Coetzee identifies this displacement of truth in confessional self-examination in works by Rousseau, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky, and concludes that truth is unreachable as an epistemological certainty; therefore, a confession is always bound to fail. Despite the inevitable inconclusiveness of confession in this sense, however, Coetzee suggests that the *commitment* to

search one's soul is valid as an ethical effort. This is what he refers to as the confessant's "truth-directedness", a concept which reintroduces the typical paradox intrinsic to the self's impulse towards the other that recurs in his fiction (*Doubling* 261). Truth might be hopelessly beyond reach (and therefore beyond the text), but we are nevertheless born with an intuition of truth that lies at the heart of the effort to make sense of one's life, and this intuition sustains the autobiographical project.

The impact of the argument of "Confession and Double Thoughts" on the autobiographical pact goes beyond the creation of the specific concept of truth-directedness. This concept, in fact, is fundamentally a reformulation of Coetzee's assumption that an author can only "hope to recognize the true" in the writing process (*Doubling* 18). It is to the "double thought", as the title of the essay suggests, that one should pay attention: it serves to endow Coetzee with considerable authority as autobiographer and, at the same time, to disempower the reader or critic.

Coetzee's detailed analysis of the various ways in which confession ultimately fails projects him as a writer fully aware of the limitations of self-examination, and therefore, as Sheila Collingwood-Whittick points out, it implicitly guarantees that he, as autobiographer, "is unlikely to be susceptible to … the risks that threaten the autobiographer's quest for the truth" (17). Coetzee himself pursues a similar line of reasoning when he discusses the problematic lack of self-doubt in Tolstoy's *The Kreutzer Sonata*, which he interprets as a result of Tolstoy's weariness of the complications of self-examination. Tolstoy creates a protagonist who is seemingly incapable of reflective distance, unaware of how one can deceive oneself, and this unawareness, Coetzee concludes, undermines his authority as a confessant:

> For whatever authority a confession bears in a secular context derives from the status of the confessant as a hero of the labyrinth willing to confront the worst within himself (Rousseau claims to be such a hero). A confessant who does not doubt himself when there are obvious grounds for doing so (as in Pozdnyshev's case) is no better than one who refuses to doubt because doubt is not profitable. Neither is a hero, neither confesses with authority. (*Doubling* 263, 64)

In contrast, Coetzee's acute awareness of the treacherousness of the double thought empowers his ethical and intellectual authority as autobiographer.

The other implication of the double thought in Coetzee's autobiographical writing concerns not himself, but his readers. The inescapable tendency to

undermine one's own judgment is also a feature of the confessor's psychology; hence, anyone who intends to assess autobiographical truth is, in principle, unfit for the task. To put it differently, readers of an autobiography can at best be self-deceived or at worst have a hidden agenda (conscious or not) when they pass judgment on the autobiographer's truth.[32]

Finally, there is yet another aspect that tilts the balance of authority in matters of self-examination and truth towards Coetzee: years of practice. To elaborate on that, I want to look briefly into the function of mimesis in fiction and nonfiction as Walsh understands it. He explores Paul Ricoeur's notion of "configuration", that is, "the making of plot, understood as a systematic synthesis, which is not the reproduction of something already given but creative production". Mimesis is thus not an aspect of "the representational content, or referential world" of a narrative, as in the Aristotelian conception of the imitation of action, but "an aspect of the construction of narrative". Therefore, "mimesis doesn't mediate the narrative content, but the narrative act". (49) In the case of nonfiction, mimesis as configuration is suited to the notion of a relation of coherence between the text and the world: the nonfictional narrative does not imitate the real world (as in a relation of correspondence), but rather constitutes the author's effort of making sense of it by means of writing. Put differently, the writing itself constitutes the authorial process of understanding (self-understanding in the case of an autobiography). In fiction, however, mimesis as configuration would lack an object, that is to say, a real world of which to make sense. Thus, Walsh explains mimesis in fiction as a configuration that "has no object (no data) on which to act other than what it proposes to itself … [It] lacks the direct purpose of nonfictional narrative understanding" (50). On this view, mimesis

[32] Coetzee draws mainly on Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* when he argues for the inexistence of an ideal or adequate confessor. Prince Myshkin, a Christ-like figure who would in theory neither be too severe in his judgment nor too cunning to have double motives when hearing a confession, admits that he is himself not immune to the spiral of double thought. The auditors of Ippolit's confession, who could be described as the opposite of Myshkin in that they are all-too-aware of deception, are essentially indifferent to Ippolit's truth. Coetzee also examines whether one can confess without a confessor. The underground man of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* proposes to confess only to himself; since there will not be an audience to his confession, he claims his narrative will produce the truth. His confession fails because there seems to be a lack of scrutiny in the narrative process itself. Within the parameters of the underground man's hyperconsciousness (his exceptional capacity for self-examination), his narrative is flawed because there are moments in which his hyperconsciousness seems to slip. For Coetzee, the major problem about the confessional undertaking of *Notes from Underground* is precisely how to bring the story to an end in light of its potential eternal unfolding, a problem which he claims the novel fails to articulate.

in fiction would have the indirect purpose of exercising the capacity for narrative understanding (for both the writer and the reader). From this perspective, Coetzee's memoirs, produced late in his novelistic career, would be the product of an authorial consciousness that has exercised its capacity for narrative understanding over many years, and now applies this trained, sharpened faculty to understand himself and his own story in the world.

In the following chapters, I will bring "Confession and Double Thoughts" to bear on two works of Coetzee's later oeuvre, *Disgrace* and *Summertime*. The focus of my discussion lies on the assumption that Coetzee's conception of autobiographical writing as an utterly private and self-contained project dismisses the mutuality between author and critic. Since *Summertime* is a memoir, it undoubtedly lays some claim to autobiographical truth. Its narrative technique, however, renders the notion of autobiographical truth highly dubious. In the narrative world, the author himself is introduced as a dead character, so that his story is told by people who were once close to him. My reading draws attention to the unreliability of these accounts, which I interpret as Coetzee's representation and critique of the methods with which readers and critics have assessed the story of his life. I argue that all the narrators, to a greater or lesser extent, are presented as unreliable, which hence disqualifies their assessments of the truth about him.

The next chapter dwells on *Disgrace*. My reading of the novel assumes that one can rethink the mutuality between narrative and critical discourse in terms of an internal dialogue within Coetzee's own literary production, that is to say, between his essay and his novel. Coetzee deals essentially with the same issues in both: self-examination, truth-directedness, and the double thought. Each discursive arena (critical and novelistic), given the specific set of tools that he has at his disposal, allows him different possibilities to bring his reflection to a point of conclusion: the novel, I argue, can represent the closure of self-examination that, in the terms of the essay, would always escape the self-examining subject.

Chapter 2 - The Self-Sufficient Writer of *Disgrace* and "Confession and Double Thoughts"

The common thread that runs through this literary chapter and the next is the self-sufficiency of Coetzee's authorial discourse. The focus of this chapter lies on the dialogue internal to the authorial consciousness, which creates complementarity, or mutuality, between its novelistic and its critical dimensions. The conception of mutuality to which I refer here differs from the mutuality between authorial and critical discourse that was in focus in the previous chapter: here, mutuality brings to the fore the completeness of Coetzee's authorial discourse, that is, its self-explanatory quality. My discussion of *Disgrace* and of the essay "Confession and Double Thoughts", both of which revolve around the impasses of self-examination, aims to shed light on this self-explanatory quality. By reading Coetzee's novel through the lenses of his essay, I will first address the construction of *Disgrace* as a fictitious conversion narrative. More importantly, however, my aim in reading *with* the author here is to argue that *Disgrace* carries the argument of the essay further, gesturing within its narrative world towards the transcendent moment of illumination that is required to bring self-examination to a true moment of closure. Put differently, the greater possibilities of novelistic writing allow Coetzee to go beyond the limitations of the logical argumentation of "Confession and Double Thoughts".

The Nonfictional Character of *Disgrace*: The Novel's Mimetic and Confessional Design

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, *Disgrace* is particularly salient among Coetzee's later novels. It is probably the work that made him famous worldwide, so that it does naturally stand out among his novels, but it also has a singular transitional character in the oeuvre. At the same time that *Disgrace* shares with the earlier works an almost irresistible appeal to the South African reality, it also displays conceptual and formal features that align it with the autobiographical or self-referential mode of writing that distinguishes the later

works. The autobiographical aura of the novel is created most ostensibly by the similarities between the characterization of David Lurie as an academic and Coetzee's own academic history. Lurie is a former professor of Modern Languages at the "Cape Technical University, formerly Cape Town University College" (3); Coetzee has for many years been a professor of English Literature at the University of Cape Town. Besides, this potential proximity between author and protagonist is intensified by one peculiarity of the narrative transmission that concerns the narrator. If one assumes that Coetzee employs authorial narration, he does so by means of free indirect discourse, whose most distinct reading effect is the impression that the authorial narrator has a privileged "insider" access to the psyche of the protagonist. The narrative transmission, in fact, also creates proximity at the other end as well, in the sense that it effectively brings the reader closer to the narrative world. This proximity is a result of the absence of a determinate narratee. Matt DelConte examines some of the general implications of what he calls "the absentee narratee" that apply to the reading effects produced by *Disgrace*:

> The narrative transmission seems to transcend the ontology of the fiction: considering that the narrator seems aware that no one within his ontology can access the narration, the narrator seems to narrate as if somehow conscious that someone outside his/her ontology can hear the story. The absentee narratee, then, seems to invite the reader to enter into the fiction more readily than might occur with narrative modes containing a determinate narratee … [There] is nothing within the fictional construct to buffer us (the authorial audience) from the narrator; thus, our (the authorial audience's) role as audience becomes much more immediate than in other works that can accommodate a narratee. (433, 34)

One can also, however, approach the narrative technique of *Disgrace* from a different perspective and thereby accommodate it within a mode of autobiographical writing that is specifically Coetzeean: one can assume that the fictitious protagonist Lurie is narrating his own story in the same manner in which Coetzee narrates his memoirs *Boyhood* and *Youth*. Analyzing the second sentence of the second paragraph of the novel, John Douthwaite shows how Lurie "is carrying out a conversation with the addressee", which hence implies "the makings of a confessional novel, one in which Lurie does not, however, beat his breast and admit his guilt" (51).[33] As I will elaborate on

[33] The sentence reads: "Technically, [Lurie] is old enough to be [Soraya's] father; but then, technically, one can be a father at twelve."

in this chapter, to assume that Lurie is the narrator is in fact the most suitable approach to the narrative voice given the conceptual features that *Disgrace* shares with so-called conversion narratives. *Disgrace* can be read as a narrative that pivots on Lurie's quest for illumination; in this reading, the title of the novel immediately alludes to Lurie's pursuit of grace in a negative way.

The absence of a determinate narratee, as explained above, invites or entices the reader to engage with the events of the story in a more immediate manner. Put differently, it creates a greater identification, or proximity, between the fiction and the real world. This is certainly one of the major structural aspects of *Disgrace* that help to account for the very intense responses that the novel has elicited especially among readers immersed in the South African reality. *Disgrace* prompts what could be described as a "nonfictional mode of narrative understanding", to borrow an expression that Walsh uses to describe how "the mimetic logic of fictional representation" compels readers to engage with a fictional story (13).

The story of *Disgrace* takes place in the second half of the 1990s, part in Cape Town and part in the Eastern Cape. David Lurie is a middle-aged, twice-divorced academic who sexually exploits one of his students, Melanie Isaacs. Their brief liaison ends when she files a report for sexual harassment against him. Lurie is called before a university committee to explain himself. The case, as one of the committee members puts it, has "overtones" which attest to "the long history of exploitation" of women in South Africa. Lurie is therefore called upon to admit to "the abuse of a young woman" before "the wider community" (50, 53). During the hearing, however, he questions the procedures of the committee and challenges their authority. He accepts the charges brought against him perfunctorily, refusing to make any kind of confession or public display of contrition. The university does not accept his plea and he is then dismissed. Upon his dismissal, Lurie seeks refuge at his daughter's farm in the Eastern Cape. Lucy is a representative of a new and forward-looking generation in South Africa; a "young settler", Lurie calls her (61). She is a lesbian who lives alone and cultivates a patch of land with the help of a black co-proprietor, Petrus, formerly her employee. They sell the produce of the farm in a local market and keep dogs in a kennel. She also volunteers at an animal welfare clinic run by a close friend, Bev Shaw, and shares with Bev the commitment to a more humane treatment of animals.

The first period of Lurie's stay with Lucy is smooth: they get along quite well, he helps her with the work on the farm, even gives Bev a hand at the

clinic. Everything changes the day three black men break into the house, beat Lurie, set him alight, shoot the dogs in the kennels, and gang rape Lucy. This brutal attack brings home to Lucy the precariousness of her progressive ideas about racial and social tolerance after the dismantling of apartheid. Reconciliation, in the terms presented in the novel, seems to be a delusion; the balance of power has shifted, with the consequence that she, as a member of the white minority in black territory, is disempowered, humiliated, subjugated (158, 59). To be able to keep on living on the farm, she accepts a polygamous arrangement with Petrus, signing part of her land over to him in exchange for his protection (204). But Petrus's protection is double-edged: there are suspicions that he was involved in the attack, as it later turns out that one of the rapists is his wife's brother (200). As for Lurie, he cannot do much for Lucy, who refuses to heed his advice to leave the farm. Eventually, she finds out that she got pregnant from the rape. The narrative ends with Lucy steadfast in her resolution to go on leading her life on the farm, and with Lurie in a state of suspension, as it were: he is unemployed, "his finances are in chaos", his house in Cape Town has been ransacked (175, 6). While he waits for his grandchild to be born, he carries on with the searing work of helping Bev put down countless abandoned dogs and dispose of the corpses, which is a tremendously disturbing experience for him. Besides, he invests considerable time and effort in the composition of an eccentric musical piece featuring Byron and one of his mistresses, another Sisyphean task that "consumes him night and day" (214).

The storm of critical commentary about *Disgrace* has converged on the novel's bleak portrayal of social relations. What is particularly interesting in those critical assessments, insofar as the authorial communicative act is concerned, is the insight that they provide into Coetzee's confrontational manner of engaging his readership. Attwell captures this side of his authorial agency concisely and with precision: "At a historical juncture in which the citizenry desperately wanted respect, Coetzee gave them disgrace" ("Social Life of Fiction" 107). I will begin by giving three examples that are representative of the kind of indignant reaction elicited by the novel among many commentators. Isidore Diala, for instance, interrogates how the novel handles historical guilt, and wonders whether "Lucy's mode of engagement with history is Coetzee's valid paradigm for white's negotiation for a precarious foothold in post-apartheid South Africa" (60). Lucy Graham and Rosemary Jolly choose to focus on another very sensitive issue in a South

African context: rape. Graham resents that "most commentators have skirted around the issue of sexual violence as a social problem in South Africa". She reacts in particular to a reading of Melanie Isaacs's rape as an Orphic encounter, accusing both the novel and this specific reading of contributing "to a much wider and more problematic phenomenon of silencing" (7, 13).[34] Jolly also underscores that Orphic readings of Melanie's rape reveal "a tendency to overlook the *corporeal* being of Melanie". The degree to which she can tease out the possible continuities between the novel and its surrounding context of production and reception is most noteworthy, however, when she conflates the fictional narrative world with the real-world South African society: "I find this confusion of Eurydice and Melanie disturbing. It may be true that in the underworld power becomes impossible; but *in this world*, Melanie is alive, and Lurie's power over her living body is all too evident" (163, italics mine).

Is it the case that *Disgrace* has often been misread? As Attwell argues, when many critics read *Disgrace* "as documentary, as providing access to a social truth", they often do so "without any acknowledgement that the truth it reveals is instantiated, contextualised, and frequently ironised, within forms of discourse which are being held up for scrutiny" ("Social Life of Fiction" 107, 8). Graham Pechey shares Attwell's point of view: he resents "the kind of simplistic response" that *Disgrace* has often received, a response "which precipitately allegorizes [the novel's] paraphrasable content, reading it monologically as the dramatization of white guilt at its most masochistic extreme, and turning Lucy's pragmatic ethical decision in the world of the action into a political categorical imperative for all who live in the world beyond it" (381).

To speculate whether Coetzee deliberately welcomed such responses, or at least did not refrain from eliciting them, would be to address the authorial communicative act from the wrong end, for it would entail speculations about authorial intention, and authorial intention is, ultimately, unavailable. What can be said beyond doubt is that the novel has been perceived by many readers as provocative; to those readers, *Disgrace* has spoken in a trenchant and disturbing manner about South Africa. In Lucy's story specifically, rape and white contrition, two incendiary issues in a South African context, are aligned.

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[34] Graham reacts to Michael Marais's "'Little Enough, Less than Little, Nothing': Ethics, Engagement, and Change in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee".

Lucy decides to bear an illegitimate child conceived during a gang rape in what seems to be a sign of reconciliation, as though accepting that she must pay for some kind of social debt. For a male critic such as Grant Farred, this passive acceptance of rape carries a message: "Lucy cannot speak her violation but she can bear manifest testimony to it: the future mixed-race child which the white lesbian mother will bear enunciates her recently violated past. But it is, more importantly, the most enduring symbol of her refusal to resist" ("Borderlines" 19). For female critics in particular, however, the so-called message that Lucy's rape supposedly carries is very hard to digest. Boehmer finds this depiction of female submission "problematic" and "ultimately male-led" ("Sorriest" 144). Elsewhere, she argues that it is "outrageous" to prescribe such a model of behavior for a character who, unlike Lurie, has not been an agent of evil ("Not Saying Sorry" 349). For Georgina Horrell, "the pivotal role that Lucy plays in *Disgrace* and the novel's 'redemptive' gesture towards a future, reconstituted South African society ... [demands] interrogation. … It is on and through her flesh, it would seem, that the conditions of the new South Africa are written. … An inscription of guilt is performed upon gendered flesh" ("One Settler" 32).

A reading of *Disgrace* that ignores the social and political dimension of the story would fail to respond to one of the most clearly defined aspects of Coetzee's communicative act. As Rosemarie Buikema points out, *Disgrace* "can hardly be read in any other way than as a commentary on [the] gigantic political-historical process" (189). She emphasizes specifically the similarities between the procedures of the university committee in which Lurie has to explain his involvement with Melanie and the procedures of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa: "it is difficult not to read this long opening scene [the hearing] as a commentary on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and on the debate that was being conducted about this process in South African society" (190). It seems that, for readers engaged in the South African context in particular, *Disgrace* poses the demanding challenge of drawing a distinction between approaching the novel as a participant "in the on-going dialogue on the transformation process in South Africa" that can contribute to an "understanding of the underlying implications of South Africa's peculiar history", as Diala puts it, and finding in

its representation of South African society a projection (that is to say, Coetzee's projection) of the future of the country (52).[35]

The reading I want to pursue here does not diminish or overlook the significance of South African issues in the configuration of *Disgrace*. Nevertheless, since I want to insert *Disgrace* among the later works in which Coetzee explores the possibilities and the pitfalls of self-examination and truth, I will approach the nonfictional mode of narrative understanding that the novel prompts by means of its confessional, rather than mimetic, design. As a point of departure, one could, for instance, consider how female characters such as Melanie and Lucy, whose human value is depicted as reduced in *Disgrace*, play a very specific part precisely in relation to this confessional design. To a great extent, their degradation makes sense within the mimetic construction of *Disgrace*, representing as it does the status of women in South African society as goods in "a vast circulatory system" (98). This treatment of women is one of the elements which, as Attwell argues, the novel holds up for scrutiny, instead of unreflectively reproducing it. In other words, to be dismayed and outraged at Melanie's and Lucy's fate in the novel is certainly a tenable response. The novel, however, tells first and foremost *Lurie's* story; he is the central focalized consciousness and, if one draws a parallel between *Disgrace* and Coetzee's memoirs (since the narrative technique is the same), Lurie is also the narrator of his story. Therefore, the instrumental role that women play in *Disgrace* must also be accounted for in relation to the narrative focus on Lurie. When Coetzee creates a protagonist such as Lurie or the Magistrate of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, for instance, he usually pushes the women into a secondary, or instrumental, role in order to emphasize how deficient, partial, or self-absorbed is his protagonists' ethical outlook. Michael Marais is one of the critics who suggest a more perceptive reading of the events surrounding the female characters in *Disgrace*. For him, Melanie's and Lucy's rapes function chiefly as "the mechanism through which Coetzee challenges his protagonist's assumptions of autonomy and the careless freedom with which it invests him" ("Task of the Imagination" 76). Lucy's rape is the major event in the plot that punishes Lurie for raping Melanie, forcing him to experience his state of disgrace as repentance. Lurie's narration

[35] See also, for instance, Georgina Horrell's "Post-Apartheid *Disgrace*: Guilty Masculinities in White South African Writing"; Jacqueline Rose's "Apathy and Accountability: South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission"; Rebecca Saunders's "*Disgrace* in the Time of a Truth Commission"; Michiel Heyns's "The Whole Country's Truth: Confession and Narrative in Recent South African Writing"; and Sue Kossew's "The Politics of Shame and Redemption in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*".

of his own disgrace and journey towards an arguable secular grace entails that Lucy's and Melanie's stories, and the potential complexities of their characters, are constrained by his limited perspective.[36]

Something similar happens in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, also narrated and focalized by its protagonist. The Magistrate's project of soul searching is essentially self-absorbed, just as Lurie's. As character narrator and focalized self, the Magistrate dwells on his own suffering, so that what happens to the other (the barbarian girl, in this case) is ultimately beyond his concern or capacity to grasp. In general, what *might* redeem Coetzee's self-centered protagonists are those few dubiously enlightened moments in which they seem to reach out to the other and almost get a glimpse of the other's interiority, or alternatively almost get a glimpse of themselves from the perspective of the other. The passage below, for example, shows how the Magistrate eventually comes to the insight that he has exploited the barbarian girl's crippled body. The strange attentions he has devoted to her bear a disturbing resemblance to the violence that she has suffered at the hands of her torturers:

> Whom will that other girl with the blind face remember: me with the silk robe and my dim lights and my perfumes and oils and unhappy pleasures, or that other cold man with the mask over his eyes who gave the orders and pondered the sounds of her intimate pain? Whose was the last face she saw plainly on this earth but the face behind the glowing iron? Though I cringe with shame, even here and now, I must ask myself whether, when I lay head to foot with her, fondling and kissing those broken ankles, I was not in my heart of hearts regretting that I could not engrave myself on her as deeply. (147, 48)

The Magistrate's ethical awakening, like Lurie's, is presented as a process, rather than as a product. The immediacy of the present-tense narration, among other textual elements, intensifies their soul searching with a sense of directedness, understood as a progression towards some kind of illumination.

The subject matter of *Disgrace*, Lurie's quest for illumination, can be described in secular terms as a pursuit of self-understanding and personal growth; therefore, the myopic inward look of the narrative technique is

[36] In the words of Gayatri Spivak, one needs to "counterfocalize": "*Disgrace* is relentless in keeping the focalization confined to David Lurie. Indeed, this is the vehicle of the sympathetic portrayal of David Lurie. When Lucy is resolutely denied focalization, the reader is provoked, for he or she does not want to share in Lurie-the-chief-focalizer's inability to 'read' Lucy as patient and agent. No reader is content with acting out the failure of reading. This is the rhetorical signal to the active reader, to counterfocalize" ("Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee, and Certain Scenes of Teaching" 22).

inescapable, and indispensable for the interpretation of the novel. The search for self-knowledge is a recurrent thematic concern in Coetzee's novels, and this is also the issue at the center of "Confession and Double Thoughts", where his dispiriting conclusion is that self-knowledge lies irremediably beyond the inward look. Knowledge, or the truth about the self, is both central and secondary to soul searching: it is central because it is the *raison d'être* of the inward look, but it is also secondary insofar as it is hopelessly unavailable. What is possible in the self-examining enterprise is the quest itself, the self's truth-directedness in the face of relentless doubt, which is inescapably triggered by the self's own thought processes or uttered by others. In the context of autobiographical or confessional writing, this back-and-forth between truth and doubt, between truth-directedness and the double thought, is the most distinct aspect of Coetzee's authorial discourse.

As far as the relationship between the novel and the essay is concerned, my focus will lie on the issue of closure. My reading aims to show that the novel can bring closure to Lurie's self-examination in a manner which, following Coetzee's argument, a genuine autobiography cannot. The configuration of *Disgrace* does more than enact the back-and-forth between truth-directedness and the double thought: it also ends Lurie's quest for illumination at a point in which it is possible to argue for grace beyond his self-scrutiny. In the terms of the essay, closure is an issue of authority: Lurie cannot bring closure to his self-examination and claim that he is redeemed. Put differently, the text itself does not articulate, from his perspective as the teller of his own story, a moment of definitive grace, but the narrative world contains the structural elements that are necessary to argue that grace might be brought upon him.

The next section begins the analysis of *Disgrace* in light of "Confession and Double Thoughts". It is useful to split the novel in two parts, in order to account for the completely different worlds in which Lurie moves and grasp how the relationship between both parts has a direct bearing on his personal growth, or on the truth-directedness of his soul searching. In general lines, the first part of *Disgrace* is devoted to delineating Lurie's character; the second part brings self-examination more clearly into focus.

Lurie's Story: Two Universes of Discourse

Lurie's life in Cape Town in the first part of the novel is stable, predictable, structured: "he is in good health, his mind is clear" (2). He keeps his

professional and affective lives "within limits" (3). As a former professor of Modern Languages that has been downgraded to adjunct professor of Communications, Lurie does not have much respect for the tasks he performs at the university, but "he continues to teach because it provides him with a livelihood" (5). As regards "the problem of sex" for a fifty-two year-old divorcée, he thinks he has "solved [it] rather well", after a period of "promiscuity", with weekly visits to the prostitute Soraya, "a ready learner, compliant, pliant", whom he finds "entirely satisfactory" (1, 5, 7). His life derails following his involvement with Melanie. In the second half of the novel, whose climactic event is the attack on the farm, Lurie's life is radically changed. He feels that "he is losing himself day by day", "stuck in the back of beyond … nursing his daughter" and attending to the work on the farm that Lucy is unable to care about; "a dying enterprise", he calls it (121). He commences a sexual relationship with Bev Shaw in what seems a self-inflicted punishment for his womanizing. Concomitant with his work at the clinic, where he and Bev put down abandoned dogs in sessions that leave a deeply unsettling imprint on his imagination, he struggles with the composition of an opera about his Romantic hero, Byron, and one of his mistresses, another dying enterprise which, on the surface at least, gets him nowhere.

Coetzee's comments on Tolstoy's writing in "Confession and Double Thoughts" can throw light on this dramatic shift, as well as on the role that eschatological themes such as death, repentance and revelation, predominant in the second part of the novel, play in the overall story of Lurie's personal growth. Tolstoy's writing, and particularly the later stories, according to Coetzee, is "concerned with truth" and centers on a "crisis", defined as "a confrontation with his own death that brings about an illumination in the life of the central character [and] makes it absurd for him to continue in a self-deceived mode of existence". Coetzee is particularly interested in "the sense of urgency" with which Tolstoy recounts a period of personal crisis, "the relentlessness of the process in which the self is stripped of its own comforting fictions" (*Doubling* 262). He identifies "a contest of forces" between "two states of mind simultaneously present" in Tolstoy's psyche. One is "a passive state" that, although "associated with reasoning", likens "a strange state of mind-torpor … a stoppage, as it were, of life". It is a state of "error", a "drive to death" that manifests itself as "a gathering sluggishness, like the running down of life itself". The other state is an "impulse" that

"partakes of the intellect" but from which "a saving truth" springs that "obscurely mistrusts reason" (260–1).

In order to begin looking into how *Disgrace* unfolds following this pattern, I want to draw attention to how this "contest of forces" is prepared in the novel. In the analysis of Tolstoy's fictional confession *The Kreutzer Sonata*, Coetzee reflects on how this later work fails to conform to Tolstoy's conception of "a fiction centering on a crisis of illumination, retrospectively narrated by a speaker (now a truth-bearer) about his earlier, (self-) deceived self'. The problem of the *Sonata*, as Coetzee sees it, lies in "two crippling silences":

> The first is the silence about the conversion experience, an experience in which … being a truth-bearer is felt most intensely by contrast with the previous self-deceived mode of existence. … The second and more serious silence [is manifested in] the function of doubling back and scrutinizing the truthfulness of the truth enunciated by [the protagonist]. (*Doubling* 262, 63)

In the case of *Disgrace*, the second silence, the scrutiny of the truthfulness of Lurie's utterances, is dealt with first (the first silence will be the focus of the discussion in the next section). Part of it is accomplished by means of the reflective distance that is inbuilt in his intellectual makeup. Lurie, as Pechey notes, "habitually lives at a distance from himself', and a typical manifestation of this analytical bent is his "obsessive inward attention to words" (378). Lurie is a literary scholar; the intellectual distance that is a natural habit of the profession is deeply rooted in his personality as well, where it translates as emotional coolness and detachment especially in his affective life. The most distinguishing feature of his characterization in the first part of the novel, up to the episode of the university inquiry, is his intellectualized male gaze. The "inward attention to words" which Pechey notes is symptomatic of the manner in which Lurie typically defines, categorizes, or reads the other, which becomes particularly noticeable in his dealings with women. His habit of unfolding words of the same root trying out different connotations of the object they qualify captures this dispassionate disposition: for instance, he describes Soraya, the prostitute he sees once a week, as "compliant, pliant" (5); the sessions with her give him, as he puts it, "a moderate bliss, a moderated bliss" (6). Melanie, the typically exotic desirable other, is objectified with a "shift [of] accent" and an epithet: "Meláni: the dark one" (18).[37]

[37] Similar occurrences can be found, for instance, on pages 71, 164, and 166.

The following passage captures three typical personality traits of Lurie's: the habit of contemplating an issue from different angles; his biting irony; and finally, the condescending and sexist view of the female body:

> Would they [Lucy and Helen] dare to share a bed while he was in the house? If the bed creaked in the night, would they be embarrassed? Embarrassed enough to stop? But what does he know about what women do together? Maybe women do not need to make beds creak. And what does he know about these two in particular, Lucy and Helen? Perhaps they sleep together merely as children do, cuddling, touching, giggling, reliving girlhood – sisters more than lovers. Sharing a bed, sharing a bathtub, baking gingerbread cookies, trying on each other's clothes. Sapphic love: an excuse for putting on weight. (86)

As Coetzee points out in "Confession and Double Thoughts," the truthfulness of a conversion narrative, or a narrative that centers on "a crisis of illumination", hinges on the scrutiny of the protagonist's utterances (*Doubling* 262). In *Disgrace*, this scrutiny is performed to a great extent by the narrative technique itself, which is congenial to represent Lurie's analytical and self-reflexive predisposition. But the reader is also drawn into Lurie's self-examination, particularly into the examination of his ethical standards, given the absence of an apparent narratee. The passage below, for example, is illustrative of this dual scrutiny. It is a typical instance of Lurie's habitual self-distance, the analytical, almost clinical detachment; at the same time, however, the reader is also indirectly implicated, as though invited to share the different point of view to which Lurie alludes towards the end:

> He ought to give up, retire from the game. At what age, he wonders, did Origen castrate himself? Not the most graceful of solutions, but then ageing is not a graceful business. … Severing, tying off: with local anaesthetic and a steady hand and a modicum of phlegm one might even do it oneself, out of a textbook. A man on a chair snipping away at himself: an ugly sight, but no more ugly, from a certain point of view, than the same man exercising himself on the body of a woman. (9)

The scrutiny of Lurie's conduct is also developed into a central episode of the novel, the hearing held by the university after the complaint for sexual harassment lodged by Melanie. Yet what has called the attention of most critics is the social critique embedded in the episode. Coetzee draws explicitly on the procedures of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, calling into

question the ambiguous authority with which it invested itself.[38] The similarities between the fictional committee of inquiry in *Disgrace* and the TRC are visible. Neither has any legal punitive powers; their role is formally restricted to making "recommendations" on the best course of action (47). Their overt ambition, however, manifest in their discourse of public accountability, is to act as a kind of forum in which true soul searching is carried out and repentance is exposed to all. Apart from the social critique, the hearing scene speaks directly to the problem of knowledge in confession as Coetzee spells it out in "Confession and Double Thoughts". Most obviously, the premises of the inquiry go against the basic requirement for confessional truth according to Coetzee: truth-directed soul searching is a private, not a public, issue. But the motives that call for confession and repentance, as well as the spirit in which one attempts to confess, are also in focus.

Truth-telling is depicted in Lurie's inquiry as a matter of rhetoric in its most depreciative sense, where truth is measured by the awareness of an audience. The members of the committee want his abasement to appease the angry repercussion generated by the case. For the male members, whom Lurie cynically thinks of as "his friends", those who "want to save him from his weakness, to wake him from his nightmare", a public statement is necessary to minimize the collective damage in the eyes of the media (54). The female members, and among them the chair of "the university-wide committee on discrimination", demand public censure as an exemplary punishment (40). Lurie himself refuses to engage in real reflection about his conduct before such auditors. He appears before them "in the wrong spirit", sarcastically alleging that he has "reservations of a philosophical kind" concerning its constitution (47). Unsurprisingly, the women begin to press him at once. One of them wonders whether he has consulted "a priest … or a counsellor", which immediately exasperates him: "No, I have not sought counselling nor do I intend to seek it. I am a grown man. I am not receptive to being counselled. I am beyond the reach of counselling" (49). In a clearly provocative spirit, he offers the following confession: "something happened which, not being a poet, I will not try to describe … Suffice it to say that Eros entered … I was not myself … I became a servant of Eros" (52, 53). Outraged at the manner in which he evades responsibility, the committee

[38] Examining the relevant material for *Disgrace* in *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing*, Attwell concludes that the TRC "provided the seed from which *Disgrace* germinated" (220).

demands not simply an admission of guilt, but a declaration that "comes from his heart" and "reflects his sincere feelings" in a "spirit of repentance". Needless to say, Lurie does not recognize their authority: he mocks their pretension to "divine" whether truth "comes from [his] heart"; refuses to "shed tears of contrition" or "humble [himself] and ask for clemency" (52–54). Finally, ascribing repentance to "another world, another universe of discourse", he puts forward "a secular plea" and is invited to resign from his position (58).

Lurie is also confronted with the truth of his abusive behavior even before the inquiry, in a conversation with his ex-wife Rosalind that prefigures his fate during the hearing:

> 'I don't know what you do about sex and I don't want to know, but this is not the way to go about it. You're what – fifty-two? Do you think a young girl finds any pleasure in going to bed with a man of that age? Do you think she finds it good to watch you in the middle of your…? Do you ever think about that?'
>
> He is silent.
>
> 'Don't expect sympathy from me, David, and don't expect sympathy from anyone else either. No sympathy, no mercy, not in this day and age'. (44)

This passage is relevant not only because it foreshadows the spirit in which the inquiry is conducted. Most importantly, it suggests the beginning of what could be a potentially true self-examination and remorse because Lurie tacitly acknowledges that Rosalind has a point: "Perhaps it is the right of the young to be protected from the sight of their elders in the throes of passion." Eventually, however, the change of perspective (from self to other), the incipient ethical insight, is curbed, for he falls back on a defense of his predatory behavior: "That is what whores are for, after all: to put up with the ecstasies of the unlovely" (44).

Lurie will carry out a searching examination of his conscience when he flees the city, where the eyes of the public are upon him, and seeks refuge and anonymity at his daughter's farm. His story from this point onwards is essentially a narrative of defamiliarization with himself, a gradual estrangement from the predictable world to which he was accustomed, and an admission into the "universe of discourse" in which repentance is not only legitimate, but inevitable (58). As he becomes more and more disempowered within a traditional patriarchal and racist structure, he gains moral authority. This is a

recognizably Coetzeean progression: power and moral authority do not go hand in hand in Coetzee's fiction. In Lurie's case, this progression pivots on his conflicted relationship with his daughter Lucy and with the "remarkably unattractive" Bev Shaw, with whom he will nevertheless have a sexual affair (82).

Broadly speaking, the conflict between Lurie and Lucy is a generational one; more strictly, though, what sets them apart is the issue of moral authority. As Attridge notes, "Lurie is in many ways a typical white South African of the generation that grew up with apartheid (he would have been three years old when the Nationalist government won power" (*Ethics of Reading* 171). He is, in other words, a representative of the generation that has benefitted with the power relations established by apartheid, even if he has not actively endorsed racial oppression. This generation, however, is on its way out, which emerges most clearly when the conceptions of life and of the future held by Lucy are contrasted with Lurie's. Lucy, as Horrell argues, "represents a new way for white people to live in Africa":

> She is able to share property … and appears to have constructed fair and just terms for co-ownership with Petrus … Lucy would seem to represent a *post*-colonial "dissenting colonizer, the colonizer who refuses", in that she "refuses" to take up the burdens of the master-slave, owner-worker relationship, fashioning instead a partnership with the black man who is at first employed by her … [She] exceeds and thereby refuses the structures of patriarchal colonialism: she is firmly inscribed in the margins of society as a lesbian woman, who has chosen to live alone, independent of male authority. ("One Settler" 27, italics in original)

Lurie, in contrast, lives by and represents a surpassed, obsolete model whose privileges, particularly sexual privileges, are exposed as immoral because of the power relations that make them possible. The interactions with Lucy often make it evident. For example, when he tells her that he "wouldn't oblige" to the "spectacle [of] breast-beating, remorse, tears" demanded by the university, Lucy's soft and subtly ironic advice uncovers precisely the vanity behind his principled resistance: "You shouldn't be so unbending, David. It isn't heroic to be unbending" (66). In another conversation, Lurie wants to speak for the "rights of desire". He draws the melodramatic comparison between the reprimand he was given by the university and the beating of a dog by its owners whenever the animal wants to mate. It is "ignoble" to attempt to make an animal hate its "own nature", he argues, for "no animal will accept the

justice of being punished for following its instincts". Lucy challenges him openly this time, calling into question his exploitative sexual behavior: "So males must be allowed to follow their instincts unchecked?" (89, 90)

Another issue that exposes the ethical and ideological divide between father and daughter is the treatment of animals. On the whole, Lurie is basically indifferent to animals. They should be treated kindly, he says, but one cannot "lose perspective" of the fact that "we are of a different order of creation from the animals. Not higher, not necessarily, just different" (74). Lucy reads in his indifference yet another exercise of power; we dispose of animals according to their utility to us: "They are part of the furniture, part of the alarm system. They do us the honour of treating us like gods, and we respond by treating them like things" (78). On the issue of how animals should be treated, she has clearly elected a model of unselfish dedication to the other: she volunteers at the animal clinic because of people like Bev, who do "an enormous amount of good" by attempting to share "some of our human privilege with the beasts" (73, 74). Unsurprisingly, the moral authority that someone like Bev can inspire in Lucy upsets Lurie. On the surface, his reaction is scornful. "Animal-welfare people", as he calls them, are "a subculture of [their] own", without cultivation, refinement, or charm. Since Bev is a woman, Lurie is particularly (and predictably) attentive to her physical attributes: "He has not taken to Bev Shaw, a dumpy, bustling little woman with black freckles, close-cropped, wiry hair, and no neck. He does not like women who make no effort to be attractive" (72). Bev's neglect for her looks, Lurie seems to believe, is an indirect attack on men like him, for whom a woman's beauty is a man's property: as he once told Melanie, "a woman's beauty is part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it" (16). More deeply, though, he is unsettled by the realization that his daughter's independence entails, for him, an inevitable loss of paternal authority (and this realization will be intensified as the story unfolds). His condescending remarks about her engagement with animals are a symptom of his uneasiness at finding himself thus surpassed, or disempowered, before her:

> I am sorry, my child, I just find it hard to whip up an interest in the subject. It's admirable, what you do, what she does, but to me, animal-welfare people are a bit like Christians of a certain kind. Everyone is so cheerful and well-intentioned that after a while you itch to go off and do some raping and pillaging. Or to kick a cat. (73)

Lucy's response makes it clear that she rejects her father's way of life and what it represents, especially his lofty scholarly and artistic pursuits, which she emphatically discredits as paths to a "higher life":

> You think I ought to involve myself in more important things … You think, because I am your daughter, I ought to be doing something better with my life … painting still lives or teaching myself Russian. You don't approve of friends like Bev and Bill Shaw because they are not going to lead me to a higher life … They are not going to lead me to a higher life, and the reason is, there is no higher life. This is the only life there is. Which we share with animals. That's the example that people like Bev try to set. That's the example I try to follow. (74)

In some respects, father and daughter can be said to be worlds apart; this conflict between them encapsulates on a minor scale the schism between two worlds that is a significant thematic component of the novel. This schism is fittingly situated in frontier territory: the Eastern Cape border, the site of "long-ago, infamous wars among the white colonists, the Afrikaner Trekkers and the indigenous black population", a place which marks "if not the original point of conflict then certainly the most enduring site of antagonism between black and white" (Farred, "Borderlines" 17). The frontier where Lurie and Lucy remain is a symbol for a suspended state: it is neither here nor there, for it marks both the end and the beginning; it is the site of the encounter, or clash, between self and other. The frontier territory where the second half of the story takes place is depicted as a primitive, barbaric, superstitious world beyond enlightenment and, consequently, beyond the reach of the traditional power structures that have privileged Lurie.

A thought that occurs to him as he is locked in a lavatory while his daughter is raped in her bedroom captures this change in the order of things swiftly; Lurie, the cultivated man of letters, is completely powerless before the brutality of the place in which he finds himself: "He speaks Italian, he speaks French, but Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa" (95). The chapter in which the attack on the farm and Lucy's rape are portrayed, which marks the climactic point of the narrative, has an almost otherworldly atmosphere. Lucy's opening words about three wild geese that come to the farm every year have a sinister tone, foreboding the arrival of the three rapists: "I feel so lucky to be visited. To be the one chosen" (88). The word "visit" is also suggestive: it evokes "visitation", in the sense of a divine dispensation, or the coming of a supernatural power to judge and punish one. Lurie himself

also describes the attack in similarly eschatological terms: "So it has come, the day of testing. Without warning, without fanfare, it is here, and he is in the middle of it" (94).

The frontier has a metaphorical dimension in Lurie's progression: it is the place where he will undergo a slow process of disempowerment, manifested in the disordered intellectual and emotional state in which the attack leaves him. Lurie is traumatized; a gloomy and abject frame of mind settles upon him, which he often expresses as a relentless emptying of life and of meaning: "He has a sense that, inside him, a vital organ has been bruised, abused – perhaps even his heart … [He] feels his interest in the world draining from him drop by drop. It may take weeks, it may take months before he is bled dry, but he is bleeding" (107). On a more intellectual level, Lurie experiences a similar emptiness as language seems to him to have been exhausted of meaning. Language has "thickened, lost [its] articulations, [its] articulateness, [its] articulatedness … stiffened … like a dinosaur expiring and settling in the mud" (117). The following passage is representative of the disarray in his grasp on the world; the way he looks for the roots of the word "friend" captures his attempt to rationalize the new reality according to familiar, but anachronistic, conceptions:

> Bill Shaw believes that if he, Bill Shaw, had been hit over the head and set on fire, then he, David Lurie, would have driven to the hospital and sat waiting … Bill Shaw believes that, because he and David Lurie once had a cup of tea together, David Lurie is his friend, and the two of them have obligations towards each other. Is Bill Shaw wrong or right? … Has Bill Shaw … seen so little of the world that he does not know there are men who do not readily make friends, whose attitude toward friendships between men is corroded with scepticism? Modern English *friend* from Old English *freond*, from *freon*, to love. Does the drinking of tea seal a love-bond, in the eyes of Bill Shaw? Yet but for Bill and Bev Shaw, but for old Ettinger, but for bonds of some kind, where would he be now? (102, italics in original)

His skepticism about male comradeship is understandable. In the background of his reflection about the obligations that friends have towards one another is the conduct of his male work colleagues, his "friends", as he cynically referred to them in connection with the inquiry. These were the comrades who so readily concurred with his public exposure, disguising self-interest (since they wanted to safeguard their own reputations) as fellow-feeling: "We have our weak moments, all of us, we are only human. Your case is not unique" (52).

This identification of points of contact between the first and the second parts of the narrative is a central reading effect of *Disgrace*. The configuration of Lurie's trajectory relies on how the key plot events are aligned by means of similarities, analogies, or parallels.[39]

For instance, the central metaphor that Coetzee explores to depict Lurie's melancholy after the attack, as well as Melanie's and Lucy's experiences of sexual violence, is death. The metaphor creates a common framework for their experience, for they are all victims of violence, and it also establishes the unbridgeable gap between Lurie and the women where sexual violence, in particular, is concerned. The passage below is an example of how Lurie's thoughts after the attack typically revolve around personal dissolution:

> Just an after-effect, he tells himself, an after-effect of the invasion. In a while the organism will repair itself, and I, the ghost within it, will be my old self again. But the truth, he knows, is otherwise. His pleasure in living has been snuffed out. Like a leaf on a stream, like a puffball on a breeze, he has begun to float toward his end … The blood of life is leaving his body and despair is taking its place, despair that is like a gas, odourless, tasteless, without nourishment. You breathe it in, your limbs relax, you cease to care … (107, 8)

Lurie is in mourning for himself because of what he describes as an "invasion", a significant word because of the chain of associations that it can create. It calls to mind his own unexpected and unwanted appearance at Melanie's apartment in the first part of the novel: "He has given her no warning; she is too surprised to resist the intruder who thrusts himself upon her". It is precisely after Lurie's invasion that the text depicts Melanie's powerlessness before him most explicitly as a kind of death: "When he takes her in his arms, her limbs crumple like a marionette's" (24). Within Lurie's psychological and ethical makeup, his advance does not amount to rape ("not quite that"), but the words that Coetzee uses to portray Melanie's subjection are unambiguous: "As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration…" (25).

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[39] Michael Marais and Alyda Faber also underscore the importance of these parallels for the understanding of the novel. In Marais's words, "by constructing a parallel between the two rape scenes in the novel, Coetzee thus places his protagonist in a number of roles and positions which are ironic reversals of those he has previously occupied. In so doing, the writer introduces his protagonist to realms of experience from which he has previously been excluded" ("Task of Imagination" 78). Faber notes that "a number of broadly parallel events play off each other in the novel, creating a dialogical dynamic … Language in *Disgrace* is dialogical in the sense that reiterated words – like 'disgrace', 'save', 'impersonal' and 'love' – reveal changing shades of positive and negative meaning depending on contexts of shifting negotiations of power in and through race and gender relations" (306).

One can continue to pursue the implications of the death metaphor with reference to Lucy, whose reaction is similar to Melanie's. Her remoteness while being consoled by her father immediately reenacts Melanie mimicking death. Lurie "takes [Lucy] in his arms. In his embrace she is stiff as a pole, yielding nothing" (99). Coetzee uses identical words in the first part of the novel in the scene where Lurie invites Melanie to spend the night with him: "she does not withdraw, but does not *yield* either" (16, italics mine). Finally, "she slips his *embrace* and is gone" (17, italics mine). Two other passages also render Lucy's experience as analogous to dying. The first one occurs when she reports the assault, the killing of the dogs, and the robbery but does not mention the rape to the police officers. Lurie interprets her silence as an admission of defeat; out of shame, he thinks to himself, she is conceding the rapists a "victory" by not laying charges: "The men … will read [in the news] that they are being sought for robbery and assault and nothing else. It will dawn on them that over the body of the woman silence is being drawn like a blanket" (110). The second passage is Lucy's most explicit account of her experience: "I am a dead person and I do not know yet what will bring me back to life" (161).

The trauma caused by the attack accentuates the differences between father and daughter, and their estrangement increases after a number of confrontations. For Lurie, those confrontations make it painfully explicit that Lucy does not need her father's protection; indeed, she does not want his protection. Despite his struggle to reach out of his self-centeredness, his attempts to understand what she is going through constantly fail. These bitter exchanges follow a pattern: Lurie often gauges Lucy's situation in terms of his own response to the events; she, on the other hand, asserts her difference from him time and again, challenging him to reach beyond his usual modes of thinking. Lurie wonders, for instance, if Lucy is trying to remind him "of what women undergo at the hands of men" by not speaking about the rape, which is revealing of his inchoate awareness of being himself a violator (111). She cuts him short: "This has nothing to do with you, David" (112). Upon her curt reply, he tries another recognizable Lurie-like approach and reads her attitude against a wider context of interpretation. Her silence is a symbolic gesture, he ventures; she is making reparations for the historical crime of apartheid: "Is it some form of private salvation you are trying to work out? Do you hope you can expiate the crimes of the past by suffering in the present?" To some extent, he might have a point; Lucy is a forward-looking

young South African whose rejection of the colonial past has created a new landscape of social relations around the life on the farm. But, again, she is categorical: "No. You keep misreading me. Guilt and salvation are abstractions. I don't act in terms of abstractions" (112).

Within the historical dimension to which Lurie alludes, Lucy's words spell out for him that historical guilt belongs with his generation, not hers. But there is a more personal aspect of the difference between them that is implied by her response as well: Lurie is the intellectual who deals in abstractions; the pragmatic Lucy does not. This exchange is also significant on the level of the overall configuration of the narrative, since it functions as a metacommentary on Lurie's journey towards some form of illumination (and not without a tinge of irony). Lucy disowns abstractions such as guilt and salvation, but guilt and salvation lie in fact at the heart of her father's story in the novel. Another such metacommentary is implicit when she accuses him of being selfish: "You behave as if everything I do is part of the story of your life. You are the main character, I am a minor character who doesn't make an appearance until halfway through" (198).

Lurie's loss of paternal authority is intensified when "fatherly Petrus" emerges as the figure of power to which Lucy chooses to appeal (162). As Petrus rises as Lucy's protector and Lurie finds himself impotent, archaic, anachronistic, the animosity between both men grows. Lurie is particularly aggrieved at Petrus's reticence to acknowledge that Lucy has been raped, which for him is evidence of Petrus's connivance:

> *You are whipping yourself into a rage*, he admonishes himself: *Stop it*! Yet at this moment he would like to take Petrus by the throat. *If it had been your wife instead of my daughter*, he would like to say to Petrus, *you would not be tapping your pipe and weighing your words so judiciously. Violation*: that is the word he would like to force out of Petrus. *Yes, it was a violation*, he would like to hear Petrus say; *yes, it was an outrage*. (119, italics in original)

Lurie wants from Petrus an unequivocal admission of his collaboration with the rapists. "Violation" is the specific word that he wants to hear, and that Petrus "so judiciously" avoids. This passage, like others, harks back to a counterpart in the first half of the novel. Petrus's silence about Lucy's rape recalls Lurie's own refractory stance during the inquiry about Melanie's abuse. The outrage that Petrus's maneuvers elicit from him is similar to the anger that Dr. Rassool, the chair of the committee for discrimination, manifested at Lurie's evasive responses during the inquiry, when she demanded a confession

of sexual abuse: "*Abuse*: he was waiting for the word. Spoken in a voice quivering with righteousness. What does she see, when she looks at him, that keeps her at such a pitch of anger?" (53, italics in original) As with the death metaphor, silence creates a common framework for victims and perpetrators, both aligning and dissociating them. Male silence, as both Lurie and Petrus make use of it, is an index of power, and an eloquent expression of their guilt, whether by action or omission. Female silence, in contrast, as both Melanie and Lucy resort to it, is a token of their powerlessness and victimization.

Lurie refuses to talk about rape during the inquiry because he is a perpetrator of sexual violence, whereas Lucy refuses to talk about rape because she is a victim of sexual violence. Yet underlying both refusals is a common purpose: the wish to avoid public disgrace. This parallel between Lurie's and Lucy's disgrace emerges clearly for the first time when Lurie listens to Lucy's partial account of the events to the police and thinks: "Lucy's secret; his disgrace" (109). A little later, it appears again more elaborately in the passage in which he reflects on her decision to skip the Saturday market, where she sells the produce of the farm, a couple of days after the attack:

> She would rather hide her face, and he knows why. Because of the disgrace. Because of the shame. … Like a stain the story is spreading across the district. Not her story to spread but theirs [the rapists']: they are its owners. How they put her in her place, how they showed her what a woman was for (115).

Lurie is trying to create a common ground for himself and Lucy, mainly to gauge her experience. The narrative itself, however, calls this common ground into question: by means of Bev, the novel suggests that it is a mistake to measure Lucy's experience of being disgraced by the same yardstick with which one could measure Lurie's. She is a *victim* of sexual violence; he is a *perpetrator*. The following passage spells it out clearly. The number of questions that Lurie asks himself is also significant; his confusion peaks at this point in the novel, and he is on the brink of a radical transformation:

> *You weren't there. You don't know what happened.* He is baffled. Where, according to Bev Shaw, according to Lucy, was he not? In the room where the intruders were committing their outrages? Do they think he does not know what rape is? Do they think he has not suffered with his daughter? What more could he have witnessed than he is capable of imagining? Or do they think that, where rape is concerned, no man can be where the woman is? Whatever the answer, he is outraged, outraged at being treated like an outsider. (140, 41, italics in original)

I have resorted to Coetzee's analysis of Tolstoy's work in "Confession and Double Thoughts" in order to shed light on two major structural elements of *Disgrace* that evince the novel's confessional design. The first element has been dealt with in this section: it is the scrutiny of the protagonist's consciousness, performed both by the narrative voice itself, which enacts Lurie's characteristic reflective distance, and by the characters with whom he interacts, notably the female ones. The second confessional element of the novel will be the object of the next section: it is the "conversion experience", as Coetzee puts it in connection with the protagonist of the *Sonata*, "an experience in which … being a truth-bearer is felt most intensely by contrast with the previous self-deceived mode of existence" (*Doubling* 262).

"Not a Good Man, but not a Bad One Either"

The Kreutzer Sonata, in Coetzee's view, fails as a confessional work because Tolstoy was seemingly not interested in portraying the process by means of which his protagonist attains illumination. To outline what this process would be like in the conception of a writer such as Tolstoy, Coetzee turns to Tolstoy's own *Confessions*, an autobiographical narrative of a turbulent period in his life. Coetzee sees in Tolstoy's personal account of his suicidal thoughts the presence of two simultaneous states of mind:

> Though associated with reasoning, the condition of mind that leads him to "[hide] away a cord, to avoid being tempted to hang myself" … is described as a passive state, "a strange state of mind-torpor … a stoppage, as it were, of life" … Conversely, the impulse that saves his life is not simply a physical life-force but partakes of the intellect: it is "an inkling that my ideas were wrong", a sense that "I [had] made some mistake; it is "doubts" … Thus the opposition is not between a clear and overwhelming conviction that life is absurd, and an instinctually based animal drive to live: error, the drive to death, is a gathering sluggishness, like the running down of life itself, while the saving truth springs from an instinctive intellectual power that mistrusts reason. (*Doubling* 260, 1)

One can bring the features of these concomitant states of mind to bear on Lurie in *Disgrace*. After his dismissal from the university, and most intensely after the attack on the farm, Lurie feels "a gathering sluggishness", as Coetzee puts it above, a profound sense of disempowerment that he often describes as a drying up, or a draining, of life itself. The catalyst of his transformation, however, is a concrete and life-changing experience of death: his work with

Bev at the animal clinic, where both put down abandoned dogs. Lurie starts giving Bev a hand at the clinic before the attack and, already at this early stage, he is unsettled by what happens there:

> Things are beginning to fall into place. He has a first inkling of the task this ugly little woman has set herself. This bleak building is a place not of healing – her doctoring is too amateurish for that – but of last resort … Bev Shaw, not a veterinarian but a priestess, full of New Age mumbo jumbo, trying, absurdly, to lighten the load of Africa's suffering beasts. Lucy thought he would find her interesting. But Lucy is wrong. Interesting is not the word. (84)

The uncertainty, as well as the ambiguity that Lurie seems to sense in relation to what Bev does "to lighten the load of Africa's suffering beasts", is a symptom of his gradual identification with animals as powerless creatures. Initially, what prompts this identification is his experience of having been deprived of his "rights of desire": as I quoted previously, he draws a parallel between himself and a dog beaten for following its mating instincts; besides, he also identifies with a goat that has had its testicles savaged (106). One passage that alludes to the identification between Lurie and animals is particularly more significant in the context of the failure of reason that, as Coetzee suggests in "Confession in Double Thoughts", is potentially transformative. Lurie is disturbed by the impending slaughter of two sheep for Petrus's celebration of his acquisition of part of Lucy's land:

> A bond seems to have come into existence between himself and the two Persians, he does not know how. The bond is not one of affection. It is not even a bond with these two in particular, whom he could not pick out from a mob in a field. Nevertheless, suddenly and without reason, their lot has become important to him. (126)

The empathetic impulse that manifests itself "suddenly and without reason", seemingly at odds with Lurie's habitual indifference to animals, escapes his rational grasp. Along the lines of the argument in "Confession and Double Thoughts", it seems that a transformation slowly "takes place in the site of the self", and something like a "saving truth" insinuates itself (*Doubling* 261).

Lurie's saving truth becomes more palpable as he works at the animal clinic, helping Bev put down abandoned dogs. If the sacrifice of the sheep gave Lurie an intuition of death, the work at the clinic in contrast will bring home to him its concrete and hugely unsettling reality. On the one hand, the killing of the dogs could be deemed a charitable act; Bev releases them from a

miserable existence of disease and neglect, giving the animal "her fullest attention" in its last moments, "stroking it, talking to it, easing its passage" (*Disgrace* 142). It is not a task that she takes lightly; as Lucy puts it, "it cuts her up terribly" (79). Lurie himself, however, is overwhelmed by the ambiguity of what is actually happening, and cannot help falling back into his scholarly cast of mind when he describes it as "sessions of *Lösung* (German always to hand with an appropriately blank abstraction): sublimation, as alcohol is sublimed from water, leaving no residue, no aftertaste" (142, italics in original). His experience of death at the clinic can be said to be both first-hand and surrogate. It is first-hand in the sense that the dogs are killed in his arms: "he is the one who holds the dog still as the needle finds the vein and the drug hits the heart and the legs buckle and the eyes dim" (142). Strictly speaking, though, despite the directness of his participation, his experience is obviously a surrogate one.

Lurie identifies with the dogs to the point that he projects his own powerlessness onto their fruitless efforts to escape the lethal injection. He sees in the animals' instinctual resistance a vivid picture of his own inexorable dissolution:

> They flatten their ears, they droop their tails, as if they *too* feel the disgrace of dying; locking their legs, they have to be pulled or pushed or carried over the threshold. On the table some snap wildly left and right, and some whine plaintively; none will look straight at the needle in Bev's hand, which they somehow know is going to harm them terribly.
>
> Worst are those that sniff him and try to lick his hand. He has never liked being licked, and his first impulse is to pull away. Why pretend to be a chum when in fact one is a murderer? (143, my italics)

But the disgrace of death to which he alludes implicates him in another way as well: Lurie is ashamed of what he forces the animals to undergo: "he gives off the wrong smell … the smell of shame" (142). Though not aware of how his thought processes work, on some level he realizes that shame, or disgrace, attaches both to the powerful and the powerless.

The change that the sessions of *Lösung* gradually enact in Lurie's psyche is enormous. Upon knowing that the dogs' rigid limbs are beaten before the hospital crew feed the corpses into an incinerator, he decides to dispose of them personally, one by one; his care borders on the absurd. Towards the end of his reflection on what motivates him to do so, Lurie has, in fact, an epiphany:

> Why has he taken on this job? To lighten the burden on Bev Shaw? For that it would be enough to drop off the bags [which contain the corpses] at the dump and drive away. For the sake of the dogs? But the dogs are dead; and what do dogs know of honour and dishonour anyway?
>
> For himself, then. For his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing. (146)

His new "idea of the world" seems to spring from "an instinctive intellectual power that obscurely mistrusts reason", as Coetzee puts it in "Confession and Double Thoughts" (*Doubling* 261). Lurie's concern with the animals' fate is not purely irrational. Not only does he acknowledge that, given the abandon in which they live, Bev's devoted, even loving care in their last moments manifests a profound respect for the animals' existence; Lurie also scrutinizes his and Bev's roles, recognizing the undeniable exercise of power that, in truth, makes their charity possible. However, he is, more importantly, atoning for his actions, and not only for his participation in the sessions of *Lösung*. The excessive dedication to the dogs' corpses, which he does not want to see handled according to one's convenience, is a displaced atonement for the ways in which he himself has handled other bodies, violating their integrity. As Boehmer puts it,

> we see him taking the quality of sympathy beyond its conventional limits, the divides between the living and the dead, between humans and other animals, without being precisely sure why he is doing so. He achieves, in Elizabeth Costello's terms, an unconscious redemption from evil: his self becomes a site on which pity is staged. Fundamentally, this evil is the evil of having objectified others through reason as entirely different from ourselves and therefore to be used as we see fit. ("Sorriest" 141)

Lurie's "new idea of the world", in light of the remarkable contrast between the old and this new self, is something akin to illumination. At this point in the story, he is indeed a very different character from the one in the first half of the novel. The rationalizations, the objectifying ironies, the habitual way of treating people, and especially women, as instruments have given way to an irrationality, almost a naiveté, that is unprecedented: "Curious that a man as selfish as he should be offering himself to the service of dead dogs. There must be other, more productive ways of giving oneself to the world, or to an idea of the world. … He saves the honour of corpses because there is no one

else stupid enough to do it. That is what he is becoming: stupid, daft, wrongheaded" (146).

In the overall configuration of *Disgrace,* Lurie's "new idea of the world" carries great thematic significance. The insight that human and animal suffering, as depicted in the novel, is both commensurate and impossible to compare pivots on Lurie's illumination. Different human bodies in the narrative (Melanie's, Lucy's, even Lurie's) suffer some form of violence (an "invasion") which they internalize as a form of death. The animal bodies, however, are those upon which the violence is in reality most extreme because it is irreparable, beyond processing, as it were: unlike Melanie, the dogs cannot mimic death; unlike Lucy and Lurie, they cannot allegorize the trauma of their violations as a form of death. The animals are indeed put to death; strictly speaking, the true correlation between death and disgrace applies, in the novel, to them.

Lurie has certainly come a long way in his journey towards illumination. Yet one can hardly talk about character reformation without acknowledging that, for every step forward towards a new improved self, Lurie also takes a step backwards, falling back into the same old pattern of behavior. What happens at the clinic breaks him down, so to speak, and ushers in the moral insight that is most immediately imperative to him: the recognition that he has used women sexually. Another manifestation of Lurie's surrogate experience of death is the death of desire that takes place in his subjectivity. Again, the eschatological aura over the events of the second half of the novel is noticeable here. The similarities between Lurie's dispassionate involvement with Bev and Melanie's involvement with him evince some form of retributive justice, as if a superior power brought upon him the same kind of suffering that he has inflicted upon Melanie (though arguably not the same degree of suffering that he has caused, since Lurie, unlike the women, is not being forced to have sex). One can also account for this superior punitive force in terms which would be more in line with Lurie's abjection: he is compulsively bringing this death of desire upon himself, unconsciously abasing or reducing himself. "Of their congress", as he describes it, "he can at least say that he does his duty. Without passion but without distaste either". And the relapse into the old objectifying self is clear: "Let me not forget this day, he tells himself, lying beside her when they are spent. After the sweet young flesh of Melanie Isaacs, this is what I have come to. This is what I will have to get used to, this and even less than this" (150).

To some extent, more or less consciously, Lurie does seem to grasp what Melanie has gone through with him, and he relives it with Bev, this time by becoming the object of desire. He will, however, go even further in his empathetic identification with women once Lucy hints that, since he is a man, he is a potential rapist or, at least, potentially complicit:

> When it comes to men and sex, David, nothing surprises me any more. Maybe, for men, hating the woman makes sex more exciting. You are a man, you ought to know. When you have sex with someone strange – when you trap her, hold her down, get her under you, put all your weight on her – isn't it a bit like killing? Pushing the knife in; exiting afterwards, leaving the body behind covered in blood – doesn't it feel like murder, like getting away with murder? (158)

Lurie is very disturbed by her words: "*You are a man, you ought to know*: does one speak to one's father like that?" (italics in original). Nevertheless, "Lucy's words echo in his mind" and eventually prompt another remarkable imaginative effort for someone like Lurie:

> Lucy was frightened, frightened near to death. Her voice choked, she could not breathe, her limbs went numb. *This is not happening*, she said to herself as the men forced her down; *it is just a dream, a nightmare*. While the men, for their part, drank up her fear, revelled in it, did all they could to hurt her, to menace her, to heighten her terror …
>
> *You don't understand, you weren't there*, says Bev Shaw. Well, she is mistaken. Lucy's intuition is right after all: he does understand; he can, if he concentrates, if he loses himself, be there, be the men, inhabit them, fill them with the ghost of himself. The question is, does he have it in him to be the woman? (160, italics in original)

Not only does he admit that he knows what it is like to abuse a woman sexually, but he also recognizes that it is impossible for a man to be fully empathetic with a woman. This is another epiphanic moment of his, and one about which one could also argue for a measure of truth-directedness on Lurie's part. Full empathy, or real knowledge of what a victim of sexual abuse experiences, is out of reach for him; nevertheless, it is the recognition itself that might redeem him.

The chapter that follows this passage, however, complicates the picture of Lurie's truth-directedness considerably. He decides to pay a visit to the Isaacs', to "speak his heart" (165). Arriving in their house, he is met by Desiree, Melanie's younger sister. At once, he knows that he is down the same path

again. Noticing that Desiree "is, if anything, more beautiful" that Melanie, he wonders: *"God save me,* he thinks – *what am I doing here?"* (italics in original). He cannot refrain from being his usual self: "He thinks: fruit of the same tree, down probably to the most intimate detail. Yet with differences: different pulsings of the blood, different urgencies of passion. The two of them in the same bed: an experience fit for a king" (164).

Lurie does utter an apology to Melanie's father: "I am sorry for what I took your daughter through. You have a wonderful family. I apologize for the grief I have caused you and Mrs. Isaacs. I ask for your pardon" (171). Once again, one could argue for a measure of truth-directedness in his apology, given the transformation in his character. The problem with confessions and apologies in Coetzee's writing is that they are always tainted by the conscious effort of producing the truth. So it is with Lurie's apology: immediately after asking for pardon, he is subject to the double thought: *"Wonderful* is not right. Better would be *exemplary*" (171, italics in original). Pressed further by Isaacs, he tries to be even more truth-directed, that is, to articulate with more sincerity what he has in his heart:

> In my own terms, I am being punished for what happened between myself and your daughter. I am sunk into a state of disgrace from which it will not be easy to lift myself. It is not a punishment I have refused. I do not murmur against it. On the contrary, I am living it out from day to day, trying to accept disgrace as my state of being. (172)

But Isaacs thinks that this apology is not enough, and indirectly urges Lurie to apologize to Melanie's mother. Lurie humbles himself even more before Melanie's mother and sister: "With careful ceremony he gets to his knees and touches his forehead to the floor". Arguably, this is an even more truth-directed effort, and one that evades words. His self-consciousness, however, betrays truth yet another time: "Is that enough? he thinks. Will that do? If not, what more? (173) Finally, Isaacs scrutinizes Lurie's sincerity once again. In his hotel room at night, Lurie receives a call from Isaacs, first wishing him "strength for the future", then pointedly questioning his motives to apologize: "You are not hoping for us to intervene on your behalf, are you, with the university?" (173)

An inconclusive back-and-forth between the man he has always been and an incipient reformed self: the oscillation that Lurie experiences between these two dispositions is comparable with the two concomitant states of mind that Coetzee identifies in Tolstoy's grappling with his own conflicted self in the

Confessions. Lurie has certainly changed, but is at the same time all too human to attain redemption for his sins, the grace that the title of the novel negatively points to. Most obviously, "disgrace" is an allusion to Lurie's downfall and abasement both on a public and on a private sphere, but the title is also consistent with the argument in "Confession and Double Thoughts", in particular with the discussion of Dostoevsky's works. Coetzee identifies a progression in *Notes from Underground, The Idiot,* and *The Possessed* insofar as the hopelessness of the double thought is concerned. In *The Possessed*, he argues, Dostoevsky not only restages the potentially infinite self-doubt of a confessant, but brings it to a point of closure within the narrative. The solution is, essentially, a matter of directedness, that is, of gesturing towards grace without asserting that the confessant has achieved, or has been granted, it.[40]

However incomplete or unsatisfactory Lurie's progression, the narrative does provide elements to argue for his redemption. His startlingly irrational dedication to the dogs, the ambiguous act of charity, is one of them, especially if it is seen against the background of one of Coetzee's comments about the influence of Dostoevsky's writing on his own fiction. What draws Coetzee's attention in the self-examination of Dostoevsky's characters, apart from their exacerbated self-awareness, is the fact that Dostoevsky is ultimately "not interested in the psyche, which he sees as an arena of game-playing", but in what can bring self-examination to an end: "Against the endlessness of skepticism Dostoevsky poses the closure not of confession but of absolution and therefore of the intervention of grace in the world". Further, he suggests a parallel between his own writing and Dostoevsky's by alluding to a secular counterpart of grace: "a measure of charity [is], I suppose, the way in which grace allegorizes itself in the world"(*Doubling* 249).

Grace, in a theological conception, and charity, in Coetzee's novel, are both bestowed freely when one needs them most. Lurie can be said to grant the dogs a measure of grace, understood as benevolence or charity, when he allows them to leave this world in a more dignified manner. In turn, Lurie himself, by practicing an unselfish action, without expecting some benefit or

[40] In *Notes from Underground* and *The Idiot*, Coetzee traces the heightened level of self-awareness that often compromises the confessions offered by Dostoevsky's characters. The term "double thought" is coined by the protagonist of *The Idiot*, but Coetzee identifies the phenomenon first in *Notes from Underground*, whose protagonist is trapped in his so-called "hyperconsciousness" (*Doubling* 275).

advantage, might possibly be granted forgiveness for his past actions. Since grace transcends a secular world, the narrative itself does not portray him as a reformed man. Rather, it portrays his atonement as a possible path towards a redeemed self.

There is yet another element of Lurie's story that gestures towards grace, and with more emphasis: his effort to compose an opera. Along with the work at the animal clinic, this is a task to which he devotes himself wholeheartedly. The next section carries this argument for Lurie's grace further by elaborating on how artistic creation can be read as another allegory of grace in the novel. On the whole, the opera can be described as a truth-directed piece because it is underway, and Lurie does not seem to be able to conclude it. Most importantly, the opera, originally conceived as an exuberant piece with "lifting melodies" and "lush arias", is in fact depicted as an almost ridiculous work, something to laugh at: it is composed with a toy banjo and will possibly include the howling of a lame stray dog that sings along with the protagonists, Byron and one of his mistresses (*Disgrace* 183–84). It is, however, precisely this diminishment or descent of art, as it were, a stripping down of greatness or magnificence in the artistic creation, that has the potential to manifest grace. In order to develop this argument, I will make a parallel between *Disgrace* and *The Master of Petersburg*, whose subject matter is, in contrast with Lurie's minor or failed artistic achievement, the creation of a masterpiece.

Artistic Creation: *Disgrace* and *The Master of Petersburg*

The Master of Petersburg is a work about artistic creation, a fictional account of the genesis of *The Possessed*, one of Dostoevsky's major works. Coetzee distorts the historical record to explore the troubled relationship between Dostoevsky and his stepson Pavel Isaev. In reality, Pavel outlived Dostoevsky; in Coetzee's novel, he dies in his early twenties, after falling from a shot tower in St. Petersburg. The novel depicts artistic creation as the means whereby Dostoevsky tries to come to terms with loss and guilt.[41] The circumstances of

[41] In the chapter devoted to *The Master of Petersburg*, Attwell examines the circumstances of the death of Coetzee's son and how they informed the novel's composition: "The autobiographical move in *The Master of Petersburg* is to propose that at the centre of Dostoevsky's creativity in *The Possessed* was an episode of disorienting grief. Coetzee has remarked that he found the record of the relevant period in Dostoevsky's career 'absorbing and very humbling to follow' because it speaks of Dostoevsky's struggle with indirection and uncertainty. The sense of affinity Coetzee speaks from

Pavel's death are sinister and particularly painful. It was apparently a suicide, but rumors of his involvement with anti-Tsarist revolutionaries lead the police to suspect that he has in fact been murdered. Pavel's untimely death overwhelms Dostoevsky, who had been a distant, indifferent father figure to him after his mother passed away. Although overrun with guilt for not having been present in Pavel's life, Dostoevsky is also deeply resentful at his presumed collusion with the revolutionaries, the loathed "nihilists", as he calls them.

Death, in Coetzee's novel, is that which prompts Dostoevsky to write what will become *The Possessed*. In its original conception, the work that the fictional Dostoevsky wants to produce is meant to be a gift of love to Pavel's memory, as well as an apology for his negligence. For the largest part of Coetzee's novel, however, Dostoevsky gets nowhere; the writing simply does not flow. It is only when he abandons the conception of the project as a tribute to the dead that the writing finally advances. The pivotal chapter of *The Master of Petersburg* is the last one, entitled "Stavrogin" after the protagonist of *The Possessed*. The chapter revolves around the terrible imaginative effort that relieves Dostoevsky from his writer's block. His creation is a "betrayal" of the dead, a "perversion" of the bond between father and son (*Master* 235). Dostoevsky recreates Pavel in his writing by blemishing his memory: he "gives up his last faith in Pavel's innocence", rejects the thought that he was a loving child and reconceives him instead as a hateful revolutionary, one of the "restless" youths "who responded without reserve … not just to the adventure of conspiracy but the soul-inflating ecstasies of death-dealing too" (238, 39).

Coetzee portrays the creative process as partly purposeful, partly independent from Dostoevsky's efforts: sitting at "Pavel's table, his eyes [are] fixed on the phantasm opposite him … whom it has been given to him to bring into being". Dostoevsky knows that the emerging character, a "vision of Pavel grown beyond childhood and beyond love … a figure [in which] he detects no love, only the cold and massive indifference of stone", is not "the truth" (240). Once this destructive creative process has been started, the

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here includes another empathic leap: imagining his own grief as Dostoevsky's. … Certain passages in *The Master of Petersburg* are written straight out of a father's grief" (*Life of Writing* 194, 96).

deformation of Pavel's memory goes beyond the deliberate misconstruction of his personality, and not even his physical integrity is spared in Dostoevsky's imagination: "An image comes to him that for the past month he has flinched from: Pavel, naked and broken and bloody, in the morgue" (241). From these perversions Stavrogin is created, the arrogant, nonchalant, cold-blooded nihilist and child abuser of Dostoevsky's novel who, in *Master*, is a synthesis of Pavel and Dostoevsky himself (242).

In *The Master of Petersburg* and in *Disgrace*, artistic creation is intricately involved with death, or mourning, both in concrete and in metaphorical terms. The most intense phase of Lurie's creative process coincides with the period in which his frame of mind is dominated by death images: he works at the animal clinic and mourns his continuous loss of desire. The opera itself is a work about death, a memorial to Byron sung by his mistress Teresa. As in *Master*, and in keeping with Attridge's argument about artistic creation in *The Singularity of Literature*, Lurie is transformed by the creative process and by the work that gradually comes into being. At the same time, the creative process itself also feeds and intensifies the transformation of his character.

Lurie's sexual affair with Bev provides the background real-life context that most immediately changes the conception and the direction of the opera, permeating his creative process and manifesting itself in the piece. Like Dostoevsky, Lurie cannot carry out the project as he has originally planned, for the present circumstances of his life keep intersecting with it, altering its course. In particular, he cannot write the music for a "young, greedy, wilful, petulant" Teresa, as he initially conceived of her. In this form, the work "[fails] to engage the core of him. There is something misconceived about it", he thinks, "something that does not come from the heart". The Teresa that eventually appeals to his imagination is a middle-aged, "plain, ordinary" woman, "a dumpy little widow … with [a] heavy bust, [a] stocky trunk, [and] abbreviated legs" (*Disgrace* 181, 82). Clearly, it is Bev, the "dumpy, bustling little woman" with a "sturdy, almost waistless" body, "like a squat little tub", that indirectly shapes Teresa thus in his mind (72, 149).

As in *Master*, creator and creation become, to some extent at least, indissociable in Lurie's opera. The piece manifests or incorporates his presence on different levels. Most obviously, Lurie chooses a hero whose life and temperament seem to be more naturally amenable to his imagination. Simply put, Byron was a reputed womanizer, like Lurie himself; a man "who doesn't act on principle but on impulse", to whom "the source of his

impulses" remains "dark", and whose name was often attached to "notoriety and scandal" (31, 33). The period of Byron's life that absorbs Lurie is also self-revealing. At first, he wants to capture Byron in the last years of his philandering: "a once passionate but now less than passionate older man", leading a "becalmed" life, "obscurely … [longing] for a quiet retirement" or "failing that, for apotheosis, for death" (180). Thus conceived, Lurie feels that he "can find words for Byron", though not for the young Teresa who will sing with him. As he downgrades Teresa, as it were, by divesting her of youth and beauty, he kills Byron: his new hero is "long dead", lost in the "caverns of the underworld", and the older, lamenting Teresa wants to reclaim him (181, 83).

Despite the affinities between Byron and Lurie, it is Teresa that becomes his leading character, literally carrying the work forward. Singing or humming her vocal line is like "[following] the Contessa into her underworld", as Lurie puts it; as Teresa gives "voice to her lover … he [gives] voice to Teresa. The halt helping the lame, for want of better" (183, 84). Creation and creator grow into each other here as well. Like Lurie, Teresa clings to memories of lost love and youth, trapped in an old house taking care of her debilitated father, struggling to make the dead speak. Her conjuring up of Byron from the underworld replicates Lurie's creative trance, as well as Dostoevsky's in *The Master of Petersburg*. Dostoevsky stares at a "phantasm" as he sits and struggles to write; Teresa, as Lurie imagines her, "sits staring out over the marshes toward the gates of hell, cradling the mandolin on which she accompanies herself in her lyric flights"; Lurie himself, in turn, back in his plundered house in Cape Town, sits "at his own desk looking out on the overgrown garden" and "marvels at what the little banjo is teaching him" (*Master* 240; *Disgrace* 184).

At the heart of Lurie's creative path towards an art form that can truly respond to his "dried up" state of being lies his unexpected choice of instrument (107, 183). The elated love story that he initially imagined goes through a process of diminishment, a reduction or emptying out that responds to and parallels his psychological state. What inspires his artistic creation appears to him as belittled, stripped of grandeur, minor. At first, Lurie imagines a full, effusive, lavish music, with a "lushly autumnal" melody that would be composed at the piano. But the sound of the piano strikes him as "too rounded, too physical, too rich" for the aged Teresa and Byron, "exiled from life, pale as a ghost" (184, 5). They seem to require a music that is dispossessed of exuberance, or of grand aesthetic aspirations. In fact, as he

recognizes, "it is not the erotic that is calling to him after all, nor the elegiac, but the comic" (184). The chant of a "woman in love, wallowing in love" sounds to him like "a cat on a roof, howling"; immortal love boils down, so to speak, to a chemical reaction: "complex proteins swirling in the blood, distending the sexual organs, making the palms sweat and the voice thicken as the soul hurls its longings to the skies" (185). In this frame of mind, Lurie is unable to create the magnificent or lofty piece that he first imagined; so he chooses "the odd little seven-stringed banjo" from Lucy's childhood, and finds, to his surprise, that the instrument becomes "inseparable" from Teresa's voice (181, 4).

As in *The Master of Petersburg*, the dominant metaphor for Lurie's artistic creation in *Disgrace* is a fall. In *Master*, Dostoevsky wants to write out of love, but truly writes out of "resentment"; tainting Pavel's memory and turning him into the vicious Stavrogin is a "fall", a "plunge into darkness" that corrupts him as well (234, 5). In *Disgrace*, the metaphor of the fall is most apparent in Lurie's fall from grace, but it encompasses his creative process as well. Apart from the comical banjo (in place of the noble piano), the fall is most clearly evoked in the choice of Byron as the protagonist of the opera (a fallen man, as it were). But there are other aspects of Byron's and Teresa's characterization that convey a descent, or dissolution: Byron "wanders among the shades" in the underworld; his voice is "wavering and disembodied", "faltering", a "cracked monotone", "a reluctant recall from the long sleep of oblivion" (182–185). Teresa, "the girl of nineteen with the blonde ringlets who gave herself up with such joy to the imperious Englishman", is "lost too"; Lurie's heroine has become "a woman past her prime, without prospects, living out her days in a dull provincial town … sleeping alone" (182).

Differently from *Master*, however, the fall in Lurie's artistic creation has an overriding redemptive connotation. In *Master*, Coetzee depicts the creative process of a classic; yet what the work brings to its creator is damnation, epitomized in the terrible Stavrogin who sexually corrupts a child. Dostoevsky's great work, in Coetzee's novel, can only come into being as a perversion of the dead, of the writer himself, and of others close to him: "everything and everyone [must] be turned to another use … gripped to him and fall with him" (235). Lurie's opera, in contrast, is depicted as a failed work, "pinched, stunted, deformed", going "nowhere"; it is an obscure piece that will never reach the heights of a Dostoevskyan masterpiece: "His hopes must be more temperate: that somewhere from amidst the welter of sound

there will dart up, like a bird, a single authentic note of immortal longing. As for recognizing it, he will leave that to the scholars of the future … for he will not hear the note himself, when it comes, if it comes" (214).

Again, unlike the creative process as it is portrayed in *The Master of Petersburg,* Lurie imagines himself in his creation not as one of the characters, but as the artistic expression itself, the medium. To be sure, his characters are projections of himself to some extent, but what in fact reproduces in the opera Lurie's dried up, abased, disgraced state of being is the sound of the banjo: "He is in the opera neither as Teresa nor as Byron nor even as some blending of the two: he is held in the music itself, in the flat, tinny slap of the banjo strings, the voice that strains to soar away from the ludicrous instrument but is continually reined back, like a fish on a line" (184, 5). This is probably the passage that captures most concisely Lurie's "crablike" movement towards grace (186).

In the context of how artistic expression *might* manifest the truth, the last passages about the opera are very suggestive. Once again, the focus lies on how the novel sets the scene for the possibility of closure with the revelation of truth but does not, in effect, represent a moment of definitive truth. Lurie is considering to "bring a dog into the piece", to let the howling of a lame stray dog he is particularly fond of join in "the strophes of lovelorn Teresa's". This dog "is fascinated by the sound of the banjo"; when Lurie "hums Teresa's line … the dog smacks its lips and seems on the point of singing too" (215). The novel ends, however, with Lurie "giving him up" to be put down, "bearing him in his arms like a lamb" (219).[42] If the dog's howls do enter the opera, a work that "will never be performed", his creation will in effect give voice to the most disempowered beings in the world of the narrative, "the old, the blind, the halt, the crippled, the maimed" (218). Most importantly, the dogs do not have a language or reason, that is to say, they are the beings who lack the rational faculties which, as Coetzee conceives of it in "Confession and Double Thoughts", constantly defer truth. As the journey towards illumination is configured in *Disgrace*, if the dog speaks in Lurie's opera, it might be a messenger of truth.

***

[42] If the dog's howls become music, the baseness of its death in a session of *Lösung* will indeed have been "sublimed", as Lurie puts it, but in the sense of being elevated into something sublime, into art (142).

I have read *Disgrace* as a work that shares the self-referential orientation of Coetzee's later narratives, all of which experiment with life writing and, most importantly, with autobiographical truth. The narrative technique that Coetzee employs is crucial to understand how the novel's configuration as a story of soul searching resumes and extends his analysis of self-examination and autobiographical truth in "Confession and Double Thoughts". One can assume that *Disgrace* is narrated by its protagonist in the third person and in the present tense, the same narrative technique that Coetzee adopts in his memoirs *Boyhood* and *Youth*. If we accept that Lurie is the teller of his own story, the moment of illumination, or grace, towards which he progresses remains beyond the horizon of his perception. From his limited perspective, which the reader is forced to share, his story is a necessarily incomplete (or not yet completed) progression towards a better self.

In the larger context of my characterization of Coetzee's authorial discourse as self-sufficient, and of his assertion of the discourse of the novelist as superior to the discourse of the literary critic, the depiction of the power of artistic creation in *Disgrace* is significant. It is by means of the composition process of his eccentric opera that Lurie might be granted grace. The contrast between the old and the new self is in focus here: illumination escapes the intellectual, the former professor of Modern Languages, but it might manifest itself to the struggling but truth-directed artist.

A final issue to be considered concerns the implications of closure in a fictional narrative of self-examination, as opposed to a nonfictional one such as a memoir. As I mentioned towards the end of section 1, a process of self-examination in the terms of "Confession and Double Thoughts" can only be brought to a closure by a transcendent authority, that is, an authority that transcends the inward look of the self. Since this authority, in the case of real soul searching, inevitably does not exist in this world (for the interpreter is excluded), self-examination cannot be closed other that on false or arbitrary grounds. The impossibility of closure becomes a precondition for the ethical value of self-examination; from this perspective, the deferral of truth acquires in fact a very positive connotation for the self-examining subject in the sense that, for Coetzee, the only path to truth is through relentless doubt. Put differently, without doubt, there is not even the *possibility* of truth.

In the case of a fictitious self-examination as in *Disgrace*, bringing closure to Lurie's soul searching carries no ethical consequences for the subject, for the

obvious reason that the subject does not exist. In the case of a real project of self-examination, such as the memoirs *Boyhood*, *Youth*, and *Summertime*, the ethical implications of bringing closure to Coetzee's soul searching become inescapable in light of the argument in the essay. The next chapter will look into the closure of Coetzee's autobiography.

Chapter 3 – The Self-Sufficient Autobiographer of *Summertime*

This chapter reflects on the self-explanatory quality of Coetzee's authorial discourse, to which I refer as his self-sufficiency, from another angle: the role of the interpreter. The focus of attention here is the characterization of the author with emphasis on how one sees the implication of the reader in autobiographical truth. Attridge sees this implication as an encouragement to partake of Coetzee's self-examination and autobiographical truth. I propose a different reading: Coetzee's autobiographical project first rejects the interpreter, in "Confession and Double Thoughts" and in *Boyhood* and *Youth*. In *Summertime*, this rejection is accentuated: the interpreter is inevitably involved with the autobiographical self, but is discredited as an authority on autobiographical truth.

Coetzee's Communicative Act in *Boyhood* and *Youth*

The most salient feature of Coetzee's memoirs *Boyhood*, *Youth*, and *Summertime* is their hybrid quality: although they are offered as fiction, the narratives are undoubtedly autobiographical. This hybrid quality obviously affects the narratives' appeal to autobiographical truth, but it does not necessarily weaken or invalidate it. Fictionality, as Walsh suggests, does not equate with fiction as generic category; understood instead as a token of the author's particularized way of conveying meanings, fictionality requires a negotiation between the text itself (the fictive utterances contained in it) and the context within which it was produced.[43] The common approach to autobiographies of writers as records of formative experiences that have influenced the fiction is an example of this kind of negotiation: the fiction becomes a natural interpretive context, or frame of reference, to read the autobiographies. *Boyhood* and *Youth*, like many other autobiographies, have often been read as works that give glimpses into the origins of central themes in Coetzee's novels. Indeed, the

[43] See Walsh, Chapter 1, "The Pragmatics of Narrative Fictionality".

memoirs suggest that this is a valid starting point. *Youth* revolves to a great extent around John's struggle to become a writer, and it ends with him in the British Library perusing manuscripts that are supposedly the materials of Coetzee's first novel, *Dusklands*. *Summertime* also builds on the theme of the writer's development, picking up from the end of *Youth*. The biographer chooses to interview people who had close contact with Coetzee around the time he released *Dusklands*, a period which the biographer believes is critical to understand the emergence and development of Coetzee's writing career.

A number of scholars have approached the self-referentiality of the memoirs from this perspective. Jean Sévry, for instance, draws several thematic parallels between *Boyhood*, a number of Coetzee's novels, and the interviews in *Doubling the Point*. Poyner also looks for the connections between the memoirs and the fiction: "aspects of Coetzee – the intensely private author and guarded academic – are evident in many of the writers-as-narrators he portrays", she claims, and concludes that *Boyhood* and *Youth* "give insights into the darker side of 'Coetzee' the author, and into the inspiration behind many of his writers-as-protagonists" (Poyner, "The Lives of J. M. Coetzee" 4). Similarly, Collingwood-Whittick argues that the "fabulating qualities of memory" that Coetzee explores in works such as *In the Heart of the Country* are "the focal point of the episode in which the young Coetzee [in *Boyhood*] … recounts his 'first memory' to his schoolmates" (16). Head also recognizes traits of the authorial consciousness in John's depiction in *Boyhood*: "There are several elements in the portrayal of the young Coetzee that contribute to his sense of independence, or, the refusal to conform; and this prefigures the sense of resistance that becomes the key characteristic of the writer" (*Cambridge Introduction* 5). The boy's love for the family farm, he suggests, constitutes the formative experience "honed into an ethical vision" in *Life and Times of Michael K* (5). In his reading of *Youth*, Head traces the passage in which John discovered Beckett to Coetzee's own "inspiration and development" as a writer: like Beckett's *Watt*, Coetzee's *Youth* "is characterized as the flow of a voice fitted to the author's mind, and constantly checked by doubts" (14).

Apart from the continuities between the fiction and the memoirs, another recurrent element in the critical reception is the consensual view that Coetzee is a truth-directed writer. This is a typical response to the "feel" of the writing, or to the distinct quality of the creative consciousness that emerges from the narratives. Qualities such as authenticity, frankness, candor, and honesty have been frequently attributed to Coetzee's writing. In the biography *A Life in*

Writing, Kannemeyer quotes a number of critics and authors who use those terms to describe their experiences of reading *Boyhood* and *Youth* (507 – 509). Other sources of praise for his truth-directedness are also easily found. The Swedish Academy's Press Release announcing Coetzee as the Nobel laureate in 2003 celebrates him as "a scrupulous doubter" whose "intellectual honesty … distances itself from the tawdry drama of remorse and confession" ("The Nobel Prize in Literature to John Maxwell Coetzee"). Kermode, commenting on *Disgrace*, detects in the writing "resources of purity" that evoke the religious (London Review of Books, Dec 8, 2014). Even critics who are less prone to praise Coetzee's literary achievements remark on the authenticity of the writing. James Wood, for example, in a famous negative review of *Disgrace*, grants that the novel has "vigorous honesty" and that "few writers are as … repetitively honest" as Coetzee. Lay readers have also underscored the honesty and truthfulness of Coetzee's writing. For blogger Richa Kedia, "Coetzee offers an honest piece of himself in every book. Reading every book makes me feel closer to him; akin to the intimacy you feel on meeting a person several times and still enjoy hearing his/her honest opinions". Richard Strachan, commenting on the edited single volume *Scenes from Provincial Life* which comprises the three memoirs, is vehement: the memoirs "are incredibly vivid and almost forensically honest … If these volumes do offer an accurate account of Coetzee's early life, then he has been utterly brutal with himself".[44]

Once again, Attridge stands out among the interpreters of Coetzee because of his empathetic response to the thrust of the writing, his acute awareness of the kind of honesty at stake in it, and his impact on the critical field. Attridge was the first critic who brought the novelist and the theorist of autobiography together when he published an article on *Boyhood* in 1999.[45] Before turning to an explanation of how "Confession and Double Thoughts" informs the memoirs, Attridge notes the distinctness of the text in relation to the genre it appeals to, as well as its distinctness in relation to Coetzee's previous writings. "As a novelist", Attridge begins, "Coetzee is not known for confessional self-

[44] This might be another example of mutual influence among interpreters. Strachan's description of Coetzee's inward look as "forensically honest" echoes what Grant Farred calls an "autopbiography", a "scalpel-sharp" form of self-analysis ("Autopbiography" 832). I will return to Farred's concept later on.

[45] I will explore Attridge's reading of Coetzee's memoirs as he presented it in the chapter "Confessing in the Third Person", in his *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (2004). An earlier version of this chapter (without the analysis of *Youth*) appeared in 1999 as "J. M. Coetzee's *Boyhood*, Confession, and Truth".

revelation" (*Ethics of Reading* 138). The effect created by the writing, nevertheless, is unmistakably confessional: "The reader can testify to what we might call, following Roland Barthes on the subject of realism, a confession effect – the experience, in the reading, of a truth-directed articulation of an author's past life" (148). Attridge explains this seeming contradiction via "Confession and Double Thoughts": *Boyhood* "exemplifies the project of confession as presented by Coetzee" in the essay (148). The third-person present narration conveys the author's lack of interest in presenting justifications for his past actions, which in turn speaks for his commitment to a form of truth that is not biased by retrospection and ulterior motives.[46] On this view, Coetzee aims at a kind of truth that could confront the limitations of traditional autobiographical writing. Offering the memoirs as fiction does not weaken their autobiographical truth; instead, it singles out Coetzee's distinguished conception of what autobiographical truth is.

Attridge expands on how the truth-directedness of the text is felt in the conjunction of "unflinchingness and forgivingness" that sustains Coetzee's self-analysis (*Ethics of Reading* 148). He finds those terms in an interview where Coetzee suggests that one needs "a cruel enough eye" to "look at the past … Forgivingness but also unflinchingness: that is the mixture I have in mind, if it is attainable. First the unflinchingness, then the forgivingness" (*Doubling the Point* 29). After identifying unflinchingness and forgivingness as proof of Coetzee's truth-directedness, Attridge makes a bold statement about the confessional power of *Youth*:

> [T]he protocols of confession are more severely tested where the awkwardness and shame experienced by the young man cry out for the complement of later regret and repentance. [Embarrassing episodes] are all described in language which conveys the shame and distaste felt at the time but gives no hint of how the author now regards them. *Yet there can be no doubt of the truth-directedness of the writing:* these passages expose the moral failings of the author as a young man all the more unblinkingly for not

[46] Lars Engle also resorts to Coetzee's nonfiction to evaluate the absence of the mature author's judgment and the consequent emphasis on clarity and objectivity that it conveys, though via a different take on the narrative technique. He refers to Coetzee's narration as "a globalizing third-person present that makes eternizing claims … put before the reader to be skeptically scrutinized". This is a device which Coetzee "frequently employs as a reviewer, especially when he is getting to what he thinks the heart of another author's message", and it allows him to highlight "the certainties or God-terms of others – certainties he does not need either to refute or espouse once they have emerged with such clarity as if by themselves" (Engle 34).

> including anything that could be taken to be excuse or attenuation. (*Ethics of Reading* 160, italics mine)

Attridge's certainty about Coetzee's truth-directedness in *Youth* must be seen in light of the kind of readerly engagement that he advocates. For him, the memoirs (indeed, Coetzee's works in general) call for an ethical reader, someone conscious of his or her role and responsibility in deriving meanings from the text. Consequently, he stresses the reader's responsibility for the judgments pronounced on the autobiographical subject and for confidence in autobiographical truth: the reader is implicated "in the ethical web spun by the work" (143). Being a theorist and practitioner of an ethically responsible reading, Attridge cannot but be unambiguous when he claims that "there can be no doubt about the truth-directedness of the writing", as he puts it in the passage above concerning *Youth*, and he also implicates himself in the construction of the truth claims of *Boyhood*. Vouching for the "general" truths of growing up in South Africa, he attests to the veracity of the particular, "singular" truths that Coetzee reveals (or seeks) about himself:

> The truth that *Boyhood* offers, then, is first and foremost that of testimony: a vivid account of what it was like to grow up as a white male in the 1950s in South Africa as the Nationalist government set about institutionalizing its particular brand of racism and entrenching the power of Afrikanerdom, an account that combines general truths about that experience *(and having shared it, I can vouch for its accuracy and penetration)* and of singular truths about one highly unusual child. (155, italics mine)[47]

The proximity that Attridge appeals to above, as well as the assertiveness with which he outlines the autobiographical truth of *Boyhood*, introduce at least two contentious issues. The first, as I discussed in Chapter 1, is the creation of a model reader of Coetzee and the dominance of one interpretive perspective among critics.[48] To claim that "there can be no doubt about the truth-directedness of the writing" is not simply a very strong claim about the authorial communicative act; it is conceivably the strongest claim one could make for Coetzee's truth-directedness, made by his most influential critic, one

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[47] In the earlier published version of this reading, Attridge continues: "[The truth that *Boyhood* offers] is also, and by virtue of the same accomplished handling of literary language, the truth of confession, without transgression, repentance, or absolution, and the truth, or a truth, *about* confession, about confession and writing, confession as writing, writing as confession" ("J. M. Coetzee's *Boyhood*, Confession, and Truth" 91, italics in original).

[48] Section "Attridge's Ethical Discourse about Coetzee's Novels: Passivity vs. Agency"

who has indeed *shared* part of that truth, as he puts it in the quote above. The influence of Attridge's account in the reception of the memoirs is apparent, for instance, in Head's reading in *The Cambridge Introduction to J. M. Coetzee*, as well as in readings of *Summertime*.[49] Head also interprets the combination of child and adult perspective in *Boyhood* that would normally evince the unreliability of recollection as a form of genuine truth-telling. The presence of the adult's sensibility in the child's perspective "inevitably colours our perception of the book as a portrait of the artist as a boy". However, precisely in calling the reader's attention to the adult author's reconstruction of his childhood, this dual perspective also advocates the memoir's reliability and, hence, Coetzee's truthfulness. The author's fictional style "is refashioned [in *Boyhood*] to engage with personal memory, and this makes the effects of the book very uncertain, but not necessarily less 'believable' than in a more conventional memoir" (*Cambridge Introduction* 8). *Boyhood* is "believable", in other words, because the synthesis of child and adult perspective is evidence of Coetzee's intention to tackle the inherent unreliability of self-reflexivity, which is the nub of "Confession and Double Thoughts". The more the boy's perspective is felt as a "fabrication", the more "the later artist's consciousness" comes across as genuine to the reader (9).

A significant difference between Head's and Attridge's readings, it is important to note, has to do with the kind of reader projected by Head. To begin with, Head's reader is a variation on Attridge's: it also subscribes to Coetzee's "unflinchingness and forgivingness" as the marks of his truth-directed self-assessment. This reader, however, is also well aware of the fact that among the apparently genuine moments of truth seeping through, as it were, here and there, Coetzee is calling attention to his own manipulation of autobiographical truth. The memoirs call for a "resistant reader", as Head refers to it, attentive to a possible dubiousness in the "excoriating self-analysis" that the author seems to be conducting especially in *Youth* (16). Coetzee's unblinking portrait of his ethical shortcomings in *Youth* is unsettled by "mitigating circumstances" in the narrative, which thus suggests "that John is being subjected to an extreme form of condemnation" by the mature author (16).

The second contentious issue raised by Attridge's claim relates to the critical "betrayal" or "overpowering" of the authorial discourse (*Doubling* 61).

[49] I will have more to say about that in my reading of *Summertime*.

There is certainly a great deal of deference to Coetzee in Attridge's work. In the particular case of the memoirs, his reading casts Coetzee as something like an ideal autobiographer: a combination of the truth-directed writer of fiction, whose reputation for being truth-directed is largely recognized and well established, with the lucid judge of the problems of autobiographical writing revealed in the essay. Yet precisely in light of the importance of "Confession and Double Thoughts" in defining the authorial communicative act, Attridge's claim also subverts, or breaks the autobiographical pact itself. The essay, as I have mentioned previously, has two functions, so to speak: it undermines the authority of the autobiographer, the reader, and of the genre in relation to truth, but also establishes Coetzee's credentials as an autobiographer who will not be susceptible to making the same old mistake that the genre usually compels upon autobiographers, namely, to pin down the truth. This is, in fact, precisely the gist of Attridge's reading, up to the point at which he reintroduces truth (the truth of testimony in *Boyhood*, the unquestionable truth-directedness of *Youth*) as something that can be described, or paraphrased. By doing so, he erases the ambiguity that is a trademark of Coetzee's double gesture and, most importantly, fills in the essential gap in the narrative that Coetzee arguably wishes to keep as a gap: autobiographical truth itself.

Finally, the question is whether it is at all possible to present a properly 'close' reading of the memoirs that takes "Confession and Double Thoughts" into account. On the one hand, one cannot simply disregard the appeal to truth intrinsic to the memoirs, especially since this appeal is felt even more strongly in the works of a renowned truth-directed author. Such a reading would fail to respond to the heart of the writing; it would yield an impoverished experience of the oscillation between skepticism and belief in the search for the truth. On the other hand, one cannot vouch for the truth-directedness of the writing either, or make any claims about the kind of truth that one reads in Coetzee's autobiography without confronting the provocative trait of his communicative act, that is, the double thought and the shadow that it casts over the interpreter. It seems that proximity is out of question when one reads the memoirs, unless one accepts the thoroughly passive and subservient position of a *silent* reading, literally allowing Coetzee to have the last (or the only) word about his autobiography.

The oscillation between skepticism and belief is present in Coetzee's third memoir as well, *Summertime*, which closes his autobiographical project. What distinguishes it from the previous memoirs, however, is that *Summertime* shifts

the focus from how Coetzee deals with autobiographical truth to how his interpreters deal with it. In the next section, I will examine how the text encourages the construal of a coherent system of beliefs around the notion of autobiographical truth. Beliefs, however, are not the same as truth; what Coetzee has his character narrators convey about him in *Summertime* are opinions, presuppositions, judgments devoid of proof or conclusive evidence. Autobiographical truth remains suspended once again, which in turn rearticulates resistance, rather than truth-directedness, as a more appropriate definition of Coetzee's communicative act as autobiographer.

The Interpreter and *Summertime* as the "Coda" to *Boyhood* and *Youth*

> *Mr. Vincent:* Was that how it ended, then[?] …
>
> *Julia:* Not quite. There was a coda. I'll tell you the coda, then that will be that (*Summertime* 71).

A "coda", according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is "a passage of more or less independent character introduced after the completion of the essential parts", supposedly in order to bring "a more definite and satisfactory conclusion" to the project as a whole. It is certainly suitable to approach *Summertime* as a passage "introduced after the completion of the essential parts": the end of *Youth* already connects its protagonist with the author J. M. Coetzee (John is doing research for what would become *Dusklands*). As a coda to *Boyhood* and *Youth*, *Summertime* would therefore "form a more definite and satisfactory conclusion" to the previous memoirs. The question is: what kind of definite and satisfactory conclusion does *Summertime* provide to Coetzee's autobiography?

Coetzee's fictitious death in the text is the conceit that most obviously represents a definite conclusion to the story of his life, but it also brings closure, or offers a solution, to the problem of endless self-reflexivity that preoccupies him in "Confession and Double Thoughts". On the level of the three autobiographies as a unitary project, the story of his life is fictively closed from the outside, so to speak, by someone 'other' than himself, that is, by the fictitious biographer who is going to write about the famous late author. *Summertime* plays with the illusion of being the definitive record of Coetzee's life, a narrative not open to rewriting or revision, at least not by its

subject. Coetzee's life and oeuvre are represented as a coherent and finalized project (a representation that only works within the fictionalized frame of the narrative, since Coetzee published another novel after *Summertime*, *The Childhood of Jesus*, in 2013). Even his literary achievements are 'summed up': one of the character narrators is a literary scholar who evaluates his writing career (and the accuracy of those evaluations is carefully called into question as the narrative progresses).

The general mood of *Summertime* also recalls *Boyhood* and *Youth*, thereby closing the whole project on a more satisfactory note, by bringing again into focus the widely held assumption that Coetzee is a truth-directed autobiographer. "Coda" is a word used by Julia, one of the author's lovers in the narrative world (*Summertime* 71). Her story, which is the first one presented, furnishes the reader with the most compelling argument to naturalize the fictionalization of the author's death into a token of his truth-directedness, in the same vein of the previous memoirs. Julia claims to have no qualms about revealing embarrassing stories about John because he is dead: "Since he is dead, it can make no difference to him, any indiscreetness on my part" (37). Accordingly, she does tell a few indiscrete episodes which cast him in a very disreputable light and which, crucially, make the biographer wonder whether she is not being too hard: "No, I'm not", she retorts. "I am just telling the truth. Without the truth, no matter how hard, there can be no healing" (84).[50]

Julia's reply can be read as an appeal to take *Summertime* as yet another truth-directed memoir. If the revelations that Coetzee discloses about himself in Julia's story (and, hence, in the stories of all the other narrators) have indeed some truth in them, he is persisting in and deepening the self-condemnation that he carried out mainly in *Youth*. Farred's description of *Summertime* as a form of *'autopbiography'* attends precisely to this aspect of the memoirs. As a "scalpel-sharp" mode of self-scrutiny, autopbiography abides by the imperative of looking at one's past "with a cruel enough eye", in Coetzee's own words (Farred, "Autopbiography" 832; Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 29). Farred reads Coetzee's "cruel eye" on himself in *Youth* and *Summertime* as evidence of truthfulness in both narratives, so that both memoirs validate one another:

[50] Note the surname that Coetzee gives her: Frankl (19).

> After all, what can be left to say of the dead if they have already disparaged themselves as lovers? … Lacking distinction as a lover is a self-evaluation Coetzee first makes not in *Summertime* but in its predecessor, *Youth*. As a judgment, however, it not only retains but intensifies its veracity on the later work, where all the women remark on it. (835, 6)

A reading such as Farred's presumes that the most distinct fictional devices in *Summertime* (the author's death and the several character narrators) become the necessary vehicle for that kind of unflinching soul searching that Coetzee claims for himself in *Doubling the Point*. Otherness, represented both as the author's significant others and as his death, serves as the vantage point for the inward look, as though Coetzee could adopt the perspective of the other and look into himself, thus endowing his last memoir with a particularly poignant form of truthfulness. "[W]hat kind of strength, what kind of self-unpossession, self-forbearance, self-love, self-loathing, girds such a project [?]", Farred asks ("Autopbiography" 833). The fact that the significant others in *Summertime* are very likely made-up characters whose referents in the real world are beyond either the reader's capacity or interest to pursue does not affect the rhetoric of veracity of the narrative, quite the opposite, in fact: it enhances it. In such a reading, the self-distance already enacted in the free indirect discourse of *Boyhood* and *Youth* is taken one step further, as it were, giving the impression that Coetzee's characteristic inclination to keep his subjects at an ambiguous distance is intensified. Once again, distance is a fundamental condition of truthfulness. Dooley's review of *Summertime* responds precisely to this narrative element: "How, when [Coetzee] has ostensibly constructed the narrative to be so distanced from his own apparent point of view, does it come to seem so extraordinarily solipsistic and self-lacerating?" ("Review of *Summertime*, by J. M. Coetzee").[51]

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[51] David Parker's reading of *Boyhood* as what he calls a relational narrative explores how "authorial self and significant others tend to be co-subjects". A relatively recent mode of autobiographical writing, relational narratives depart "from the structural pattern of the 'canonical' autobiographies with their teleological unfolding into epiphanies of the autonomous self", for the "self is understood in relation to the recognition of [those] significant others" (9). Parker makes a case for *Boyhood* as a relational narrative by referring to an episode in which Coetzee hints that, as a boy, he had an intuition of a particular responsibility towards those who stand close to him. He suggests that Coetzee had a glimpse of his "special responsibility to remember and to speak, to write, which is both a responsibility to himself, to define and realize that which is unique in him; and [to] … those others and those stories. These are not two responsibilities but one" (17). This is the passage on which Parker draws: "How will he keep them all in his head, all the books, all the people, all the stories? And if he does not remember them, who will?" (*Boyhood* 166) He concludes that "in place

The Unreliability of *Summertime*

> And the sources you have selected have no axes to grind, no ambitions of their own to pronounce final judgement on Coetzee? (*Summertime* 217)

Dooley's question in the closing of the previous section is particularly revealing from a narratological perspective: it attests to Coetzee's exploration of what Susan Lanser describes as the reader's propensity to "accord the character(s) so privileged a relationship to the author's consciousness that [it is barely necessary] to distinguish one from the other". Readers are likely to associate a narrator's utterances to the "voice" of the (implied) author by gauging "the authorization [that emerges] *internally* as the narrative establishes the credibility, wisdom, and reliability of various narrators and characters" (emphasis in original):

> A blend of diegetic and mimetic factors creates pointers encouraging readers to identify authorial positions with particular narrators and characters or with specific aspects of these narrators and characters. I think this process may operate even when I "know" that the historical author is different from the authorized narrator or character, for it is not that I believe one to be the same as the other, but that I accord the character(s) so privileged a relationship to the author's consciousness that I barely need to distinguish one from the other. (13, 4)

Distance is certainly the crucial aspect of *Summertime* to which one must respond. However, whereas Farred and Dooley interpret the increased distance of the narrators as a token of intensified truth-directedness on Coetzee's part, I want to suggest that this increased distance can be read as an intensified suspicion of truth-directedness. In the communicative exchange that *Summertime* establishes between Coetzee and his informed readers, the fictitious character narrators have to be negotiated as authorial mouthpieces. In other words, the reader must assess the narrators' fictional utterances in relation to inferences about the authorial communicative act. In this respect, *Summertime* is clearly distinct from *Boyhood* and *Youth* as regards the relationship between the narrators and the author. In *Boyhood* and *Youth*, Coetzee is

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of solitary flight, Coetzee puts an intuition of connection, which draws the hero out of solitude" in *Boyhood* (18).

narrating a representation. The distance between the narrator and the autobiographer (who is both the writer and the subject of the story) can be approached, as Walsh suggests, as a matter of narratorial slant, that is, as an idiosyncrasy of Coetzee's mode of self-presentation (79). In *Summertime*, in contrast, Coetzee is representing several instances of fictional character narration, except in the opening and closing sections, when he is again narrating as in *Boyhood* and *Youth*. The implication, therefore, is that the distance between the fictional narrators and himself as autobiographer in *Summertime* might be greater than the distance between the extradiegetic but homodiegetic narrator of *Boyhood* and *Youth* and himself. As with a character such as David Lurie (but also with autofictional characters such as Elizabeth Costello and Señor C), Coetzee faces his readers with the task of figuring out the points of convergence and divergence between his characters and himself, that is to say, figuring out whether, when, and to what extent he is 'speaking through' his fictional creations in *Summertime*.

In *Boyhood* and *Youth*, it is feasible to conclude that author and narrator are the same. This is not the case in *Summertime*, however, even though the reader may practically conflate author and character narrator in those passages in which the communicative situation in the narrative world simulates a possible real-world communication between Coetzee and his informed reader. This example comes from Julia's narration:

> You must be getting worried. *What have I let myself in for?* you must be asking yourself. *How can this woman pretend to have total recall of mundane conversations dating back three or four decades? And when is she going to get to the point?* So let me be candid: as far as the dialogue is concerned, I am making it up as I go along. Which I presume is permitted, since we're talking about a writer. What I am telling you may not be true to the letter, but it is true to the spirit, be assured of that. Can I proceed?
>
> [Silence.] (32, italics in original)

Julia is justifying the fictionalization of her story with an assurance of being "true to the spirit" of her acquaintance with John in order to preempt any misgivings that Mr. Vincent, her interlocutor, might have about possible distortions of the historical record and, therefore, about her version of the truth. The passage is a perfect representation of what Coetzee, the actual author, is doing in *Summertime*: offering a fabulated narrative of his life on the arguably dubious plea (grounded on the generic affiliation of the narrative and on his reputation) to be taken as a truth-directed storyteller. Apart from the

italicized words (which are Julia's reproduction of what she presumes to be the biographer's thoughts), the rest of the passage could literally be taken to be Coetzee's words to his reader, who has to come to terms with his assertion (his words in Julia's mouth, as it were) that what he is telling in *Summertime* "may not be true to the letter, but it is true to the spirit".

Passages like the one above can be read as an authorial commentary on the dynamics of the communicative exchange between writer/autobiographer and reader. It is significant that Coetzee has Mr. Vincent respond with silence to Julia's reassurance that the narrative she creates for herself and John will be "true to the spirit" of their life together (32). Mr. Vincent's cryptic silence could perhaps be an indication that he accepts to take Julia's story in the terms she is proposing (since he does not interrupt the flow of her narration), but it is much more appropriate to assume that his hesitation reflects suspiciousness of Julia's appeal. Mr. Vincent's silence is representative of what James Phelan calls a "second track of communication" in the primary communication between the narrator (Julia) and the narratee (Mr. Vincent). For Phelan, character narration necessarily presents the reader with two tracks of communication: that from the narrator to the narratee, and the indirect communication from the narrator to what he calls the authorial audience (which amounts to an implied knowledgeable reader). "Character narration is an art of indirection because the implied author must use the narrator to communicate with the authorial audience and the narrator is unaware of that audience" (*Living* 214, 5).[52]

The double communication from the narrator (to the narratee and to the authorial/informed audience) is a distinguishing feature of unreliable narration. Since Booth first addressed unreliable narration in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, the concept has received attention by a number of other theorists. For Phelan, as for Booth before him, unreliability is inextricably tied to the informed reader's projection of authorial intention, that is, to the informed reader's conception of what the author might in fact be conveying in the second track of communication of a narrator's utterance. Accordingly, the

[52] Margaret Lenta and Anthony Uhlmann take up the issue of an "immanent" or "middle" voice in Coetzee's memoirs akin to the second track of communication that Phelan identifies in character narration. Lenta refers to the "immanent voice" as a "quality … appropriate in Coetzee's extensive use of free indirect discourse [to indicate] to the reader without overt authorial intervention that it is necessary to go beyond the words of the text" (166). Uhlmann distinguishes an authorial middle voice: "The subject cannot be approached directly: it is only through the relation of elements adjacent to the absent object that the absent object might be sufficiently evoked" (755).

informed reader construes what Booth and Phelan call "the implied author" as the agent responsible for the values imbued in the text (*Living* 216). Phelan considers a character narrator to be unreliable "when he or she offers an account of some event, person, thought, thing, or other object in the narrative world that deviates from the account the implied author would offer" (*Living* 49). Walsh has a similar understanding of unreliable narration, but he discards the implied author in favor of a narrative logic that provides "some means of accounting for the narrator's self-contradictions or manifest distortions" (79).

The logic that *Summertime* suggests for the unreliability of its narrators as spokespersons for a truth-directed Coetzee hinges, once again, on the equation of narratorial distance and autobiographical truth introduced in *Boyhood* and resumed in *Youth*. Coetzee displaces his authorial voice in *Boyhood* and *Youth* by means of free indirect discourse to suggest his truth-directedness. In *Summertime*, he displaces it even more: the distance between the narrators and the autobiographical subject is increased, since Coetzee has indeed created fictional narrators to speak for him. However, the explanation provided for Mr. Vincent's choice of interviewees within the narrative world casts doubt on the assumption that the increased distance between the narrators and the autobiographical subject intensifies Coetzee's truth-directedness.

The interviewees/narrators are supposedly knowledgeable interpreters of Coetzee's life and work, chosen by Mr. Vincent precisely on the basis of their closeness to the author (217). They lay claim to a kind of inside knowledge that guarantees the validity of their assumptions, or the "truths" they tell, about the late Coetzee. As the narrative progresses, however, the narrators' own accounts of their life with John raise suspicions about their versions of the events, and therefore compromise the supposed truths they tell about him. Coetzee shows his narrators/mouthpieces in *Summertime* helplessly revealing their own unreliability as a result of their involvement with John. Unreliability is revealed in the domain of what Phelan calls disclosure functions. Phelan distinguishes between narrator functions and disclosure functions to address how readers can detect an indirect authorial message being passed on. Narrator functions "refer to the communication along the track from the narrator to the narratee", whereas disclosure functions "refer to the communication along the track from the narrator to the authorial audience" (*Living* 214, 5).

Lack of objectivity, or potential unreliability, is of course intrinsic to every first person perspective, and this is particularly obvious in *Summertime*. All the women interviewed were emotionally involved with John, though in different ways. The biographer's own story is also compromised by the admiration he nurtures for his works and for the "more human" man that emerges from the accounts of the interviewees (*Summertime* 235). Martin, a former colleague and the only male interviewee, is apparently the most reliable (or least unreliable) of all the narrators, but the very possibility of his reliability is unsettled in light of the unreliability of all the other narrators. In other words, this is the work of the double thought again: an account of Martin as a reliable spokesperson for Coetzee could simply be an effect of a particular reader's incapacity to detect signs of unreliability (the reader's own blind spot). As Phelan observes, however, one particular instance of a narrator's unreliability does not necessarily render this narrator unreliable or suspect throughout the whole narrative: "narrators exist along a wide spectrum from reliability to unreliability" (*Living* 53). Accordingly, a narrator can be perceived as reliable at times, and as unreliable at other times, and some narrators, like Martin, can in fact be gauged as more reliable than others, which brings into focus the construal of autobiographical truth itself.

The Truth of *Summertime*

> *Julia*: I warn you most earnestly: if you go away from here and start fiddling with the text, the whole thing will turn to ash in your hands (*Summertime* 44).

The central ideational aspect of *Summertime* that directly concerns autobiographical truth is the construction of a system of beliefs which authorizes the fictionalized utterances as bearers of some notion of truth about the real Coetzee. Once again, Coetzee compels the reader to account for fictionality in the autobiographical contract. The fictional quality of *Boyhood* and *Youth* already diminished the relevance of assessments of autobiographical truth based on reference to facts of the world but it did not rule them out entirely, for the episodes in the narratives are, to a great extent, factually accurate to the historical record of Coetzee's life.[53] The same applies to the character narrators in *Summertime*: the possibility that they have "originals" in the world is not ruled out entirely, but this is a line of reasoning

[53] See Kannemeyer's biography of Coetzee, *A Life in Writing* (9).

that the fictionality of the text renders secondary or insignificant. The only fact that will eventually bear an assessment of truth on the basis of correspondence beyond any question is Coetzee's death, which certainly creates an aura of severe truth-directedness around his narrative.

The propositions made by the narrators about Coetzee appeal primarily to other propositions made about him, so that the truth of such propositions is essentially not "a matter of whether the world provides a suitable object to mirror" them, but "a matter of how beliefs are related to each other" (Glanzberg, "Truth"). As a function of the fictionality of *Summertime*, autobiographical truth arises within a set of contextual assumptions that can be made to validate one another on the basis of coherence. A reader such as Farred, for example, who establishes a connection between *Summertime* and *Youth* (or indeed between *Summertime* and any other of Coetzee's writings, for all of them can be read as autobiographical records of a kind) does not gauge the truth of the proposition under consideration in strictly ontological terms, that is, looking for a referent in the real world. Rather, every proposition under consideration can in principle provide a "potential explanatory framework", to borrow Walsh's phrase, for another proposition in another narrative, which thus establishes a mutual aura of truthfulness between both propositions (and narratives).

Walsh uses the term co-reference, as opposed to reference resolution, to explain the processing of fictional utterances. Co-reference occurs when a proposition presupposes rather than asserts another proposition, helping thus to create the "potential explanatory framework" that validates both. Narrative understanding, which in the case of an autobiography depends naturally on truth, is a result of the "processing [of assumptions] in accordance with our assessments of their relative strength" (Walsh 34). The coherent connections among the fictional or fictionalized propositions are not potentially inexhaustible because pragmatic relevance, the assessment of their relative strength, puts an end to the inquiry itself. From that perspective, autobiographical truth in *Summertime* also invokes a pragmatist theory of truth, according to which "we expect the end of inquiry to be a coherent system of beliefs" (Glanzberg, "Truth").

Since *Summertime* is Coetzee's last autobiography, it functions indeed as coda to *Boyhood* and *Youth*, that is to say, it presupposes a coherent relation with the previous memoirs that puts an end to his autobiographical project. Yet *Summertime* harks back to *Boyhood* and *Youth*, as well as to "Confession and

Double Thoughts", not by reenacting Coetzee's continuing investment in a truth-directed mode of autobiographical writing, but by reasserting his resistance to life writing as a means to pin down autobiographical truth. Resistance, as both Head and Attridge have pointed out, is a predominant conceptual feature of *Boyhood* and *Youth*. For Attridge, resistance is latent in Coetzee's lack of interest in making his own case as a truth-directed autobiographer (*Ethics of Reading* 148). For Head, resistance is a "key characteristic of the writer", but the most significant aspect of his argument is that he emphasizes resistance on the part of the reader as well, who should be alert to Coetzee's manipulation of autobiographical truth and therefore suspect his severe soul searching (*Cambridge Introduction* 5, 9, 11, 16). Both Attridge and Head outline (albeit somewhat implicitly) the mode of resistance characteristic of Coetzee's authorial discourse, namely, his unwillingness to comply with the prescriptions of a literary genre, and therefore have his works measured against a pre-determined template. In effect, *Summertime* does not necessarily articulate a new form of resistance to (certain kinds of) interpretation, but challenges the interpretive methods with which readers and critics habitually construe a writer's autobiographical truth.

This challenge to interpretive expectations and methods is detectable throughout the narrative. There are several passages in *Summertime* from which it is possible to infer that Coetzee is scrutinizing the reception of his writing, as though anticipating what readers and critics are likely to do when assessing his autobiography. I will begin by discussing three passages that set the tone of this challenge. In one of them, Julia alludes to the truth about John as the result of the most informed conclusions that can be drawn against a contextual background: "You asked me to give an idea of John as he was in those days, but I can't give you a picture of him alone without any background, otherwise there are things you will fail to understand" (*Summertime* 23). Coherence among the utterances of the character narrators in *Summertime*, both for Mr. Vincent in the narrative world and for the real readers of Coetzee's memoir, is a matter of balancing text and context.

The very disposition of the interviews serves to illustrate how Coetzee disavows traditional approaches to autobiography, as well as traditional expectations towards the truth about an author's life. Mr. Vincent is still in the *process* of turning his material, which comprises diary entries similar to *Boyhood* and *Youth* and the interviews he is carrying out, into a biography of the late author. The finalized and coherent narrative of Coetzee's life by Mr. Vincent

is still *in medias res* and its meanings, therefore, are always potentially provisional, insofar as he might get back to his materials and produce some other coherent story about Coetzee's life out of them. The biographer's engagement with the narrators' stories in the fiction is analogous to what the reader or critic is doing in reality: bringing stories about Coetzee, all of them imbued with some kind of truth, to cohere around a narrative of the author's life.

Within the narrative world, one of the clearest allusions to the self-interest embedded in any account of autobiographical truth is made by Martin when he comments on the interviewees' inevitable personal slant in their views about John: "And the sources you have selected have no axes to grind, no ambitions of their own to pronounce final judgement on Coetzee?" (217).[54] It is difficult not to read in Martin's words an authorial commentary on, and critique of, how one usually approaches an autobiography. Each reader has an interpretive agenda that informs the expectations brought to bear upon a narrative. Accordingly, each reader gives priority to those inferences that are worth pursuing in relation to this interpretive agenda. The interpretive process, as Walsh argues, presupposes a balance between effort and effect, so that its pragmatic end, in terms of deciding up to which point it is worth pursuing coherence, is to refrain from making inferences that can "throw [a narrative's] representational logic into disarray" (36):

> As a fictional narrative progresses, further assumptions become manifest not because earlier assumptions have projected a fictional world within which the fictional truth of new assumptions can be established, but because the achieved relevance of the earlier assumptions itself becomes a contextual basis for maximizing the relevance of subsequent related assumptions. (32)

For the real reader of *Summertime*, the narrators' utterances can initially be made to validate one another as bearers of autobiographical truth across the individual stories, but they often surpass the narrative limits of *Summertime* and communicate with other works by Coetzee, with his interviews, or with critical assessments of his works. It is possible, at times, to arrive at something quite close to a relation of correspondence between a fictional narrator's utterance and an utterance by Coetzee himself in an interview, for example, and thereby maximize the relevance of a narrator's utterance and construe this

[54] I will address Martin's (un)reliability in more detail towards the end of this chapter.

narrator as an authoritative, that is to say, reliable spokesperson for Coetzee. Still, there is no clear-cut and incontestable correspondence, only passages that can be taken as more strongly evocative of Coetzee speaking through his narrators *depending on the reader's interpretive agenda*.

In a particular passage of Julia's interview, the authority over the meanings of Coetzee's life story and over autobiographical truth is granted, in a markedly provocative manner, only to himself:

> You commit a grave error if you think to yourself that the difference between the two stories, the story you wanted to hear and the story you are getting, will be nothing more than a matter of perspective – that while from my point of view the story of John may have been just one episode among many in the long narrative of my marriage, nevertheless, by dint of a quick flip, a quick manipulation of perspective, followed by some clever editing, you can transform it into a story about John and one of the women who passed through his life. Not so. Not so. I warn you most earnestly: if you go away from here and start fiddling with the text, the whole thing will turn to ash in your hands. (*Summertime* 44)

If Julia's words are taken once again as Coetzee's own words, the only authoritative interpreter competent to "fiddle with the text" and gain access to the truth of his life narrative is Coetzee himself. In the context of this self-sufficient, even dismissive authorial consciousness, Farred's comment about the critic's task after *Summertime* is very telling. He raises the idea that, once the critic has accepted as true the brutal exposition carried out in the text, all that is left for the critic is to save Coetzee from himself:

> [It] is precisely because *Summertime* does the autopbiographical work of analyzing, declaiming, and subjecting the author to a thorough humiliation that this genre creates, after itself, a paradoxical time. After the (seemingly unrelenting) self-indictment of the autopbiography, it appears that only veneration, or something proximate to it, can follow the autopbiography. With the author declaimed, by himself, what is there to do but rescue him from himself? Restore him? What is left to do but imagine the possibility of a hagiography, that most hallowed and therefore hoary form of the biography, for the writer? ("Autopbiography" 837)

As Farred expresses it above, Coetzee puts the critic in a difficult position in *Summertime*. The next section looks into the critic's difficult task in greater detail. As I argued in this section, *Summertime* compels the reader to construe a coherent system of beliefs that sustain the assumptions of Coetzee's autobiographical truth. The next section carries this argument further by

providing examples of how assumptions of autobiographical truth presuppose both parallels between utterances made by the fictive narrators in *Summertime* and parallels between these fictional utterances and publicly available information on Coetzee. Whichever way one attempts to construe this coherent system of beliefs, however, the outcome is problematic because it exposes the limitations and the fallibility of the interpretive process.

Coetzee's Autobiographical Truth and a Narrator's Mimetic Authority

> Mr. Vincent: Because the story you told was so long I dramatized it here and there, letting people speak in their own voices. … Am I taking too many liberties?
>
> Margot: I don't know. Something sounds wrong, but I can't put my finger on it (*Summertime* 87, 91).

Reading *Summertime* entails that one is constantly looking for the author in the voices in the text. In more technical language, this process can be described as such: a reader aligns a narrator's mimetic authority and reliability with "authorial positions" by means of "diegetic and mimetic factors" (Lanser 13). Diegetic factors are intrinsic to the narration itself and are noticeable, for example, in stylistic features, such as words and expressions representative of Coetzee's narrative habits. Mimetic factors are associated with particular aspects of the presentation of characters or narrators. For instance, the combination of unflinchingness and forgivingness characteristic of the narrative perspective in *Youth* also applies to the characterization of Julia and Adriana in *Summertime*.

But as one finds tempting signs of a narrator's reliability by construing a coherent system of beliefs that sustains the assumption of their reliability, one also finds plenty of evidence that their accounts are colored by personal bias, distortions, or even potential lies. The most significant index of the character narrators' reliability as mouthpieces for Coetzee, and therefore of the alleged truth-directedness of *Summertime*, is precisely the combination of unflinchingness and forgivingness.[55] The stories narrated by Julia and Adriana,

[55] This combination functions as something like a theme as well, insofar as unflinchingness and forgivingness apply to the motivations underlying Julia's and Adriana's narrations, offering a vantage point from which to understand their stories. "Narrative themes have at least three functions", one of which being that "they help readers sketch the plot's semantic skeleton by

mainly marked by this combination, cohere primarily around John's inaptitude as a lover. Julia, for example, admits that John was "important" to her and that she can "look back on him with affection", but her unflinchingness often outweighs her forgivingness (81, 63). According to her, John was "socially inept" and "repressed", "not easy to take to", "too wary" and "defensive"; "his mental capacities, and specifically his ideational faculties, were overdeveloped, at the cost of his animal self"; he was physically "unattractive" and had "an air of seediness [and] failure"; he was "scrawny, he had a beard, he wore horn-rimmed glasses and sandals" (20, 21, 25, 58). She does not refrain from sentencing that "in his lovemaking … there was an autistic quality" (52).

One of the most embarrassing and amusing episodes that Coetzee has Julia tell about John (and therefore supposedly about himself) is his unsuccessful attempt to synchronize sex to the Schubert string quintet:

> He wanted to prove something to me about the history of feeling, he said. … Because music was the trace, the inscription, of feeling. … If, instead of resisting, I had let the music flow into me and animate me, I would have experienced glimmerings of something quite unusual: what it had felt like to make love in post-Bonaparte Austria. (69)

Julia's (and therefore Coetzee's) unflinchingness is potentially validated by another character narrator, Adriana. Despite not having had a love affair with John, she uses harsh words on her speculations about his talents as a lover. "Perhaps this is how these Dutch Protestants behave when they fall in love: prudently, long-windedly, without fire, without grace. And no doubt that is how his lovemaking would be too, if he ever got a chance" (172). Coetzee has Adriana mention that John sent her a letter about Schubert, claiming that "listening to Schubert had taught him one of the great secrets of love: how we

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indicating its strategic points, which describe those events, actions, intentions, and results of actions that keep it moving and that are indispensable for understanding the totality it forms". A related function of themes concerns "their synthesizing capacity: they may be used as shorthand expressions for the abstract plot schemata subtending narratives" (Pyrhönen, Heta, "Thematic Approaches to Narrative", *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*).

can sublime love as chemists in the old days sublimed base substances", which she considers "worse than nonsense" (175).[56]

The element that calls into question the reliability of the narrators most clearly is their proximity to John, and this is particularly evident in the women's stories. The unrelenting frankness of narrators such as Julia and Adriana is compromised by the nature of their relationship with John. Julia and another character narrator, Sophie, were John's lovers; as Coetzee has Julia put it, lovers "can't be too analytic" (59). In point of fact, Adriana was not John's lover, but she could hardly come across as impartial due to her excessive preoccupation with her teenage daughter who, she suspected, was infatuated with him. Julia claims she "was determined to avoid emotional entanglement", but there is textual evidence that she did have feelings for John (38). The sense of disappointment over her affective investment is recognizable in a number of passages. After one of the nights they spent together, the night which Julia believes "could have marked the beginning of a new life" for them, John gets cold feet and steals into the night:

> In the middle of the night John woke up and saw me sleeping beside him with no doubt a look of peace on my face, even of bliss, bliss is not unattainable in this world. He saw me – saw me as I was at that moment – took fright, hurriedly strapped the armour back over his heart, this time with chains and a double padlock, and stole out into the darkness.
>
> Do you think I find it easy to forgive him for that? (83, 4)

In another passage, she resents his passivity: "[H]e might actually have yanked me out of a marriage that was bad for me then and would become worse later. He might actually have saved me, or saved the best years of my life for me, which, as it turned out, were wasted" (59, 60). Her admittance of not being able to forgive John makes her evaluation of their relationship thoroughly unreliable, in fact. The affair with John, she says, "was hardly an affair at all, more of a friendship, an extramarital friendship with a sexual component whose importance, at least on my side, was symbolic rather than substantial. Sleeping with John was my way of retaining my self-respect" (75).[57]

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[56] Julia makes a proleptic reference to Adriana's daughters as John's "scatterlings from the ex-Portuguese empire", and wonders whether the girls "had to suffer for his nocturnal excesses" with her (52).

[57] Julia is alluding to her husband's infidelity by referring to her involvement with John as a means to "retain her self-respect".

Apart from the combination of unflinchingness and forgivingness, another significant theme in the women's stories that suggests the potential reliability of some of their utterances is John's relationship with his father. The story Coetzee creates for himself and his father in *Summertime* is another clear example of disregard for the historical record that has to be negotiated as a form of truth-telling. At that time of his life depicted in the memoir, Coetzee was not living with his father, but had a wife and children. One can, nevertheless, legitimize this distortion by thinking of it in terms of "a higher truth", which is yet another concept bearing on autobiographical writing floated by Coetzee himself.[58] The assumption would be that Coetzee might have elaborated the fiction that he was living with his ailing father to indicate regret for their troubled relationship, which is one of the main themes explored in *Boyhood*. Uhlmann's reading, for instance, relies precisely on this assumption: the end of the narrative suggests "an identification between the father and the son", since Coetzee himself at the time of writing is an ageing man and parent (760).

There is surely textual evidence to support such reading but, once again, the interpretive assumption is tied to a particular system of beliefs within which the narrators' utterances can be made to cohere with one another. In Julia's story, there is a clue to support the claim that Coetzee's fictional treatment of his story with his father betokens his personal filial regret: "Of course John did not love his father, he did not love anybody, he was not built for love. But he did feel guilty about his father. He felt guilty and therefore he behaved dutifully" (48). Julia's claim is later substantiated by another interviewee, John's cousin Margot: John behaved towards his father "if not with affection, that would be saying too much, then at least with respect" (130). Margot's indirect vindication of Julia's claim invests Julia with a degree of mimetic authority and reliability because it provides support to Julia's belief that what lies behind John's dedication to his father is guilt rather than love. In the particular question of the reason why John is taking care of his father (and not on the issue of whether Julia is a reliable spokesperson for Coetzee *throughout* the narrative), Julia's and Margot's statements cohere with one another and, by so doing, contribute to the establishment of their authority, or presumable reliability, as spokespersons for the autobiographer.

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[58] "[W]e should distinguish two kinds of truth, the first truth to fact, the second something beyond that, … a "higher" truth. … [T]o call autobiography – or indeed history – true as long as it does not lie invokes a fairly vacuous idea of truth" (*Doubling the Point* 17).

Julia's mimetic authority and reliability as regards John's care for his father is also consolidated in tandem with the mimetic authority of the extradiegetic narrator of the opening and final fragments of *Summertime*, which have supposedly been written to comprise a third memoir in the style of *Boyhood* and *Youth*. Since this is, in all likelihood, the same extradiegetic but homodiegetic narrator of the previous memoirs (that is to say, Coetzee, whose peculiar habit of self-presentation is to refer to himself in the third person), this is the voice which, according to Lanser, presumably occupies "the text's highest level(s) of authority" in speaking for the author (14). This narrator/autobiographer admits he has felt "the bitterest remorse" about his conduct towards his father (*Summertime* 249, 50).

Nevertheless, the reliability of this extradiegetic narrator as the authorizing agent of Julia's views does not go unchallenged. At the end of some of the episodes narrated by this extradiegetic narrator, there are italicized notes with comments about how to turn the memory into a story and, more importantly, about the ethical characterization of the autobiographer: "*Features of his character that emerge from the story: (a) integrity (he declines to read the will as she wants him to); (b) naiveté (he misses a chance to make some money)"* (*Summertime* 12). Since those traits are not necessarily the traits that emerge overtly from the story, the question of authorial manipulation of autobiographical truth comes immediately and inevitably back into focus. Indeed, at the end of the entry in which Coetzee (the homodiegetic extradiegetic narrator) expresses regret about his story with his father, the notes allude precisely to their relationship as a *"theme to carry further: his father and why he lives with him"* (252).

One can expand the system of beliefs that sustains one interpretive assumption by turning to extratextual sources as well. It is possible to grant Julia reliability as a mouthpiece for Coetzee on the issue of filial regret by means of an external authorizing agent, that is, an agent outside of *Summertime*, to support the claim of a "higher truth" (that is, repentance) about Coetzee's relationship with his father. Coetzee has not spoken unambiguously in his own voice about his regret towards his father, but he has spoken about his mother, first in *Boyhood* and then in his Nobel Banquet Speech. Coetzee's mother, as he depicts her in *Boyhood*, was likewise a difficult presence in his life:

> Her blinding, overwhelming, self-sacrificial love, for both him and his brother but for him in particular, disturbs him. … She loves him absolutely, therefore he must love her absolutely: that is the logic she compels upon

> him. … The thought of a lifetime bowed under a debt of love baffles and infuriates him to the point where he will not kiss her, refuses to be touched by her. … [H]e deliberately hardens his heart against her. (*Boyhood* 47)

Against the background of passages like this, Coetzee's Nobel Banquet Speech, in which he speaks in a tone of regret about his mother, can indirectly validate what he is doing in *Summertime* (making his characters speak for himself) as a kind of apology to his father as well:

> My mother would have been bursting with pride. My son the Nobel Prize winner. And for whom, anyway, do we do the things that lead to Nobel Prizes if not for our mothers? … Why must our mothers be ninety-nine and long in the grave before we can come running home with the prize that will make up for all the trouble we have been to them? ("Banquet Speech")

The truthfulness of Julia's utterance about Coetzee's guilty feelings can be maximized by means of several different implicatures, that is to say, by means of inferences based on a given interpretive context. In the particular case of John's relation with his father, however, despite the strong coherence between Julia's utterance and Coetzee's Nobel Banquet Speech, the pragmatic end of inquiry entails, literally, putting words in his mouth, for Coetzee has in fact not spoken explicitly about his father.

With Sophie, another narrator, it is possible to establish a very strong co-reference, or almost correspondence, between some of her utterances and Coetzee's interviews. Nevertheless, even when a narrator's particular utterance can be construed as reliable, their reliability is brought into question by surrounding circumstances that weaken it.[59] Once again, emotional attachment to John is what betrays the women's accounts. Sophie, for example, who is an academic and literary critic, also had a love affair with him. She interprets her absence from his artistic works as a form of absence from his private life, and therefore as an indication of her affective insignificance to him. Never entering Coetzee's books is a complaint first made by Julia: "[To] me [it] means I never quite flowered within him, never quite came to life" (*Summertime* 36). Sophie voices the same kind of disappointment:

[59] Those surrounding circumstances are revealed by means of what Phelan calls disclosure functions. Head, in his reading of *Youth*, also responded to an authorial message passed on by means of disclosure functions. He detected "mitigating circumstances" in *Youth* that called Coetzee's severity towards his younger self into question (*Cambridge Introduction* 16).

> [I]t seemed to me at the time, now I realize how naïve this was – I believed you could not be closely involved with another person and yet exclude her from your imaginative universe.
>
> *And did you find yourself in the book [In the Heart of the Country]?*
>
> No. (…)
>
> *Were you upset to find yourself excluded from his imaginative universe?*
>
> No. It was part of my education. Shall we leave it at that? I think I have given you enough. (234, 5 italics in original)

Sophie is eager to hide her hurt feelings for not having been portrayed (or not finding herself portrayed) in John's books, but her abruptness with Mr. Vincent betrays her. A clear indication of her resentment surfaces in the passage in which she passes judgment on Coetzee's works even though she "did not read all of [his novels]":

> After *Disgrace* I lost interest. In general I would say that his work lacks ambition. The control of the elements is too tight. Nowhere do you get a feeling of a writer deforming his medium in order to say what has never been said before, which is to me the mark of great writing. Too cool, too neat, I would say. Too easy. Too lacking in passion. That's all. (242)

As with Julia's utterances, it is possible to make Sophie's utterances cohere with extratextual sources to construe her as a reliable authorial voice. Her judgment can sound representative of some of Coetzee's political views. The relationship that can be established between Sophie's utterances and Coetzee's words is quite akin to correspondence in such cases, since Coetzee has indeed spoken in his own voice concerning politics. The following passage gives an example: "I would rather say [he was] anti-political", she says. "He thought that politics brought out the worst in people. It brought out the worst in people and also brought to the surface the worst types in society. He preferred to have nothing to do with it" (228). Sophie is very close to paraphrasing the last interview in *Doubling the Point*, in which Coetzee anticipates *Boyhood* and *Youth* by referring to himself in the third person. As a child, he recalls, "he [had] seen enough of the Afrikaner right, enough of its rant, its self-righteousness, its cruelty, to last him a lifetime". In his student years, he continues, although he "steers clear of the right", he "moves on the fringes of the left without being part of the left. […] He is alienated, when the crunch comes, by its language – by all political language, in fact" (394).

In another passage, Sophie assesses Coetzee's political disposition in terms that would be consonant with the mainstream critical reception of works such as *Age of Iron* and *Disgrace*: "Nothing is worth fighting for because fighting only prolongs the cycle of aggression and retaliation. I merely repeat what Coetzee says loud and clear in his writings, which you say you have read" (*Summertime* 230). Yet in this same passage, there are more signs of her lack of objectivity. She is curt with Mr. Vincent and questions whether he has read Coetzee's works, which exposes an underlying friction in their exchange. Mr. Vincent is an academic who admires Coetzee's works;[60] Sophie, for reasons which very likely do not solely concern Coetzee's literary merits, does not show the same appreciation.

As Farred suggests, Sophie "is incapable of understanding herself as a parody of the critic … she reveals the limited imagination and destitute vocabulary of the critic" ("Autopbiography" 835). Her critical assessment of Coetzee's work up to *Disgrace* (after which she "lost interest") coheres, for instance, with a well-known unfavorable review of the novel by literary critic James Wood. Sophie's appraisal of "the control of the elements" as "too tight" and of the writing as "too cool" and "too neat" echoes Wood's words: "Coetzee's books eschew loosened abundance"; *Disgrace* is "spare" and "written in a language that, even by Coetzee's standards, is savagely reduced"; "the novel always feels tightly poised", "so firmly plotted and shaped, so clearly blocked out" ("Parables and Prizes").

Interestingly, when Coetzee undermines Sophie's authority as a critic, he endows her with credibility as his authorial voice. By paraphrasing Wood's words as the words of a critic such as Sophie, who makes half-informed critical assessments, Coetzee brings to the fore the bias and the deficiencies of criticism. Besides, he also devises Sophie's utterances to mirror his own utterances about writing in *Youth*. Her opinion that the writing is "too lacking in passion" evokes a passage in *Youth* in which he ponders on how prose, as opposed to poetry, seems more suitable to his temperament. The passage sounds particularly truthful because it captures how the aspiring author could already detect what would become the distinctive qualities of the mature author's writing:

> He has a horror of spilling mere emotion on to the page. Once it has begun to spill out he would not know how to stop it. It would be like severing an

[60] I will have more to say about Mr. Vincent in connection with Margot's story.

> artery and watching one's lifeblood gush out. Prose, fortunately, does not demand emotion: there is that to be said for it. Prose is like a flat, tranquil sheet of water on which one can tack about at one's leisure, making patterns on the surface. (*Youth* 60, 1)

Another subject on which Sophie comes across as a reliable voice for Coetzee is autobiographical writing: "[he] believed [that] our life-stories are ours to construct as we wish, within or even against the constraints imposed by the real world" (*Summertime* 227). This chimes in well with his assertion that all writing is a kind of autobiography. Julia also makes a reference to Coetzee's autobiographical or autofictional writing, when she claims that John became a vegetarian "as part of a larger project of self-reformation" (58). This is almost a rewording of how Elizabeth Costello, one of Coetzee's autofictional characters, explains her vegetarianism as coming out "of a desire to save [her] soul" (*Elizabeth Costello* 89).

However, the assumption that Coetzee's characters are autobiographical in some way, or to some extent, is also called into question: this is the case with the 'air' of *Disgrace* hovering about Adriana's story. Adriana is a Brazilian dancer, mother of two daughters, to one of whom John gives private lessons in English. The girl in question, Maria Regina, has developed some affection for him, and Adriana suspects that John will take advantage of that and seduce the girl. The main lines of the plot involving David Lurie and Melanie Isaacs are clear: the older male teacher (apparently, in John's case) keen on taking advantage of the younger female student, which might in turn reintroduce suspicions about the real-life sources of *Disgrace*. Coetzee's characterization of John in Adriana's story clearly recalls Lurie, even when the resemblance is negative. In some respects, John is very unlike the self-assured womanizer Lurie: Adriana describes him as physically unattractive, "incompetent with women", "not made for the company of women". But, like Lurie, John tends to act without thought: she defines him as a "weak man … worse than a bad man, [for a] weak man does not know where to stop. A weak man is helpless before his impulses, he follows wherever they lead" (*Summertime* 160, 168, 171). Adriana's words recall Lurie's words in the hearing: "As for the impulse [seducing Melanie], it was far from ungovernable. I have denied similar impulses many times in the past, I am ashamed to say" (*Disgrace* 52).

These allusions to *Disgrace* distinguish another typical double gesture by Coetzee, along the lines of his undermining of Sophie's authority as a critic to accredit her as his authorial voice. The dry humor of *Summertime* as a whole

can function as a token of forgivingness, that is, of his capacity to look at the past with some amusement and come to terms with his shortcomings in a positive way. Nevertheless, such humor could also be taken as a hint that Coetzee finds ludicrous those interpretations that assume that his characters are autobiographical creations of some sort. The comically degrading development of the tale involving John, Maria Regina and Adriana in *Summertime*, for example, casts into doubt any serious claim about John's story with Adriana as the reworking of a real-life, or formative experience, for *Disgrace*. Indirectly, then, this comical denouement undermines the authority of the characters.

Another humoristic allusion to *Disgrace* is particularly effective to discredit assumptions that Lurie is a kind of autobiographical creation. It appears in the Schubert episode involving John and Julia. The episode brings to mind Lurie's opera about Byron and his Contessa, one of the central elements in his ethical progression in the novel. In *Disgrace*, Lurie struggles to hear the notes that will join harmoniously the voices of Byron and of the Contessa. During the creative process, he hears a third voice insinuate itself: it is Byron's daughter Allegra, who evokes to Lurie his own daughter Lucy's voice (180-6). In *Summertime*, Coetzee turns this opening of the self to the other by means of art into a farce:

> When a man and a woman are in love they create their own music, it comes instinctively, they don't need lessons. But what does our friend John do? He drags a third presence into the bedroom. Franz Schubert becomes number one, the master of love; John becomes number two, the master's disciple and executant; and I become number three, the instrument on whom the sex-music is going to be played. That – it seems to me – tells you all you need to know about John Coetzee. The man who mistook his mistress for a violin. (83)

Summertime compels its readers to hear the truth-directed, unflinching but forgiving author in its narrators' stories. Nevertheless, one can also hear a fiercely ironic and challenging authorial voice that exposes the self-interest, the limitations, and the arbitrariness of its interpreters. I have already singled out a passage from Julia's section in which one could arguably hear the authoritative writer warn his readers to stop "fiddling with the text", or "the whole thing will turn to ash" in their hands (44). Apart from this particular instance, it is in the stories told by the male characters that one discerns the

major challenges posed against interpreters of Coetzee's autobiography. The male characters, Martin and Mr. Vincent, are in focus in what follows.

***

Unlike all the other narrators, Martin is the only narrator who does not show signs of emotional involvement with John, which immediately speaks for his potential reliability. Given the lapses of unreliability in all the accounts in *Summertime*, however, the apparent lack of signs of unreliability in Martin's interview could in itself count as a sign of unreliability: would Coetzee authorize the only male interviewee, a white South African professor of English Literature, as his most reliable spokesperson in *Summertime*? Once again, the issue here is balancing text and context: the signs of unreliability in Martin's story have to be accounted for in relation to the unreliability of other characters, as well as in relation to the narrative logic that, as Walsh puts it, allows for an explanation of the contradictions that surround a character's narration (79). Martin's interview appears late in *Summertime* (on page 205, of 266 pages), after several signs of unreliability in the other narrators' accounts have been exposed. In terms of balancing text and context, there are three indications of Martin's relative reliability: the absence of emotional involvement between John and Martin; the affinities between them; and Martin's critique of the truth claims of life narratives.

Mr. Vincent begins his interview with Martin by reading an entry intended to be part of Coetzee's third memoir, the one "that never saw the light of day" (205). In the entry in question, John describes his meeting with Martin in an interview for a teaching position at the University of Cape Town. Towards the end of the entry, John speculates about the choice of the candidates (himself, Martin, and a third one):

> *Why have the two of them [John and Martin] (or the three of them, if the shadowy third is included) been selected to be interviewed for a lectureship in English literature, if not because they are the same kind of person, with the same formation behind them (*formation*: not a customary English word, he must remember that); and because both, finally and most obviously, are South Africans, white South Africans.* (208, italics in original)

There is a curious inverted similarity between both. Martin's initials are M. J., the inverse of Coetzee's. Their temperaments seem also diametrically opposed: compared to John's description (by Julia) as "socially inept", Martin has an "easy, straightforward manner" with strangers (20, 208). The

assumption of Martin's reliability gains strength in light of his unwillingness to engage in speculations about John's affective relationships, unlike all the women. He counters both Julia's and Sophie's ideas about the correlation between literary themes and an author's personal life: "It would be very, very naïve to conclude that because the theme was present in his writing it had to be present in his life" (215). Martin is evasive about John's personal life on two occasions: when Mr. Vincent asks whether John's lack of emotional commitment "extended beyond relations with the land into personal relations", and when he asks about John's "special friendships among students" (211, 15).

Martin's focus on such subjects as John's academic career or his feelings about South Africa suggests that his account is reliable because it coheres with publicly available information about Coetzee. For example, he addresses John's and his own "attitude toward South Africa": "Our attitude was that, to put it briefly, our presence there was legal but illegitimate. … We thought of ourselves as sojourners, temporary residents …" (209, 10). His words cohere with the description of the Coetzees as "seasonal", which appears in the story told by John's cousin Margot (87). Martin also comments on John's admiration for the nineteenth-century Russian novelists (211). Two instances of potential unreliability, or discrepancy with what is publicly known about Coetzee, are noteworthy, nevertheless. First, Martin believes that Coetzee "rarely discussed the sources of his own creativity" for fear that "being too self-aware might cripple him", which is arguable in view of the critical pieces that Coetzee has written about formative literary influences (213). Second, he comments that "if [John] hadn't wasted so much of his life correcting students' grammar and sitting through boring meetings, he might have written more, perhaps even written better", which is an odd observation, given that Coetzee is in fact a very productive writer (215). Admittedly, those are not strong instances of unreliability. The first one could refer to Coetzee reflecting on his literary influences with people close to him, rather than in public interviews or academic pieces. The second one could reflect Coetzee's own opinion about his literary output, regardless of the fact that he is considered a productive writer.

The strongest sign of Martin's reliability as an authorial mouthpiece is, nevertheless, his direct attack on the interpreters of Coetzee's life: "And the sources you have selected have no axes to grind, no ambitions of their own to pronounce final judgement on Coetzee?" (217) The response that Coetzee has

Mr. Vincent produce is significant: he has nothing to say to that. Martin's words are a particularly authoritative instance of the author speaking through his character because it expresses distinctly the internal logic of *Summertime* as the closing chapter (the coda) of Coetzee's autobiographical project: accounts of autobiographical truth might, in fact, amount to unreliable and self-interested judgment calls.

The presence of this resistant writer is intensified in the story of the other male character, Mr. Vincent. In fact, what I am referring to as Mr. Vincent's story is his retelling of the interview he conducted with Margot, John's cousin. Before I turn to how one can read Mr. Vincent in Margot's story, I will address the most obvious aspect of his unreliability, which is of a piece with the women's: he is emotionally attached to Coetzee, though in a different way. Biographers, like critics, are drawn to writers in ways that involve both intellectual and emotional investment. Evidence of Mr. Vincent's fondness and admiration is clear in this exchange with Sophie:

> *There was an image of [Coetzee] in the public realm as a cold and supercilious intellectual, an image he did nothing to dispel. Indeed one might even say he encouraged it.*
>
> *Now, I don't believe that image does him justice. The conversations I have had with people who knew him well reveal a very different person – not necessarily a warmer person, but someone more uncertain of himself, more confused, more human, if I can use that word.* (235, italics in original)

Coetzee's real-life biographers, the late Kannemeyer and Attwell, do not conceal their personal admiration either. Attwell, in fact, writing *The Life of Writing* years after *Summertime*, expresses himself with words very similar to Mr. Vincent's above: "The Coetzee who emerges from his papers turns out to be a little more like the rest of us: more human or, at least, less Olympian, though only up to a point, because the question remains: if he started *here*, how on earth did he get *there*? (25, italics in original) Kannemeyer confessed to being "impressed" by Coetzee:

> The life story of this writer with his exceptional achievements is valuable in its own right, and his extraordinary novels stimulate an interest in him as a person. … He answered all my questions meticulously, and impressed me as a man of integrity. … I also got the impression of an incredibly hard worker… [and] developed a certain compassion with this intensely private and reserved man. … One stands amazed that someone could experience so much unhappiness and yet sustain himself and continue his work. (*A Life in Writing* 6, 10, 615)

Mr. Vincent's apparent bias is disguised, however, by the ingenious embeddedness of his perspective in Margot's story.[61] He meets Margot, John's cousin, for the second time to read to her his transcription of their previous interview. The narrative that Mr. Vincent created reads as though Margot were retelling her memories in the same style (or spirit) of Coetzee's recollections in *Boyhood*. This is one example of what Mr. Vincent has Margot say, that is, of what Coetzee has his characters Mr. Vincent and Margot convey about him:

> They [John and Margot] are in a minority, a tiny minority, the two of them, of souls that are stirred by these great, desolate expanses. If anything has held them together over the years, it is that. This landscape, this *kontrei* – it has taken over her heart. When she dies and is buried, she will dissolve into this earth so naturally it will be as if she never had a human life. (*Summertime* 129)

The words attributed by Mr. Vincent to Margot above bear a strong resemblance with what Coetzee, the homodiegetic extradiegetic narrator of *Boyhood*, says in the following passage: "Whatever dies here [in the Karoo] dies firmly and finally: its flesh is picked off by the ants, its bones are bleached by the sun, and that is that. …When he dies he wants to be buried on the farm" (*Boyhood* 97).

Equally evocative of the authorial voice in *Boyhood* is the first person narration in one of the dialogues that Coetzee has Mr. Vincent create for John and Margot in *Summertime*:

> 'I can't help remembering the first conversation you and I had, the first meaningful conversation. We must have been six years old. What the actual words were I don't recall, but I know I was unburdening myself, all my hopes and longings. And all the time I was thinking, *So this is what it means to be in love!* Because – let me confess it – I was in love with you. And ever since that day, being in love with a woman has meant being free to say everything on my heart.' (*Summertime* 97, italics in original)

Again, the relationship of coherence is established between *Boyhood* and *Summertime*:

> Agnes occupies a place in his life that he does not yet understand. He first set eyes on her when he was seven. … They began to talk. She had pigtails

[61] There is an intriguing discrepancy about the name of John's cousin that calls the reader's attention to the manipulation of autobiographical truth: in *Boyhood*, her name is Agnes (93); in *Summertime*, her name is Margot.

> and a lisp, which he liked. He lost his reserve. As he spoke he forgot what language he was speaking: thoughts simply turned to words within him, transparent words.
>
> What he said to Agnes that afternoon he can no longer remember. But he told her everything, everything he did, everything he knew, everything he hoped for. … Even as he spoke he knew the day was special because of her…
>
> Is this love – this easy generosity, this sense of being understood at last, of not having to pretend? (*Boyhood* 94, 5)

What makes this relationship of coherence particularly persuasive is the expectation that an author's own words could occasionally slip through the many words of a fictional character, as though an author's narrative style could betray authentic personal expressions here and there. In other words, diegetic elements play an important part in giving the reader clues to a narrator's reliability. Apart from the resonances in the passages above, there are several other passages in which one can recognize stylistic features distinctive of Coetzee's narrative habits. Those features contribute to endow a character's utterances with a tone of autobiographical truth because they create the impression that the characters' words are indeed Coetzee's.

There are a number of instances of stylistic similarities with *Disgrace*, for example. Julia's narrative style is at times reminiscent of Lurie's characteristic doubling of words: "He had no sexual presence whatsoever. It was as though he had been sprayed from head to toe *with a neutralizing spray, a neutering spray*" (24-5); "If he had allowed himself to be *a little more impetuous, a little more imperious, a little less thoughtful…*" (*Summertime* 59); "He was what I would call *a gentle person, a gentleperson*" (58, italics mine in all examples). Mr. Vincent shows the same tendency to unfold words of the same root in Margot's story, that is to say, Coetzee applies the same technique (and similar words) in Julia's and in Margot's stories: "there is something cool or cold about him, something that if not *neuter* is at least *neutral*" (101, italics mine). Julia also uses an expression that recalls one employed by Lurie: she claims that with John she felt "no pressure of the male gaze"; similarly, Lurie comments that "women are sensitive to the weight of the desiring gaze" (*Summertime* 22; *Disgrace* 12). An occasion when John quotes to Julia an obscure line from a poem also recalls *Disgrace*: Lurie quotes a Shakespearean sonnet to seduce Melanie but instead estranges her (*Summertime* 33; *Disgrace* 16). John also tries (or pretends to try)

to quote (but in fact misquotes) Beckett to Margot, with the result that she "has not the faintest idea what he is talking about" (*Summertime* 112).[62]

Yet the strong identification between John and Margot that emerges from Mr. Vincent's story, and which would therefore authorize the fictive utterances in Margot's story as potential bearers of autobiographical truth, is ultimately depicted as a matter of narrative skill, not authenticity. Mr. Vincent informs Margot that he has "fixed up the prose to read as an uninterrupted narrative spoken in [her] voice", with dialogues (87). In fact, his reworking of Margot's interview is an attempt to emulate the focalized consciousness of *Boyhood* and *Youth*. Ironically, and provocatively, Coetzee has Mr. Vincent reply to Margot's misgivings about his recasting of her answers as a narrative with the (at best) naïve or (at worst) plainly dishonest argument that "changing the form should have no effect on the content" (91).[63] Margot, nevertheless, complains to him that his narrative technique is "confusing": "Something sounds wrong, but I can't put my finger on it" (89, 91).

Mr. Vincent attempts to copy Coetzee's narrative technique in *Boyhood* and *Youth*, as though he were following in the footsteps of the master.[64] Most apparently, this could be read as yet another authorial indication of the possible manipulation of truth inherent to forms of life writing. But it is the difference between the aspirant storyteller and the accomplished writer that deserves attention. Mr. Vincent aspires, in fact, to become a storyteller, more than a biographer, for he attempts to create a narrator (Margot, who would have the same peculiar habit of referring to herself in the third person) and characters. His reworking of Margot's story is, nevertheless, amateurish; the

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[62] Coetzee alerts the reader of *Summertime* to a misquotation of Beckett in his "Author's Note".

[63] This is what Coetzee says about style and content in his Author's Note to *Doubling the Point*: "While trying to respect the character of the [original essays], I have, in the interest of clarity, done a fair amount of local revision. Style and content are not separable: it would be disingenuous for me to claim that my revisions have not touched the substance of the originals" (vii).

[64] Coetzee critics, as I have shown throughout this dissertation, have often followed in his footsteps. One example, however, stands out: it is Karina Magdalena Szczurek's chapter "Coetzee and Gordimer" in *J. M. Coetzee in Context and Theory* (eds. Boehmer, Eaglestone, and Iddiols). Szczurek suggests that Elizabeth Costello may have been inspired (to some extent at least) in Nadine Gordimer. To present her argument, though, Szczurek creates a fictional character, a distant cousin of Coetzee's, who is reading a lecture at a conference. This is how she reveals the conceit in a footnote: "I trace the 'life and times' of J. M. Coetzee's probably most enigmatic character, Elizabeth Costello. To examine her function as a persona, an alter ego, a fictional character and author, I imitate Coetzee's own invention by introducing a fictional character name Eliza Coetzee, whom I use here to debate the issue at hand on my behalf" (45). Reviewer Peter Liebregts clearly did not appreciate Szczurek's strategy: in his view, her chapter does not "result in anything more than a gimmicky tribute to Coetzee's narratorial stance" (127).

narrative that he has made out of the interview, in Margot's opinion, cannot "stand as it is" because it does not "sound like" what she had told him (152, 91). Mr. Vincent cannot represent a subject that resorts to free indirect discourse and present tense to talk about his or her own past:

> Margot: *I don't understand. Why do you call me* she?
>
> Mr. Vincent: Of the four, Margot alone, she – Margot – suspects, looks back with nostalgia… You can hear how clumsy it is. It just doesn't work that way. The *she* I use is like *I* but is not *I*. Do you really dislike it so much?
>
> Margot: *I find it confusing* … (89, italics in original)

Put differently, his lack of narrative skill suggests that Coetzee's distinct autobiographical style cannot easily be copied. Besides, style is also conceived as something radically different from truthfulness, if truthfulness is understood as the unfiltered expression of one's selfhood. Style, in contrast, is carefully constructed and thought-out, the result of a very conscious fashioning of narrative habits, a process over which Coetzee (but not Mr. Vincent) retains full control. In the larger context of my characterization of Coetzee's authorial agency as essentially resistant and even dismissive in relation to his interpreters, this passage lends itself to another particularly incisive depiction of the superiority of the creative artist's writing skills, as well as of the hopeless attempts by his admirers to be like the author, to let the power of the authorial discourse infuse the response and enrich it. There is a huge discrepancy in talent and capacity between the biographer/aspirant writer and the worldwide-awarded novelist. What follows from this discrepancy, insofar as the communicative exchange between autobiographer and reader or critic is concerned, is clear: the only authoritative teller of the story of Coetzee's life is himself.

Conclusion

I have developed an argument about Coetzee's resistance to critical containment that revolves around two interconnected issues: his relationship with literary critics and what I have described as the self-sufficiency of his authorial discourse. This two-fold character of my study required a two-fold set of theoretical concepts. One set is provided by phenomenological criticism, which furnishes terms to gauge the relationship between author and critic. The other set of concepts comes from rhetorical theory, which allows me to discern the self-sufficiency I referred to by bringing to the fore the distinguishing traits of Coetzee's authorial discourse that impinge on how he positions himself in relation to his critics. In what follows, I will outline the findings of this study and the arguments that it presents for a change of critical attitude in relation to Coetzee.

My approach to the relationship between Coetzee and his critics has focused on how one negotiates proximity and distance, understood in phenomenological criticism as phases in the critical work. The spirit of proximity is empathetic and celebratory: proximity is informed by the desire to identify with the object of enquiry and, by understanding it as fully as possible, celebrate its unique qualities. From a theoretical point of view, proximity is certainly desirable, but it cannot be an end in itself, for that could imply a mere repetition, an echo, of the literary work and the discourse of the author. Therefore, criticism should ideally begin with proximity but always end with distance, that is, with the critic's assertion of difference. Distance would guarantee the critic's interpretive autonomy and authority. Phenomenological criticism aspires to a balance of interpretive authority between critical and authorial discourse in which the interdependence between both is predominantly positive: criticism explains or paraphrases literary language without appropriating or removing its uniqueness.

Proximity is a desirable principle not only in the sense that it celebrates the artistic creation and the creator; there is also a particular incentive to adopt it when one reads Coetzee. His works interrogate what is usually described as critical distance, the detached stance that approaches literary works with a certain suspicion, enacted in a principled resistance to the subjectivity of the act of reading for the sake of a purportedly more objective, comprehensive,

and schematic knowledge of literature. As a consequence of Coetzee's challenge to critical distance, a fundamentally proximal attitude has gradually established itself in the critical field, turning the specificities and particularities of his authorial discourse into the focus of attention and bringing the principles of detachment and impartiality into question.

On the other hand, it is also true that critical proximity cannot easily be reconciled with Coetzee when one attends to his awareness of his reception, as well as to the refractory stance that he adopts in relation to the critic. Another dominant feature of his writing, apart from the challenge to distance, is that it overtly resists, questions, or even undermines the critic, notably by anticipating and thereby disarming expected interpretive moves. From this perspective, Coetzee clearly keeps the critic at arm's length, projecting himself as a not very open or accommodating partner in the relationship between author and critic.

I have painted a schematic picture of the emergence and the consolidation of critical proximity in Coetzee scholarship. Its emergence is, to a great extent, a consequence of the political and intellectual climate in South Africa in the 70s and 80s, a period of intense political turmoil that, unsurprisingly, reached literary circles as well. Writers and critics alike were, in different ways, implicated in the struggle against apartheid. In this context, the work of David Attwell was decisive to prepare the ground for critical proximity in Coetzee scholarship. Most obviously, it is his work with Coetzee in *Doubling the Point* that, with hindsight, emerges as emblematic of the effort of establishing a dialogue with the author, rather than applying a pre-determined interpretive template to the authorial discourse. But concomitant with the interviews that he conducted with Coetzee in *Doubling the Point*, Attwell was also working on his monograph *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, and his critical stance there is the same. He focuses on what is distinctive in Coetzee's work in the South African context, which he describes as a very refined awareness that every form of resistance has to be addressed in terms of its relationship with historical forces. Attwell was the first critic to present a solid and elaborate argument about the literary political agency of Coetzee's writing, changing the critical understanding of his authorial discourse. His proximal, open, dialogical approach to Coetzee did pay off: *Politics of Writing* and *Doubling the Point* have become seminal works in Coetzee scholarship.

When it comes to the consolidation of critical proximity, I have focused on the role played by Derek Attridge. In part as a response to Attwell's

emphasis on the political import of Coetzee's fiction, Attridge turns to the ethical thinking articulated in the novels, which he further expands into a theory of reading. The degree of proximity that Attridge achieves in relation to Coetzee's authorial discourse is notable. It is possible to say that he understands the fundamental aspect of Coetzee's ethical thinking so well that he is able to digest it, so to speak, turning the terms of the authorial discourse into his own. The fundamental point of intersection between Attridge's critical work and Coetzee's authorial discourse is their conception of hospitality and what it can offer to the encounter with a literary work. From Coetzee's perspective, hospitality, understood as the intense imaginative effort of expanding one's habitual mode of thinking, is a precondition for the dialogism of the creative process. Hospitality ensures that the creative process is not simply monological because it awakens what Coetzee calls the "countervoices" within the self (*Doubling* 65). Attridge transfers hospitality as an essential component of the authorial creative process, as Coetzee conceives of it, to the interpretive process, thereby proposing that the engagement with a literary work is similar to the authorial creative process: opening oneself to a piece of literature is a means of escaping the habitual monologism of one's thought processes, of widening one's interpretive horizon by accommodating the new, the singular, the unexpected, the unknown. This is what Attridge calls a creative reading.

Two aspects of Attridge's theory of reading make it particularly appealing: one is its ethical thrust, captured in the willingness to recognize the singularity of the creative act and of the human being that sustained it. Another is the remarkable reciprocity that it achieves with Coetzee's work. By describing the activity of the reader as parallel and commensurate with the activity of the writer, Attridge's critical discourse presents itself as symmetrical with Coetzee's authorial discourse. This complementarity between Coetzee and Attridge is the most telling instance of mutuality in the critical field.

One of the reasons why proximity becomes an unstable concept in relation to Coetzee is the dynamics of mutual recognition that tends to predominate in the critical field. The success of Attwell's and Attridge's works has contributed to a dissemination of critical proximity. The recognition granted to them has gradually created an environment which naturally favored other critics who followed similar principles and adopted similar practices, thereby legitimizing and consolidating these principles and practices in the field. It is by means of this mutual recognition that Attwell's and Attridge's empathetic attitude in

relation to Coetzee's authorial discourse has become so prominent in the field. The exemplary manifestation of this prominence, apart from the ethos of Attwell's and Attridge's works, is the frequency with which Coetzee's fiction has been read in conjunction with, or against the backdrop of, his critical writing, with the aim of exploring how one can illuminate the other. This amounts to reading with the author, that is, finding the parameters of the critical inquiry in the authorial consciousness itself. Such an approach is, undoubtedly, very productive: it throws into relief the originality and the uniqueness of the creative mind in a holistic manner, uncovering different layers of its complexity. Besides, this is the kind of interpretive strategy that is very unlikely to fail, because the continuities between the authorial and the critical discourse will inevitably be there. The critical work comes to a harmonious closure, as though one could tie both ends of the authorial consciousness and avoid disrupting its internal coherence.

In principle, proximity and mutuality are certainly defensible. Nevertheless, apart from the risk of interpretive tautology, the major issue that arises when one applies both concepts to Coetzee is Coetzee himself. Throughout his novelistic oeuvre, he has consistently asserted the priority and the superiority of creative writing over pre-determined interpretive agendas, political or otherwise. His much-cited statement "all writing is autobiography" captures in an almost aphoristic manner the emphasis on writing as the singular act of an individual; put differently, what the writing ultimately represents or reveals is its author (*Doubling* 391). Appropriating it for the purposes of a just political cause or for the broader knowledge of literature entails a form of violation of this uniqueness or, as he puts it, a "betrayal" or an "overpowering" of the other (61).

This resistant feature of Coetzee's authorial discourse is very palpably enacted in the self-referential thematic focus of his later oeuvre. As a function of this self-referential quality, these later narratives intersect with the argument of "Confession and Double Thoughts", a widely known critical essay that Coetzee wrote in the 1980s. For an informed reader that engages with this later oeuvre as exercises of life writing, "Confession and Double Thoughts" becomes a double-edged interpretive tool. The essay surely sheds light on the uniqueness of Coetzee's life writing, but it also creates a restrictive and disempowering interpretive framework. Coetzee's life writing, in the terms of the essay, undermines the critic, that is to say, it undermines the critic's participation in his self-examination, which is otherwise required and

sanctioned by a traditional autobiographical pact. At the heart of his life writing are two key assumptions, or clauses in the autobiographical pact that he proposes: first, self-examination is hopelessly inconclusive for the subject, but ethically valid anyway; second, it is completely self-interested in the sense of being solipsistic, so that it concerns no one but the author.

The way in which "Confession and Double Thoughts" imposes limits on the interpretation of Coetzee's life writing reveals what I have referred to as the self-sufficiency of his authorial discourse. This self-sufficiency has two distinguishing traits. One is the capacity of the authorial discourse to elucidate itself: the key interpretive terms to understand Coetzee's autobiographical writing are spelled out in his own critical writing about autobiography. The other distinguishing trait of self-sufficiency is a direct consequence of the first: the critic loses authority as interpreter, that is to say, as the one who provides an explanatory vocabulary for Coetzee's work.

To explore these aspects of self-sufficiency and their interpretive implications, I proposed a reading of *Disgrace* and of the memoir *Summertime* against the backdrop of "Confession and Double Thoughts". My approach to these works is chiefly rhetorical, for my focus lies on Coetzee's communicative act and, more specifically, on what these works reveal about his implied views on critical proximity and mutuality. This rhetorical approach gauges an author's implied views not by attempting to pin down authorial intent, which is an imprecise and contentious concept, but by construing a context of interpretation in which certain inferences about what the author communicates in the narrative can be considered more correct than others.

Insofar as the authorial communicative act is concerned, the realism of the plot of *Disgrace* and the narrative technique deserve particular attention because they project a provocative and challenging author: Coetzee paves the way for the reader to fail in disengaging author and protagonist, real and fictional world. He produces a novel whose fictional world has a strong mimetic appeal to post-apartheid South Africa, and touches precisely on a number of very sensitive issues for readers more directly involved in South African reality. This identification between the fiction and the real world has been a major source of critique against the novel, which has often been taken as an excessively dark and depressing portrayal of the process of reconciliation after the end of apartheid.

Coetzee also employs an ambiguous narrative technique that, depending on how it is interpreted, strengthens the real-world appeal of the novel. If one

assumes that he is employing authorial narration, as many readers have assumed, the result is a problematic ideological identification of author with protagonist, which in turn enhances the potential proximity between real and fictional world. I argue that it is more appropriate to view the narrative technique of *Disgrace* as similar to the one that Coetzee adopts in his memoir *Boyhood*. On this account, *Disgrace* is narrated by its fictitious protagonist, who tells the story of part of his life in the present tense. The chief interpretive consequence of this assumption is that one can see more clearly how the South African plot becomes the background against which Coetzee creates a fictitious narrative of soul searching.

This perspective throws into relief the points of connection between *Disgrace* and "Confession and Double Thoughts". The kernel of Coetzee's argument in the essay, namely, how self-examination strives in vain for a kind of knowledge, and therefore for a reformation of the self, that is never truly attainable resonates directly with two central features of *Disgrace*: one is the novel's thematic focus on repentance and grace; the other is the role played by its narrative technique in the configuration of the story. Grace, suggested by the title of the novel in negative terms, amounts to the degree of self-awareness and character reformation that the protagonist seeks to achieve. Personal growth, however, is configured as a process of repentance and a quest for illumination, which becomes evident in the eschatological themes present in the novel. In this quest for illumination, the present-tense character narration plays a crucial role in light of how "Confession and Double Thoughts" elucidates *Disgrace*. The limited focalization on the protagonist Lurie, who is also the narrator, enables Coetzee to represent the inconclusiveness of soul searching that is the focus of the essay. Lurie oscillates between what could be described as an inchoate reformed man and the usual recalcitrant, faulty self he has always been. The possibility of a new true self is analogous to the concept of truth-directedness that Coetzee coins in "Confession and Double Thoughts"; similarly, the inevitable relapse into the usual patterns of behavior is parallel with the concept of double thought. Grace, understood as the fulfillment of Lurie's character reformation, is constantly gestured at, but never definitely achieved.

This reading brings *Disgrace* and "Confession and Double Thoughts" together in a mutual relation, since novel and essay dwell on the impasse of soul searching. In this respect, it is important to consider how the fictional discourse of the novel can go further, as it were, on the issue of grace. In the

terms of the essay, a self-examining subject can never achieve a moment of perfect knowledge; illumination necessarily transcends the rational faculties of the self. Yet the narrative world that Coetzee creates for his fictitious self-examining subject contains clues to a moment of grace that, although it escapes the protagonist's range of experience, can be inferred by the reader. More specifically, this moment of revelation could manifest itself during artistic creation, so that grace would be bestowed upon the protagonist when he is engaged in an artistic creative process. In the particular context of my argument about Coetzee as a writer who consistently asserts the authority and even the superiority of literary creation over literary criticism, this potential redemption of *Disgrace*'s protagonist is telling. As a literary scholar, Lurie can only wish for grace; as an artist, however, he might indeed experience grace.

"Confession and Double Thoughts", as I have mentioned, has a direct impact on the interpretation of Coetzee's life writing and, therefore, on his fictionalized memoirs *Boyhood*, *Youth*, and *Summertime*, which are the narratives in which he proposes an autobiographical pact with his reader with more clarity. As far as the implications of reading the memoirs in light of the argument in "Confession and Double Thoughts" are concerned, two questions were posed here. First, the strength of the claims that Attridge makes for the truth-directedness of Coetzee's writing; second, the creation of a silent reader.

Attridge was the first critic who pointed out to the importance of the essay to understand Coetzee's autobiographical writing, focusing on the confessional effect that *Boyhood* and *Youth* create. The gist of his reading is the implication of the reader in the experience of the truth-directedness of the writing, which leads him eventually to assert that Coetzee is sincere beyond doubt in *Youth*, as well as to paraphrase the truth of *Boyhood* as "the truth of testimony" (*Ethics of Reading* 155). As I argue, what defines Coetzee's authorial discourse as autobiographer is not solely his truth-directedness, but the back-and-forth between truth-directedness and the double thought. This oscillation is what makes self-examination inconclusive, preventing it from coming to a point of closure. Yet when Attridge asserts Coetzee's truth-directedness over the double thought (that is to say, over the possibility that either autobiographer or reader might be self-deceived or deliberately dishonest), he brings closure to self-examination. One could argue that his claim amounts to a betrayal of the autobiographical pact: reading the memoirs as exemplary of the argument in "Confession and Double Thoughts", Attridge disregards the

fact that the double thought is a feature of the confessor's, or interpreter's, psychology as well. Alternatively, one could also argue that his claim for the truth-directedness of the writing overpowers the discourse of the author: Coetzee does not pin down his autobiographical truth, but Attridge does; he is the one who has the final word. Besides, his word certainly counts, since he is the critic whose work is more prominently distinguished as an ideal critical counterpart to the discourse of the author.

But one also has to consider the kind of autobiographical pact at stake for Coetzee's proximal interpreters. If his self-examination is solipsistic to the point of dispensing with the interpreter's judgment (because it is hopelessly biased and faulty), what exactly is the role of the proximal reader or critic? Perhaps it would be the acceptance of a perfectly empathetic attitude, so that one becomes, in fact, a silent reader, someone who absorbs the discourse of the author, gains a privileged access into the unique mental world of the other and, then, leaves it at that. The explanation and the insertion of this unique discourse into the much wider context of life writing, which should be the goal of the critical work, would inevitably entail a betrayal or an overpowering of the authorial discourse. It is possible to play the role of a silent reader if one is simply a reader, even though that entails a perception of the authorial communicative act as a one-way transmission, rather than as the beginning of an exchange or dialogue. Obviously, a critic cannot accept this silent role, for a critic is engaged in a dialogue not only with the author, but with other critics as well. Criticism is a project shared among many parties (in a community), and not only between two (in a marriage). The communicative horizon of the work of the critic is much wider than the horizon of the reader: criticism is response that engages with and elicits other responses as well.

If it is read as a conceptual framework that elucidates the unique features of Coetzee's autobiography, "Confession and Double Thoughts" in effect silences the critic because it projects self-examination as a thoroughly solipsistic project. A slightly different, though no less forceful challenge is posed by *Summertime*, Coetzee's third memoir. The narrative shows an author who is always ahead of his interpreters, anticipating their moves and disarming them by portraying them as predictable, bitter, misinformed, even ludicrous. *Summertime* can be read as a work that discredits and even mocks the proximal critic by representing, in the fictional exchanges that take place in the narrative world, how we are likely to equate beliefs and assumptions, all of which are inevitably fallible and colored by personal bias, with the truth about the

autobiographical subject. Autobiographical truth becomes an issue for the interpreter, rather than for the subject that embarks in soul searching. The implication of the reader is at the center of the meanings of the memoir, but the sharply ironic depiction of how unrequited love, resentment, and intellectual admiration undermine the interpreters' judgments suggests not only that the truth about the self inevitably includes others but, most importantly, that the interpreters are speaking more about themselves than about the author.

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The spirit of *Summertime* is that of a dead-end: the author is dead in the story of his life, and his proximal, admiring interpreters have also reached a dead-end in their efforts to understand him. Ironically, but also misleadingly, the spirit of *The Childhood of Jesus*, the novel which follows *Summertime*, is prominently that of a new beginning. Coetzee breaks with the self-referential circularity of his later works by producing an ostensibly allegorical narrative. Allegory, it must be said, is not new in the context of his writing. As several reviewers have pointed out, the allegorical mode of writing in *The Childhood of Jesus* harks back to early works such as *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life and Times of Michael K*. But the theme of a new beginning is central in the plot: characters without memory are thrown into a new world as they arrive at a town conveniently named Novilla. The overall atmosphere of the narrative world is one of afterlife, which is also particularly appropriate for a work that comes after *Summertime*. The choice of central character is instigating. Coetzee leaves the autobiographical focus, which ended with the fictive death of the great author, to imagine the childhood of an even greater figure, the Savior. One cannot, however, align the author with the Christ figure in the novel, except for the fact that both have many followers.

Yet much about *The Childhood of Jesus* is in fact far from new for a Coetzee critic. The characteristically provocative authorial stance is recognizable by means of the dissatisfaction that reviewers have voiced when they wondered what Coetzee is doing in his latest novel. This dissatisfaction stems from the lack of a vision of what the work means, which is a direct consequence of its allegorical construction. A recurrent element in the responses to the novel is the idea that the narrative does not seem to have one central allegory that sustains its meanings. Put differently, reviewers have resented the absence of one allegorical key, as it were, that would open the work for interpretation and

disclose a coherent unit of meaning. The many allegorical paths that the story opens hinder the satisfactory completeness of the interpretive process.

The sense that a key interpretive element is missing in the narrative is familiar to readers of Coetzee: it would also apply, for instance, to the two narratives I have considered here. *Disgrace*, as a conversion narrative, suppresses from the reader's experience its central thematic element, that is, Lurie's definitive illumination. In *Summertime*, it is the fragmentation of autobiographical truth that accounts for the potential lack of one unified meaning. It is not possible to paint a whole and coherent picture of Coetzee's autobiographical truth; at best, one can have provisional, but unreliable, glimpses of it.

In sum, *The Childhood of Jesus* projects an author who first entices the critic, offering allegory as a possible interpretive path, and then disappoints the critic, refusing to indicate what precisely he is allegorizing. Not a new beginning, in other words, at least not in the context of the argument developed here; one can still discern the familiar authorial interrogation of the aims and procedures of the critical work.

This account of Coetzee's authorial discourse has aimed to show how power is a present and pressing element with which the critic has to grapple, both in relation to the author and in relation to the community of interpreters. In this sphere in particular, power circulates in diffuse ways, embedded in principles and practices that seem well adjusted to their context. It would be unreasonable to ascribe the consolidation of critical proximity in Coetzee scholarship to specific agents who deliberately attempted to shape the field. Rather, it is more reasonable to assume that proximity came to be dominant because distinct intellectual inclinations and interests shared among many members of the field have gradually created a stable environment which favored a proximal approach, allowing it to thrive and consolidate itself. The insights that proximity has generated into Coetzee's writing are undeniable; nevertheless, as I have shown here there are a number of reasons to consider whether Coetzee criticism should not, at this point, refrain from giving continuity to the proximal discourse that has prevailed thus far. The most apparent problem that attaches to proximity is its shortsightedness, which might prevent the critic from seeing that Coetzee's solipsism, which borders on what I have described here as self-sufficiency, carries within it a ferocious interrogation of what animates literary criticism.

Coetzee criticism would probably benefit from a greater degree of self-reflexiveness and accountability in relation to the ambivalent idealism that has engendered critical proximity, which is the dominant discourse in the field. Once again, this is not to say that proximity is dominant because all critics have adopted it; rather, proximity is dominant insofar as it is the discourse adopted by critics who have had a decisive role in elucidating Coetzee's writing and who, because of the recognition that they have achieved, have become examples of good Coetzee critics. Idealism conceals the fact that the field of cultural production, which encompasses the literary field, is actually a field of forces and competition.

It is relevant to make a parallel with what Bourdieu refers to as "interest in disinterestedness" (*In Other Words* 110). The form of interest that applies to literary criticism is authority that comes from recognition and prestige. This form of interest is, however, also disinterested to a certain extent, insofar as it exceeds the idea of profit strictly speaking. In other words, one does not become a professional literary critic for economic profit (though one can make a living out of an academic career); what motivates the choice of profession is often the belief that literature has meaning and value in itself. Disinterestedness for Bourdieu is a central rule of the game in the field of cultural production, tacitly or implicitly acknowledged as such. In the particular case of Coetzee scholarship, one finds disinterestedness embedded in the critical work in another, more conspicuous, way too: it resonates with the fundamental premise of proximity. Disinterestedness echoes in the ethical imperative to protect the discourse of the author from appropriation, giving priority to the other, as it were, rather than to oneself (a premise which originates in the conception of an essentially asymmetrical relation between self and other).

The ambiguity intrinsic to Bourdieu's original understanding of "disinterestedness" accounts for the way in which the term does accommodate a notion of interest despite its apparent aversion to interest. In the context of critical proximity in Coetzee scholarship, this ambiguity is compounded because proximity creates a form of attachment to the author that distinguishes its practitioners as prominent players in the field. Disinterestedness becomes clearly an instrument of power, regardless of the intention that originally motivates it, insofar as it impacts on the field as a whole. It creates what could perhaps be described as a center of authority in the critical field, a center whose gravitational force inevitably acts upon the

field, affecting to a greater or lesser extent the positions occupied by other members.

Terms such as proximity, empathy, identification, or their counterparts distance, resistance, and difference could certainly be rethought and refined in light of the critique of criticism that is performed by Coetzee's writing. This study is too limited to offer a substantial reconsideration of these concepts (and that would certainly have been a considerably difficult task), but I hope the discussion presented here has gestured towards a productive engagement with the challenge that Coetzee's works consistently pose to the work of the critic.

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