

# Goldsmiths Research Online

*Goldsmiths Research Online (GRO)  
is the institutional research repository for  
Goldsmiths, University of London*

## Citation

Farrant, Marc. 2019. Life After Beckett: J.M. Coetzee and the Politics of Literary Thinking. Doctoral thesis, Goldsmiths, University of London [Thesis]

## Persistent URL

<https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/26667/>

## Versions

The version presented here may differ from the published, performed or presented work. Please go to the persistent GRO record above for more information.

If you believe that any material held in the repository infringes copyright law, please contact the Repository Team at Goldsmiths, University of London via the following email address: [gro@gold.ac.uk](mailto:gro@gold.ac.uk).

The item will be removed from the repository while any claim is being investigated. For more information, please contact the GRO team: [gro@gold.ac.uk](mailto:gro@gold.ac.uk)

**Life After Beckett: J.M. Coetzee and the  
Politics of Literary Thinking**

**Marc Farrant**

**PhD**

**University of London, Goldsmiths College  
English and Comparative Literature**

**September 2018**

## **Declaration**

I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date:

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my thesis supervisors, Derval Tubridy and Shane Weller. One could not ask for more diligent, patient, and generous mentors. This thesis has been greatly strengthened by friends and colleagues from Goldsmiths and further afield. I would also like to thank Carrol Clarkson, Kai Easton, Josh Cohen, the helpful staff at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas, and to participants and fellow organisers of the London Beckett Seminar, Coetzee Collective, and Goldsmiths Literature Seminar. This research would not have been possible without the generous support of CHASE (the Consortium for the Humanities and the Arts South-East England) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

## Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between Samuel Beckett and J.M. Coetzee. The focus of the chapters that follow turns from the question of influence towards Coetzee's development of what I am terming a literary thinking. My approach is informed by current debates in literary studies and seeks to build upon Derek Attridge's claim for the distinctiveness of the literary. This thesis shows how Coetzee's complex and ongoing engagement with Beckett leads to an understanding of the ethico-political significance of literature precisely as distinct from other discursive domains. To reveal the ethico-political import of Coetzee's works I draw upon hitherto unexplored archival materials and trace throughout this project the way in which Coetzee's fiction interacts with his non-fiction (particularly regarding the commentaries on Beckett), starting from the earliest works of the 1960s and concluding with the most recently published novel, *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016).

Central to my contention about the ethico-political ramifications of Coetzee's literary thinking is the notion of life. Life explicitly demarcates the arena upon which Coetzee approaches Beckett. By adopting and adapting the latter's sustained critique of anthropocentrism and Enlightenment rationality, Coetzee's literary thinking situates life at the border between ethics and politics. Life, however, is also pivotal to my account of how literary works function as literature, as an affective and embedded mode of thinking that disrupts the static truths of philosophy. The greater ambition of this thesis is therefore to contribute to both the growing scholarship on Coetzee, especially in terms of his relation to Beckett and other modernist precursors, but also to larger contemporary debates about the relation between life and literature.

## Contents

Declaration	2
Acknowledgements	3
Abstract	4
Contents	5
Introduction	6
1. The ‘Anarchic Life’ of Writing: <i>The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett</i>	31
2. Unwording Life: Late Modernism and the Inhuman	64
3. Literature and the Right to Life: <i>In the Heart of the Country</i> , <i>Waiting for the Barbarians</i> , and <i>Life &amp; Times of Michael K</i>	100
4. Sacrificing Sacrifice in <i>Elizabeth Costello</i> and <i>Disgrace</i>	137
5. The Writing of Life: Life Forms and Literary Truths.	171
Conclusion: From Census to Censor	208
Works Cited	218

## **Introduction:**

‘What is missing from Beckett’s account of life?’

— J.M. Coetzee, ‘Eight Ways of Looking at Samuel Beckett’, 21.

### **i: Life after Beckett.**

The notion of life in J.M. Coetzee’s writings on Samuel Beckett is both fertile and perplexing. Coetzee’s question – ‘What is missing from Beckett’s account of life?’ – which is taken from a 2006 lecture on Beckett entitled ‘Eight Ways of Looking at Samuel Beckett’, culminates a career-long interest, if not obsession, with the Irish writer. A small sample of Coetzee’s other writings on Beckett, however, reveals the difficulty in diagnosing this perceived lack in Beckett’s account of life. In an introductory 2006 essay to the Grove edition of Beckett’s collected works, republished in *Inner Workings* with the title ‘Samuel Beckett, the short fiction’, Coetzee writes: ‘Beckett was an artist possessed by a vision of life without consolation or dignity or promise of grace, in the face of which our only duty [...] is not to lie to ourselves’ (169). In an earlier 1992 interview with Richard Began Coetzee defines this vision of life in somewhat different terms: ‘[Both] Kafka and Beckett are writers of the ordinary – of the experience of being alive’ (‘An Interview with J.M. Coetzee’, 421). In the 1992 volume of essays and interviews, *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee describes how his earliest engagement with Beckett (the novel *Watt*) elicited a bodily, ‘sensuous delight’ (20). This delight inspired a doctoral study (undertaken between 1965 to 1968), entitled ‘The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett: An Essay in Stylistic Analysis’ (1969), which comprised an innovative computational stylistic analysis of Beckett’s prose style.<sup>1</sup> From the limited selection of encounters listed above, life can be seen as multifarious and elusive: life seems to disclose not only a field of affective or somatic experience, but also the form or quality of an ethical value (of not lying; of telling the truth).<sup>2</sup>

It is this ambiguity, this inability to be isolated or pinned down to a single meaning, that broaches the distinctiveness of the literary. Coetzee’s engagements with Beckett – in the guise sometimes of critic, author, or interlocutor – thereby situates life and literature in a

---

<sup>1</sup> As Coetzee adds: ‘The critical work I did on Beckett originated in that sensuous response, and was a grasping after ways in which to talk about it: to talk about delight’ (*Doubling*, 20).

<sup>2</sup> Coetzee also completed a Masters thesis on Ford Madox Ford (1963), written whilst working as a computer programmer in England. I explore in further detail the intellectual intersection through which Coetzee locates his postgraduate work (literary criticism, linguistics, computational logic and mathematics), and out of which his own creative writing emerges, in the first chapter.

complex dynamic that this introduction aims to sketch out. Throughout my analyses the key question of Coetzee's inheritance will be framed as a question of what it means to write life *after* Beckett. More broadly, Coetzee's writings help us pose life as a framework for envisaging Beckett's legacy in contemporary literature.<sup>3</sup> Given the latter's substantial influence, life helps link the literary revolution of Beckett's negative aesthetics to what might be properly discerned as its intellectual or ethico-political import in terms unburdened by the philosophical dogmas of prior approaches.<sup>4</sup> An example of the key confluence of literature and life can be seen in Coetzee's increasingly frequent discussion of Beckett's style, in the decades following the structuralist-inspired doctoral study, in terms of an opposition between embodiment and disembodiment. As Coetzee elucidates in *Doubling the Point*, Beckett's work takes on a progressive movement towards disembodiment, one that haunts the later works, and begins with *The Unnamable*, 'Beckett's first after-death book', from which the birth of a 'post-mortem' (23) voice is derived.<sup>5</sup> The body, however, turns out to be a slippery metaphor for describing literary style, as Coetzee's vacillating commentary suggests. On the one hand, form is seen as the abstract or disembodied component of the literary work. By privileging a form of stylised negation Beckett's works are thereby seen to detach themselves from the living or social world of ideas and things. On the other hand, however, form is precisely the process of embodying, of fleshing out an idea, which explains why Beckett is so often credited by Coetzee as an inspiration, especially as providing a model for the 'voice of the mind' (*Homage*, 6).

---

<sup>3</sup> For an instructive account of Beckett's influence on contemporary writing see Peter Boxall's *Since Beckett Contemporary Writing in the Wake of Modernism* (2009).

<sup>4</sup> Since the first critics of the 1950s, Beckett has long been approached from various philosophical perspectives, including Cartesianism, Existentialism, post-structuralism, and has been the subject of numerous works by philosophers, from the earliest engagements of Maurice Blanchot, Georges Bataille and Theodor Adorno to Alain Badiou's recent writings on Beckett. As Matthew Feldman argues: 'Time and again, we see an interpretative *Zeitgeist* at work in the international reception of Samuel Beckett in the decades since 1945' ('Beckett and Philosophy, 1928-1938', 6). Coetzee's affinity to philosophy has also been noted in the criticism, and his status as a philosophical writer seems now assured by works such as *J.M. Coetzee and Ethics: Philosophical Perspective on Literature* (2010) (which focuses particularly on questions of moral philosophy from an analytic standpoint) and *Beyond the Ancient Quarrel: Literature, Philosophy, and J.M. Coetzee* (2017).

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Beckett's post-1952 late works – Coetzee has in mind *Lessness*, *Ping*, *Imagine Dead Imagine* and other later works – are described disparagingly as automata-like mechanisms in the 1973 essay, 'Samuel Beckett and the Temptations of Style' (reprinted in *Doubling the Point*). They are, 'Like a switch, they have no content, only shape. They are in fact only a shape, a style of mind' (*Doubling*, 46). Coetzee's reading of Beckett, which privileges the concept of disembodiment, resonates with the canonical early reading of Beckett's work by Maurice Blanchot, who discovered in Beckett: 'a being without being, who can neither live nor die, stop or start, the empty space in which the idleness of an empty speech speaks' ("Where now? Who now?", 213).



This duality can be perceived in 'Eight Ways', which draws on the opposition between embodiment and disembodiment as an approach to the crisis of post-Enlightenment subjectivity. This crisis is associated with a relentless scepticism and loss of self and identity in the wake of secular modernity, and the danger of an instrumental rationality both inhumane and affectless in equal measure. In the essay Beckett is painted as a 'philosophical dualist' (19), which means, Coetzee argues, that 'he writes as if he believes that we are made up of, that we are, a body plus a mind' (19). This mind-body dualism, a legacy of Cartesian scepticism, is a central context for locating Coetzee's inheritance of modernism. Indeed, Coetzee's tentative solution to Beckett's disembodied solipsism is presented emphatically as embodied life; the life of a 'substantial body' (121-2), as attributed to Friday in the earlier novel *Foe* (1986), that is typical of the way Coetzee's most enigmatic characters are presented in the elaboration of an anti-Cartesian portrayal of life. As opposed to Beckett's solipsism, Coetzee advances an intermingling of soul and flesh that exceeds Beckett's faltering, 'imaginative courage' ('Eight Ways', 24). Instead of the imprisoned brains of 'Beckett's selves, his intelligences, his creatures' (23), Coetzee gives us the whale: 'A whale is a whale is a whale. A whale is not an idea' (22). However, if Coetzee's own works purportedly distance themselves from adopting a cerebral or disembodied approach to style, the frequent references to mind-body dualism throughout the oeuvre attest to an ongoing strand of influence that is not so easily overcome, despite Coetzee's acts of self-distancing. Not only do Coetzee's texts disclose their own fundamental Beckettian estrangement of word and world, however, but, as I explore especially in Chapter 2, Beckett's works are also seen to never wholly escape the material contexts of both life and art.

By situating a philosophical context at the centre of Coetzee's inheritance I aim to illustrate how this inheritance surpasses questions of style and technique (the use of fragment or interior monologue, for instance) and is instead rooted in the very epistemological and affective structures made possible by literary modernism's revolutionary unsettling of language (structures that enable the literary writer to stand toe to toe with the philosopher). Fundamental to this revolution was a non-mimetic understanding of the relation between art and life that, in the context of Coetzee's inheritance, can be traced via two distinct strands of modernism discussed throughout this thesis: a post-romantic or vitalist modernism of ideal life (in the context of Coetzee's specific forebears this strand is related to Wallace Stevens, Vladimir Nabokov and Rainer Maria Rilke) and a late modernist aesthetics profoundly more negative in disposition

(associated with Beckett and Franz Kafka).<sup>6</sup> I argue that Coetzee's well-documented critique of reason, and trenchant challenge to the tenets of novelistic realism, is inscribed within a negotiation between these two strands.

Later in 'Eight Ways' the opposition between an embodied and disembodied aesthetics is explicitly related to the critique of reason or rationality as Coetzee performatively explores 'the universe' ('Eight Ways', 25) of laboratory animals. In staggered and interruptive cut scenes or images (that accord with the emphasis on the visual in the title, which pays homage to Stevens' 1954 poem *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*), a being is presented as the subject both of a series of experiments and as the speaking voice of their effects. Or almost, since this being seems both impossible to attribute and fundamentally ungrammatical (a corrosion of first- and third-person pronouns; it is a He, She, It, We and an I, and there is also an indefinite 'someone', 26), punctuated by the interjections of the narrator-author that only furthers the corrosion of aesthetic or textual embodiment:

A nut is dropped into the third tube. It opens the third box. It is empty. It opens the second box. It contains a nut. Aha! A nut is dropped into the third tube. It opens the second box. It contains a nut. It eats the nut. So: the universe is not as it was before. [...] (You think this is not life, someone says? You think this is merely some thought-experiment? There are creatures to whom this is not just life but the *whole* of life [...].) (26).

The scene is reminiscent of Elizabeth Costello's discussion, in Coetzee's 2004 eponymous novel, of Kafka's short story, *Report to an Academy* (1917), in which the anthropocentric mindset of late nineteenth-century science is tacitly mocked via the monologue of the ape

---

<sup>6</sup> The term 'late modernism' (198) is suggested by Attwell in *Doubling the Point* as a suitable moniker for Coetzee's works, despite his historical belatedness from modernism proper. My use of the term builds upon Attridge's notion of a 'modernism after modernism' which is defined as a 'reworking of modernism's methods' (*J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 5). These methods (notably modernist writing's self-reflexivity), Attridge highlights, are related to a vital 'apprehension of the claims of otherness' (4). For Boxall, it is this paradoxical situation of fulfilling something after its completion that situates Coetzee in a paradigm of contemporary literature (alongside other writers, such as Don DeLillo, W.G. Sebald, Paul Auster) conceived specifically as a writing after Beckett. That Beckett is often taken to signal the end of modernism is evidenced in Coetzee's own characterisation of him as a 'proto-postmodernist' ('An Exclusive Interview with J.M. Coetzee'). Beckett's disembodied art of exhaustion hence performs a sacrilegious vandalism of modernism's coveted sense of 'the new' and, as Boxall contends, thereby 'marks the limit of the literary imagination' ('Since Beckett', 303). To take this end as a point of departure, however, involves occupying the *time* of Beckett's writing: 'a time that is after the end, and before the beginning' (304). This emphasis on time marks how Coetzee's late modernism apprehends the otherness of life in terms of a Beckettian entanglement of life and death. This entanglement of life and death in Beckett's works signal how late modernism marks neither a break nor a continuity with prior modes. This paradoxical going on *after* the end is key to Shane Weller's account of Beckett's late modernism which appeals to a sense of language scepticism, a pre-requisite of high modernism's commitment to renewal (typified for Beckett by Joyce), that for the late modernist cannot be separated from 'a loss of faith in the human as such' ('Beckett and Late Modernism', 97). I explore in further detail this conjunction of language scepticism and life throughout my first two chapters.

Red Peter as he speaks to an audience of ‘esteemed academicians’ (225). The blurring of genres, a common feature of Coetzee’s later public addresses (Coetzee chose to read a story for his speech to the Swedish Academy upon being awarded the Nobel prize in 2003), renders these scenes oppositional to a didactic or extractable solution to the problem of life identified in Beckett. Much like the later *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee uses a strategy of narrative embeddedness (overlapping narrative voices; a staging of the processes of writing and narrative composition within the story itself) that attests to Beckett’s influence precisely by forestalling the attempt to arrive at a wholly untarnished or, indeed, substantial idea of substantial life.

Embeddedness, a key term I take from Coetzee’s own writing and develop throughout this thesis, informs how I understand the metafictional operations of Coetzee’s text to operate regarding a literary thinking of life. Indeed, the concept of embeddedness is integral to this thesis’ central contention: that the self-reflexivity of Coetzee’s writing is more than simply a literary navel-gazing or postmodern game-playing, but rather marks the ethico-political efficacy of what Derek Attridge terms the ‘singularity’ of literature.<sup>7</sup> Embeddedness demarcates how Coetzee’s understanding and practice of literary writing is ineluctably determined by the sphere of social life whilst simultaneously remaining irreducible to its causes (intention, historical context, biography). To state that a literary work is irreducible to its causes is to privilege instead its effects in one’s reading and hence the position of the reader. In this, I follow Attridge’s account, elucidated in *The Singularity of Literature* (published in the same year, 2004, as its companion work, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*) and the later *The Work of Literature* (2015), of the literary work as an event insofar as meaning becomes an occurrence that cannot be reduced to an abstraction or substance (a moral truth, for example). As he states: ‘Though works of literature may well offer lessons on living, and this may be an important aspect of their social value, it’s not *as literature* that they do so’ (*The Work of Literature*, 1). I further explore contemporary debates about form and literary meaning below in the two-part next section, specifically addressing the question of how my method – influenced by both

---

<sup>7</sup> For Attridge, ‘singularity’ refers not to an immutable essence of the literary as such but rather to a unique combination of repeatable or shared properties. Accordingly, to register the singularity of Beckett’s and Coetzee’s works is to witness how they may or may not partake of other discourses (by raising ethical or political issues, for instance) while nonetheless remaining irreducible to them: ‘Singularity [...] is generated not by a core of irreducible materiality or vein of sheer contingency to which the cultural frameworks we use cannot penetrate but by a configuration of general properties that, in constituting the entity (as it exists in a particular time and place), go beyond the possibilities pre-programmed by a culture’s norms’ (*The Singularity of Literature*, 63).

Attridge and Coetzee's own account of the literary – both shares and differs from aspects of new formalist and 'postcritical' approaches.

Like Beckett's works, Coetzee's literary embeddedness invites us to consider how the conditions of possibility for (self)knowledge are tied to the conditions of possibility for the subject of knowledge, human or non-human. Not only, therefore, do we find philosophical ideas and issues thematised across Coetzee's works but also *staged*; that is, a breakdown of self-identity or a moral crisis is not only a feature of a certain character's life but rather becomes integral to the fiction itself, informing the *life* of the work. In 'Eight Ways' the work thus approaches the inscrutability of embodied life not simply by presenting it as an extractable or summative idea but by itself remaining inscrutable and, in so doing, demanding more from us as readers than a merely cognitive or intellectual response (since such a response is inadequate to the demands of a thinking beyond the domain of propositional knowledge and, therefore, inadequate to engaging with a 'brain [that] comes from another universe of discourse, thinking thoughts according to its own nature, beyond malign, beyond benign, thoughts inconceivable, incommensurate with human thought', 24). In other words, although it is possible to infer a theme, trope, or concept of the otherness or inscrutability of embodied life across Coetzee's works, this inference accords to a logic that is cast aside in the text itself; that is, of rationally delineating instances of an alterity or otherness that is performatively embedded in a way unavailable for logical synthesis, argumentative delineation, or conceptual appropriation.

By attending to Coetzee's techniques of narrative embeddedness, throughout my readings in this thesis, I show how the non-representational or self-reflexive tendencies of late modernism refuse to reconcile the antinomy between art and life in terms of any ideal or vitalist notion of life. In later chapters I go on to explore how it is precisely such a concept of life (as sacred; as an absolute value; as inscrutable or wholly other) that troubles appraisals of Coetzee's works on purely ethical grounds by raising a theological or religious paradigm of sacrifice. Rather than a vitalist emphasis on form as unified or static, then, my approach considers form, both in terms of life and literature, with regard to the temporal dynamic Coetzee identifies with both the activities of writing and reading. Inheriting from Beckett's late modernism a suspicion towards the epistemological bias of reason, for Coetzee the task of a literary thinking is ineluctably linked to ontology, to the living modes of both the thinker and the thought. In the next section I discuss how Coetzee's singular contribution to contemporary literature emerges through the relation between life forms and literary forms.

## **ii. Life Forms and Literary Forms.**

Having established above several of the sites and scenes of Coetzee's engagement with Beckett, as well as some key contexts and terms, in this section I elucidate how a concept of life more clearly relates to Coetzee's oeuvre, to literature, and to recent debates in literary and cultural studies. Life manifests abstractly in Coetzee's earlier South African fictions (*Dusklands*, *In the Heart of the Country*, *Waiting for Barbarians*, *Life & Times of Michael K*) as the question of living together (of the possibility, or not, of establishing socio-political communities), but is rendered concretely through themes of sovereignty, power and violence (especially through the figures of civil war, torture, and colonialism). From around the mid-1990s life manifests as both a more explicit concern (through the question of animal life, as well as the project of life-writing inaugurated by *Boyhood*, the composition of which was begun as early as 1987), and a more ambiguous one. *Disgrace* is often marked as a pivot in Coetzee's career, a searing portrayal of post-apartheid South Africa that precipitated his emigration to Australia and the beginning of a new series of writing projects. However, I trace an earlier shift, which I am calling the philosophical turn, to the 1985 essay 'Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky'. As Coetzee affirms: '[T]he essay on confession, as I reread it now, marks the beginning of a more broadly philosophical engagement with a situation in the world' (*Doubling*, 394). This overlap of epistemology and ontology, of the problem of truth and selfhood in secular modernity and of a consequent lack of ontological fixity, is integral to Coetzee's later writings.

The confession essay thereby both frames Coetzee's ongoing indebtedness to Beckett's scepticism and helps to elucidate the privileging of an alternative non-rational modality of thought (encapsulated by what I am terming the heart-speech of the later writings as poised between the sublimities of feeling or affect and the transcendental yearning of religion). Firstly, the task of this other modality of thought will be to envisage both a renewed basis of thinking animal life (in both the fiction and non-fiction) and, on that basis, an alternative truth of the human. The key opposition between cynicism and grace, identified in the confession essay, thus bears an integral relation to the pairing of scepticism and idealism that is fundamental to Coetzee's earlier writings on Beckett and the latter's own unwording of the human mode of being (discussed in Chapter 2). Secondly, by observing this continuity across the oeuvre, and how the question of animal life is for Coetzee fundamentally tied to a destabilising of human reasoning, it is possible to register the ethico-political import of the more explicitly political earlier writings in

light of the more abstract and ethical concerns of the later, and vice versa. Finally, the notion of truth which emerges as a key component of Coetzee's philosophical turn – as later compounded by the 2015 non-fiction volume *The Good Story: Exchanges on Truth, Fiction and Psychotherapy* – delineates the ethico-political urgency of Coetzee's later metafictional staging of the authorial self (across the three fictionalised memoirs, discussed in my final chapter) and of literary authority in general.

Life then, rather than being posed as a concept in itself, is a prism by which to apprehend the intersections between a host of formal, ethical and political issues that have characterised Coetzee's authorship: issues of convention and genre (linguistic and literary, and particularly the opposition of modernism and realism); the elaboration of a literary thinking as an embodied, temporal, and experiential approach to the world; ethical issues regarding the relation between human and animal life; and questions of political power and violence. A number of these themes emerge in recent literary and cultural studies debates, where the concept of life has undergone something of a resurgence. As Arne de Boever notes in *Narrative Care: Biopolitics and the Modern Novel* (2013), in the wake of a deconstructive criticism and an earlier privileging of ethics, a new '*political turn* in the humanities and the social sciences [...] has become paired to what is sometimes described as an interdisciplinary *vitalist turn*' (2). The latter is envisaged as a renewed interest in the notion of life exemplified by figures such as Giorgio Agamben, whose discussion of crises and states of exception deploys a concept of bare life, adopted from Walter Benjamin, to refer to the inhuman kind of life situated between human and animal life that is produced in moments of political extremity. Agamben's work on biopolitics builds upon Michel Foucault's famous writings on biopower, and I discuss this intersection of life and politics in Chapter 3.<sup>8</sup>

De Boever senses that this vitalist turn is coextensive with 'a related turn to life in the sciences' (2), and recent work in Beckett studies serves as a prism through which to view this confluence of disciplines (indeed, Beckett's own sensory aesthetics and notion of the inhuman are an integral part of my discussion in Chapter 2).<sup>9</sup> Eric Santner's notion of

---

<sup>8</sup> Key works discussed in this study include Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998) and Foucault's account of biopower, as outlined in *The History of Sexuality* (especially volume one, first published in English in 1978 as *The Will to Knowledge*) and in the mid-1970s lecture series at the Collège de France (published as *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*).

<sup>9</sup> For example, recent work in Beckett studies appears to completely contradict Coetzee's account of the former's progression towards disembodiment (see the writings of Ulrike Maude and Laura Salisbury). The paradigms of performance theory and theatre studies have similarly sought to emphasise the corporeal and temporal aspects of the works whilst displacing the textual and conceptual. Similarly, interest in Beckett

creaturely life, which similarly builds upon Benjamin, has been usefully deployed by Pieter Vermeulen in a discussion of the unique forms of life generated by Coetzee's late fictions (I discuss this in Chapter 5). This study also draws upon Judith Butler's account of precarious life, in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), and seeks to demarcate contingency and finitude (an openness to injury) as the basis of conceiving of our interdependency.

Particularly pertinent to establishing my link between literature and life in terms of a literary *thinking* is Eugene Thacker's work on life, published in *After Life* (2010). Thacker's account of the relation between life and logic in Aristotle's *De Anima* helps to illustrate how Beckett's and Coetzee's works pose a *literary* challenge to the positive ontologies of life proffered by both reason and religion. The question of a theory or ontology of life is first posed by Aristotle in *De Anima* where he deploys a key distinction between Life (capital L) and the living that, as Thacker argues, manifests an irresolvable contradiction. As Thacker delineates in a shorter essay: '[A]ny concept of life must account for the principle characteristics of life, without itself being part of them; and any concept of life must be inseparable from actual instances of life – while not being determined by them [*sic*]' ('After Life: Swarms, Demons and the Antimonies of Immanence', 190). That is, there is an inherent tension between an account of the living as 'internally-caused, auto-animating and self-organizing' (190) and a metaphysical account of life that must be separate from the living to encompass this propensity for change. Aristotle sets out to smooth over this contradiction by recourse to the Greek concept of *psukhê*, most commonly translated as the 'soul' but identified by Thacker as denoting a 'life-principle' (190).

However, *Psukhê*, as Thacker outlines, is split between an 'onto-theological' attempt to capture 'life itself' and an 'onto-biological' (190) notion of the living. Consequently, to grant life the status of an ontology one must affirm contradiction, violating the Aristotelian logical principle of non-contradiction. This affirmation of contradiction, which demarcates life as a limit-concept for philosophy and conceptual thought, is fundamental, I argue, to Coetzee's critique of reason and to notion of a literary thinking.<sup>10</sup>

---

and both the life sciences and neuroscience have led to several publications, epitomised by a 2016 special edition of the *Journal of the Medical Humanities*, entitled 'Beckett, Medicine and the Brain'.

<sup>10</sup> Further accounts of Coetzee's challenge to Aristotelian rationality are given in Martin Woessner's essay 'Coetzee's Critique of Reason' and Alice Crary's 'J.M. Coetzee, Moral Thinker', both published in *J.M. Coetzee and Ethics*. It is also interesting to note how frequently Coetzee's works are described in terms of the 'non-rational', 'anti-rational' or 'postrational', and to note the ambiguity that arises from this proliferation of terms. Attridge's account of the 'prerational' (102), in "'A Yes without a No": Philosophical Reason and

In particular, Coetzee's literary enterprise dissimulates a profoundly indeterminate sense of life that consistently refuses the Aristotelian hierarchy of human life over animal life (I discuss this in Chapter 4). I explore this indeterminacy particularly in terms of the continuous capacity of the temporal condition of the present, as witnessed in Beckett's account of life, to be other than itself.

That literature, given its status as contradictory to propositional knowledge, might serve as a better means for *thinking* life than philosophy is again evidenced by Coetzee's relation to Beckett. Shortly before the encounter with *Watt* in *Youth* (2002) – which fittingly straddles the dividing line between art and life as Coetzee's second fictionalised memoir – John is grappling with his own first foray into fiction (he is reading *Burchell's Travels*, a key inspiration for *Dusklands*) and is not only discontented with the naive truth of novelistic verisimilitude but is also seeking an 'aura of truth' linked to a 'knowledge too humble to know it is knowledge' (139). He supposes he will have to undergo a process of unlearning or, in the words of Beckett's *Stirrings Still*, of 'unknowing' (113). A few pages later, John will find this knowledge in a book shop located off Charing Cross road, in London: '*Watt* is quite unlike Beckett's plays. There is no clash, no conflict, just the flow of a voice telling a story, a flow continually checked by doubts and scruples, its place fitted exactly to the pace of his own mind' (155).

Testament to both the affective and intellectual stakes of Beckett's influence is re-iterated in *Doubling the Point*: 'Beckett has meant a great deal to me in my own writing – that must be obvious. He is a clear influence on my prose. Most writers absorb influence through their skin. With me there has also been a more conscious process of absorption' (25). A further allusion to the influence of Beckett on Coetzee's *way of thinking* (emphasised over and above any stylistic or formal considerations) is made in the short text *Homage* (1993):

I have devoted years of my life to Beckett, as both academic and aficionado. It was time well spent. What one can learn from Beckett's prose is a lesson one level more abstract than one can get from verse. The lesson is not so much about getting the movements of the voice onto the page as about finding a form for the movements of the mind (6).<sup>11</sup>

---

the Ethics of Conversion in Coetzee's Fiction', is perhaps the strongest example in the criticism of how Coetzee's critique of reason is aligned to an anti-Cartesian account of life. Although I draw on Attridge's account, I take the ambiguity of Coetzee's opposition to rationality to signal a certain ineluctability of the rational that problematises the appeal to a quasi-religious ethics of conversion that is beyond all calculation.

<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere in the same essay Coetzee discusses, in reference to his literary forebears (including Nabokov, Faulkner, Pound and Beckett), the importance of inheriting the 'rhythm and syntax not only of words but,



This formulation is similarly reiterated in a 1997 interview with Joanna Scott, where Coetzee, in response to a question of Beckett's influence, says of his graduate work on Beckett: 'That kind of close, repeated reading tends to influence the cadences of one's prose and perhaps even one's habits of thinking' ('Voice and Trajectory', 85).<sup>12</sup> The epistemic or intellectual significance of Beckett's influence – and therefore of the capacity of the literary in general as a contradictory enterprise that mixes modalities of knowing and feeling – can thus be seen as integral to both Coetzee's inheritance and practice as a writer.<sup>13</sup>

A clearer articulation of what precisely I mean by a literary thinking, especially since the notion informs not only my object of study but my mode of reading, can be extrapolated from a short essay, entitled 'On Literary Thinking', which comprised Coetzee's contribution to a special anniversary edition of the journal *Textual Practice* (published in 2016). Focusing on the rise of digital technologies Coetzee castigates the reductive sense of thinking associated with the proliferation of 'binary logic' ('Literary Thinking', 1151). Contrary to the closed circuit of 'YES-NO decisions' (1152) that characterise rational thought in a digital age, Coetzee argues it is literature that is assigned the task of uncovering a higher sense of truth: 'if God will not keep our children from the single vision of YES or NO then it is up to the poets to do so' (1152). This mistrust of binary thinking, or instrumental reason, is further evidenced in a published email exchange where Coetzee writes:

I think that reason/rationality is only one aspect of mind (though hypertrophied in human beings). Just as it would be a mistake to limit investigations of the mind to exploring its reasoning faculty, so I think it a mistake to decide that the only faculty that may do the exploring is the reasoning faculty (Coetzee & Kurtz, 'Nevertheless, My Sympathies Are With The Karamazovs', 44).

---

so to speak, of thought too', and further posits 'the voice of the mind' as opposed to 'the voice that speaks from the throat' (6).

<sup>12</sup> In an archived letter to James Knowlson – Beckett's official biographer – dated 24 January 1995, Coetzee again attests to Beckett's influence at an intellectual level: 'You ask about the importance of Beckett to my own writing. During my twenties I was a devoted reader, particularly of his prose fiction. I have absolutely no doubt that elements of my prose style, and for all I know deeper-lying elements of my writing and my thinking, were formed under his influence' (Harry Ransom Center [hereafter HRC], MS Coetzee Papers, Box 79, Folder 2).

<sup>13</sup> Although I frequently draw upon Coetzee's commentaries throughout this thesis, I refrain from endorsing a model of authorial intention that is fundamentally at odds with my notion of literary thinking, as will become clear. Following my account of Coetzee's commentary on Beckett's disembodied aesthetics, I prefer to utilise the non-fiction (especially when it comes to direct statements of influence) as a framework to develop a more capacious interrogation by pushing further at key terms and issues that are raised (such as embodiment or style).

Insofar then as life presents a limit-concept for ontology or rational philosophy – following Thacker – it is central to the dynamic of my extrapolation of a notion of literary thinking that both builds upon and moves beyond Coetzee’s own theoretical articulation of the term. As Attridge argues: ‘[Our] experience of the powerful literary work, when read as literature and not as something else, is an affective and somatic as well as an intellectual one’ (*Work of Literature*, 7). Throughout this thesis I follow how Coetzee’s literary thinking accordingly embeds ideas in material and bodily contexts, destabilising the operation of abstract thought by subjecting ideas to the contingency of the temporal dynamics of writing and reading that comprise the constitutive ambiguity of literary works. Such a thinking refutes univocal formulations or propositions and thereby attests to a truth that cannot be singularly possessed, whether via the sovereign logics of either reason or religion.

As the critic James Wood argues in a review of *Elizabeth Costello* (2003): ‘the fictive device had justified itself: [...] Coetzee, in his new form, had nosed his way towards a battered truth, despite his apparent unwillingness to claim ownership of that truth’ (‘A Frog’s Life’, 15). Wood’s sense of an unmastered, or unmasterable, form of literary truth recalls the opposition Coetzee establishes in *Doubling the Point* between a mere positivistic sense of ‘truth to fact’ and the notion of a “higher” truth’ (17), later discussed in relation to silence: ‘To me, on the other hand, truth is related to silence, to reflection, the practice of writing’ (65-66). For Beckett too, in his first published work, ‘Dante...Bruno. Vico..Joyce’ (1929), life is aligned with the literary against the abstract and *disembodied* truths of philosophy: ‘Poetry is essentially the antithesis of Metaphysics: Metaphysics purge the mind of the senses and cultivate the disembodiment of the spiritual; Poetry is all passion and feeling’ (24). The assertion that literature or poetry is entirely feeling is again re-stated, somewhat flippantly, by Beckett in an interview when the question of Existentialism is posed as a potential key to his works. In reply to the question of why write novels and not philosophy, Beckett answers: ‘I haven't the slightest idea. I'm no intellectual. *All I am is feeling*. Molloy and the others came to me the day I became aware of my own folly. Only then did I begin to write the things I feel [my emphasis]’ (qtd. in *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, 240). This response, however, fails to capture the depth of thought and intellectual engagement that both influences Beckett’s compositional practice (including his extensive reading in philosophy) and the range of affective and epistemological effects produced by the final works, even as they seek to undermine a propositional knowledge. As Anthony Uhlmann argues, Beckett’s work performs a ‘poetical thinking’ that offers an

approach to the world, 'of understanding the world – [...] they offer us a kind of knowledge which might only come to light in the forms and through the processes Beckett creates' ('Beckett and Philosophy', 92).

Similarly, Coetzee's works are opposed to any form of axiomatic systematisation, framed as the weight of convention that constrains discursive prose within the parameters of a pre-established field. He states: 'When I write criticism [...] I am always aware of a responsibility toward a goal that has been set for me not only by the argument, not only by the whole philosophical tradition [...] but also by the rather tight discourse of criticism itself' (*Doubling*, 246). Like Beckett, Coetzee advances a form of affective or somatic response to the world and experience ('you have to remember what is not possible in discursive prose. In particular you have to remember about passion', *Doubling*, 60). In another interview Coetzee goes further, and suggests we 'are never not in an affective or affectively inflected state' while deploring 'Plato's ideal of affectless reasoning' (Coetzee, Rainey et al, 'An Interview with J.M. Coetzee', 851) as an impossible fallacy.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly we might relate the imperative of a literary thinking to an *enlivening* rather than an *enlightening*.

If truth is thereby bound to a temporally and affectively constituted subject this is not the same, however, as privileging a sense of prerational or affective being over reason. This is dramatically encapsulated by the staging of passion in Coetzee's latest *The Schooldays of Jesus*, discussed in Chapter 5. Rather, my engagement with the notion of affect throughout this thesis does not seek to highlight the truth of a literary work simply in terms of the body or feeling but rather to show how Coetzee's literary thinking exposes truth as subject to temporal and affective states of being that are inherently fallible, embedded, and finite. Accordingly, that the works constitute an affected reasoning means that they pertain to a precarious or provisional position through which the very binary opposition between reason/affect comes undone. The resultant ethico-political import of Coetzee's literary thinking is hence critical and interrogative, inherently non-propositional, and importantly tied to the living, affective and temporal sites of writing and reading.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> As Coetzee puts it in a Nobel prize interview with Attwell: 'I do not treat the creation of fiction, that is to say the invention and development of fantasies, as a form of abstract thought. I don't wish to deny the uses of the intellect, but sometimes one has the intuition that the intellect by itself will lead one nowhere' ('An Exclusive Interview with J.M. Coetzee').

<sup>15</sup> As Coetzee outlines, in the third-person, in *Doubling the Point*: 'As far back as he can see he has been ill at ease with a language that lays down the law, that is not provisional, that does not as one of its habitual motions glance back skeptically at its premises' (394).

\*

The notion of life also allows us to witness a blurring of the strict division between an embodied literary writing and a disembodied philosophical one. The task of this thesis is thus to deploy life as a lens through which to witness both Beckett and Coetzee as theorists in their own right, attempting to answer, as John Bolin argues in *Beckett and the Modern Novel* (2013), the question ‘of how a particular literary *form* can address reality?’ (3). After all, as Beckett declared in an interview: ‘I wouldn’t have had any reason to write my novels if I could have expressed their subject in philosophical terms’ (qtd. in *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, 240). Coetzee similarly argues: ‘I tend to resist invitations to interpret my own fiction. If there were a better, clearer, shorter way of saying what the fiction says, then why not scrap the fiction?’ (‘An Exclusive Interview with J.M. Coetzee’). For both writers, then, there emerges a potential or capacity of literary language to produce a unique form of knowledge, and for Coetzee this possibility derives from his own relation to Beckett as both a source of creative inspiration and as a terminal limit.

This broaches my methodology, in which my approach to style and form cannot be divorced from my account of the affective as well as ethico-political effects of the works. This project follows from a critical presupposition that literary form is neither wholly reducible to historical contexts nor wholly irreducible, including the historico-biographical context of authorship. This presupposition is grounded in a reading of Coetzee’s and Beckett’s fiction and non-fiction and is especially derived from Coetzee’s writings on Beckett. Taking its lead from Coetzee, this study affirms the capacity of literature to potentiate change and produce political, ethical or philosophical effects; to illuminate the social terrain beyond itself but crucially without being reducible to it. Rather than reading for a certain concept of life, to be discovered as the latent or overarching meaning of Coetzee’s oeuvre, I posit life as the scene of encounter between word and world in the texts. Life is therefore central to how the works pose philosophical, ethical, and political questions *as* literature.

This follows Coetzee’s own early engagements with Beckett and the way they hinge on the distinctive status of the literary object, on a definition of style, and the specificity of literary writing. The challenge to logic, and the positivist modalities of interpretation and thought, that Coetzee identifies in Beckett are related directly to the question of life. Beckett’s works therefore don’t only provide a source of intellectual fascination for Coetzee – which arguably reaches a zenith with the question ‘What is missing from

Beckett's account of life?' – they are also central to how Coetzee's own works develop a literary thinking of life that in turn disavows rational or irrational models of mastery.

Life thus frames how the dynamic embeddedness of literary meaning (neither subordinate to history nor extractable) is generated in contrast to the static ways in which other discourses frame, control, and capture life. By privileging the performative or diegetic aspects of Coetzee's works – the *how* as opposed to *what* – I follow several other recent studies of Coetzee. Both Derek Attridge and Jarad Zimbler (albeit with varying focuses) seek a notion of 'style' that consists of more than an author's choice of linguistic and verbal arrangement, incorporating an understanding of the capacity of literary language to challenge received notions, or what Attridge in *The Work of Literature* refers to as: 'frameworks of knowledge, feeling, and behaviour' (219). As Zimbler argues in *J.M. Coetzee and the Politics of Style* (2014) during a discussion of the merits and flaws of reader-response theories: '[S]tyle is fundamentally important to the way a novel mediates and knows the world' (60). Privileging Coetzee's works as a kind of slow philosophising, Jan Wilm is another scholar wary of symptomatic readings and attentive instead to what might be termed the content of a work's style, rather than merely the philosophical import of a work's content (its themes and ideas).<sup>16</sup> Like Wilm, I emphasise how Coetzee's writings 'favor ambiguity in a program of opening up room for the reader's interpretations, ideas, thoughts, and reflections' (*The Slow Philosophy of J.M. Coetzee*, 18).<sup>17</sup> Wilm's phenomenologically inspired approach, which draws upon figures of 'estrangement' and 'defamiliarization' (13) that this study also considers as key, shares distinct features with Attridge's emphasise on the ethics of literary reading in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (2004). Like these works, then, this study similarly focuses not on how we might derive a propositional or philosophical knowledge from the texts, but rather how literature itself performs a mode of *thinking-through* of the social and living

---

<sup>16</sup> Anticipating a contemporary trend that seeks to move beyond symptomatic or theoretical criticism, as typified by Stephen Best's and Sharon Marcus's essay 'Surface Reading: An Introduction' (2009), Coetzee argues in *Doubling the Point* – and notably in relation to a key theme of this study, embodied life – such a form of criticism ineluctably risks flattening the ambiguity of a work by privileging its own positive presuppositions: '[I]n the act of triumphantly tearing the clothes off its subject and displaying the nakedness beneath – "Behold the truth!" – it exposes a naïveté of its own. For is the naked body really the truth?' (*Doubling*, 106).

<sup>17</sup> By privileging the 'subterranean operations of syntax, lexis, prosody and narrative structure' (6), Zimbler's account seeks to avoid the potential relativism of reader-response methods. While I similarly seek to avoid equating a work's meaning with a reader's response to that work, I nonetheless follow Wilm and Attridge more closely in order to expound the distinctiveness of Coetzee's and Beckett's works in the terms of the dynamic activities of writing and reading.

world. Style in the present study is consequently linked to a literary thinking that emerges precisely through the epistemological, social, and affective efficacy of literary forms.

Indeed, Coetzee's thesis on Beckett already anticipates a phenomenologically inspired approach to literary works by revealing the shortcomings of its own method of quantitative stylistics. In his conclusion Coetzee contrasts these two approaches: 'Should style be studied in its effects on the reader, and thus in its expressive aspect, or in its objectively verifiable formal properties?' (*The English Fiction*, 153). The concerns of Coetzee's thesis, which seeks to test long held assumptions regarding the nature of the relation between form and content, thereby foreshadow the later opposition between embodiment and disembodiment, as discussed in Chapter 1. Although this later terminology provides a more appropriate critical-metaphorical framework for conceiving the relation between life forms and literary forms, Coetzee's earliest engagements are nonetheless fundamental to conceiving of the dual epistemological and affective efficacy of the literary work. In such essays as 'Die Skrywer en die Teorie (The Writer and Theory)' (1980) and 'The Novel Today' (1988), and perhaps especially *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee expands on the processes of writing, reading, and interpretation with great attention to the nuances of critical and theoretical debates. As Attridge notes: 'Coetzee, in his interviews and non-fictional writings, presents one of the most compelling accounts of what it is to write literary works that I know' (*Work of Literature*, 86). What emerges from these interventions is a dynamic account of the work of art whereby the writer is also always the reader, both active and passive in the production of the work: 'Writing shows or creates (and we are not always sure we can tell one from the other) what our desire was, a moment ago' (*Doubling*, 18).

For Coetzee, this dynamic account of the processes that constitute the literary work functions in tandem with a troubling of conventional models of surface and depth criticism (indeed, this troubling is already in place in Coetzee's analysis of Beckett's *Watt* in the doctoral thesis). In their 2017, *Critique and Postcritique*, Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski situate this two-tier model in reference to a notion of critique that they regard as underpinning a putative orthodoxy of 'suspicion hermeneutics' (1) in literary and cultural studies. Anker and Felski are at the vanguard of a movement, partially associated with new formalism, that laments the role of the critic as one of 'demystifying, and defamiliarizing' (1), especially insofar as this sets up an opposition between the manifest or surface level of a text and a latent or deeper level of meaning (typically unbeknownst

to the author, the characters, and the casual reader).<sup>18</sup> A number of these debates cross-over with Coetzee's much earlier critical writings, especially in the 1980s, as he sought to negotiate the competing demands of theoretical and formalist procedures. In 'The Novel Today' this opposition is cast respectively in terms of 'supplementarity' or 'rivalry' (2-3) to history, to which Coetzee aligns himself with the position of rivalry against his contemporaries, notably the social realist praxis of Nadine Gordimer. These debates become paramount in his fiction and can be traced through Coetzee's complex negotiation with the legacy of the realist novel.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, they provide a vital background to the development of a literary thinking that refuses the reduction of the literary work to cultural text while nonetheless claiming – increasingly in the later works – a sense of truth apropos to the real or *living* world, the realm of ethics and politics.<sup>20</sup>

By seeking to forgo conventional notions of critique or criticism, however, contemporary trends, while having the salutary effect of highlighting the specifically literary aspects of works, necessarily risk sacrificing the possibility of any direct exchange between literature and the domains of ethics and politics. By attending to the surface, and thereby privileging the scene of a reader's affective or emotional response as well as matters of style and form, a phenomenologically inspired account of the work potentially undermines a work's status as both an event and an *act*. If emphasizing the *living* or dynamic texture of the work comes at the expense of historical or biographical context, Coetzee's literary thinking issues an embeddedness that re-inserts the authorial figure into the mix. Indeed, in *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face to Face with Time* (2015), David Attwell illustrates how, through a technique of 'autobiographical metafiction' (145), Coetzee implicates himself in the writing of his texts: 'Coetzee puts fiction between himself and history, between himself and mortality' (26).<sup>21</sup> This co-implication of event and act, however, involves

---

<sup>18</sup> For an account of new formalism see Marjorie Levinson's 'What is New Formalism'. Rather than a 'theory or method', Levinson stresses how new formalism constitutes a 'movement' (558) that is marked by a desire to either correct reductive historicist readings by returning to a consideration of form (in a theoretical sense) or to campaign for a disentanglement of literature from other discourses based on form understood in aesthetic terms (as 'disinterested, autotelic, playful, pleasureable, consensus-generating', 559).

<sup>19</sup> The notion of realism is a recurrent and key figure in the criticism of Coetzee's works, from both literary and philosophical perspectives. Stephen Mulhall's 2008 *The Wounded Animal: J.M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy*, extends a concern for the real beyond the conventions of genre criticism to consider how Coetzee's challenge to novelistic realism in fact incorporates a sustained engagement with questions of reality. I deploy a similar method in this study as I seek to move beyond the genre framework of the novel to address the specificity of Coetzee's literary thinking.

<sup>20</sup> As Zimmler argues of postcolonialism: 'If [postcolonial literary criticism] is to survive its own faddishness, it will need to address its failure to treat literary works as literary works' (202).

<sup>21</sup> In Attwell's seminal earlier 1993 study, *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, Coetzee's writing is described similarly as a 'situational metafiction' (3) whereby self-reflexivity is not taken to mean an evasion of history but rather an awareness of the constructedness of historical narratives of oppression.

more than merely seeking to ascertain life-work equivalences alongside an attuned response to a work's affective and epistemological effects.<sup>22</sup> Coetzee provides a hint as to how the author can remain implicated in a work beyond simply reading for biography in an interview when, in the response taken to the problem of his own colonial identity, Coetzee discusses how he has sought to 'live out' the question, '[and] when I say I have "lived out" the question I mean I have lived it out in day-to-day life but in my fiction as well' ('An Exclusive Interview with J.M. Coetzee'). Following Attridge, and the sense of a text's 'authoredness' (*Work of Literature*, 68), I take the co-implication of a work's being not only an event but also an act as integral to its capacity to intervene in the social and discursive realm of collective life.

Accordingly, I aim to circumvent the risk of equating a work's meaning with any reader's experience of it and, thereby, to recuperate a sense of a work's critical potential. As per Coetzee's account of the dynamic processes of writing and reading – described as 'a matter of awakening the countervoices in oneself' (*Doubling*, 65) – the literary work itself preserves the critical force of an act or intervention in the world of both ideas and things whilst simultaneously remaining irreducible to any grand narrative or overarching theory (ideology critique). It is also a sense of 'act' or acting that explains Coetzee's prioritisation of a work's truth; a 'higher' sense of truth than that of any reader's experience yet nonetheless tied to the experiential matrix of the work. Coetzee's commentary on life-writing, as well as the three fictionalised memoirs themselves (discussed in my final chapter), helps to elucidate this claim. Coetzee writes in *Doubling the Point* that: 'All autobiography is storytelling, all writing is autobiography' (*Doubling*, 391). Taking this chiasmatical formulation not as gospel but as an invitation to thought, we might suggest that if the dynamic field of language refuses to yield a neutral or disembodied perspective (that of the conventional writer of autobiography, writing from a position of mastery), from which the writing of a life can be conducted with reference to an external standard of truth, then a correlative *life of writing* is implied (as per the title of Attwell's 2015 study). Far from unshackling the work from its author, however, the seemingly impersonal and slippery embeddedness of language also attests to the ineluctability of the writer as a

---

<sup>22</sup> A guiding principle of this study is to insist on the difference between Coetzee the man and Coetzee the writer, the latter conceived as both a figure anterior to the work's existence but also only produced by the work. Coetzee himself makes this distinction regarding W.G. Sebald's novel *Austerlitz* in *The Good Story*: '[M]y guess is that psychoanalysis cannot (in the view of the writer) offer aid because psychoanalysis is ahistorical (I must add that I have no knowledge of what Sebald the man thought of psychoanalysis)' (188).



crucial context (but now simply as one context among many, rather than the sole context of meaning).

The presence of both the impersonal and personal (Coetzee uses the portmanteau term ‘*autre*-biography’ to name his practice of life-writing) is emblematic of the concern that marks the breadth of Coetzee’s career as a writer: the relation between the self and the world of experience as it is framed through writing. The memoirs thereby epitomise the inherent self-reflexivity of the wider oeuvre (whereby the fictional works exhibit a reflexive interest in their own constitution), that preserves the critical character of the work of art but, by situating the critical as fundamentally a form of *self*-criticism, refuses to trample over other aspects and contexts. This impulse captures the concern of the works in elaborating a provisional position; a thinking open to revision and amendment, to the living present of reading and writing, that is linked to the literary capacity to provide a voice of the mind.

A potential question that arises is to what extent is it possible to attribute life to writing, to the literary text itself? Although a work cannot be assigned an independent agency (a literary work does not think like a living being), this sense of life captures the capacity of the work to change over time, thereby relating questions of form to temporality (indeed, time already emerges as a key figure in Coetzee’s early writings on Beckett as they seek to overcome the synchronic propensity of structuralist approaches).<sup>23</sup> Coetzee further discusses the life of the literary work explicitly, and in non-metaphorical terms, in the essay ‘What is a Classic?’ (1993): ‘What does it mean in living terms to say that the classic is what survives? How does such a conception of the classic manifest itself in people’s lives?’ (*Stranger Shores*, 19). Coetzee provides a paradox as the answer, that if the classic ‘defines itself by surviving’, then, ‘the interrogation of the classic, no matter how hostile, is part of the history of the classic, inevitable and even to be welcomed’ (19). As such, ‘criticism may in that sense be one of the instruments of the cunning of history’ (19). Coetzee’s paradoxical economy, whereby the life of the work is sustained to the degree that it is threatened, poses time to history in a way that seeks undermine immanent notions of canonical or ideal literary value. As Coetzee suggests in *Giving Offense*: ‘the classic does not belong to an ideal order [...] On the contrary, the classic is the human; or,

---

<sup>23</sup> As Attridge argues, a work of art does not think, but rather involves ‘the view, reader, or auditor in a performance of knowing or thinking’ (*Work of Literature*, 255).

at least, it is what survives of the human' (162).<sup>24</sup> Neither immortal nor merely finite, the literary thinking of Coetzee's 'bio-logical literary experiment[s]' (*Slow Man*, 114), to borrow from Paul Rayment in *Slow Man*, yield truths about life (about what it means to live amongst others, and not only human others) that are themselves both situated yet in excess of any singular discourse or truth. As Wilm argues: 'The open-endedness of Coetzee's works gives them this distinct ontological potentiality' (*Slow Philosophy*, 182). By imploring us as readers to take an active role in deciphering a work's ambiguity and complexity, Coetzee's writings bespeak a living truth that is both fragile and contingent and thereby demands a constant vigilance.

So far it is clear that my approach downplays questions of genre, notably the novel form. I am nonetheless indebted to Patrick Hayes' monograph, *J.M. Coetzee and the Novel: Writing and Politics After Beckett* (2010), which is the only other primary book-length study to deal with the relation between Beckett and Coetzee. By focusing on the novel form Hayes opens a useful political context defined by the novel's 'anti-foundational' (9) capacity to critique a 'metacultural discourse [which] attempts to position literary value, or literary truth, or most generally "culture", as superior to, or even transcendent of, politics' (3). While I similarly seek to emphasise the political ramifications of Coetzee's work (indeed I deploy Hayes political framework in Chapter 4) I nevertheless share with Attridge a desire to fully explore the theoretical ground derived from the terms 'modernism' and 'literature', especially since the terms more readily open onto a conceptual field of temporality, difference, identity, and alterity, which, with Attridge, I argue is vital to conceiving of the full effects of each writer's literary output.

This project also shares with Carrol Clarkson's study, *J.M. Coetzee: Countervoices* (2009), a consideration of 'Coetzee more broadly as a *writer*, rather than exclusively as a novelist':

In his sustained attention to the problems of language across his novels and his critical essays [...] Coetzee makes an active and original contribution to contemporary literary-critical thinking; his novels do not simply serve as allegories of an extraneous and *given* theoretical or philosophical frame (3).

Indeed, Coetzee's critical writings are manifold and many. To date there are eight volumes of nonfiction: *White Writing*, 1988; *Doubling the Point*, 1992; *Giving Offense*, 1996; *Stranger Shores*, 2001; *Inner Workings*, 2007; *Here and Now*, 2013; *The Good Story*, 2015; *Late Essays*, 2017 (the last containing four pieces – including two new pieces – on Beckett, further

---

<sup>24</sup> JC in *Diary of a Bad Year* echoes Coetzee: 'The classic: the perduring!' (190).

confirming the enduring legacy of Beckett's influence). Coetzee's non-fiction deals with several diverse topics: translation, issues of syntax, tense and voice, censorship, colonial history, and the responsibilities of South African authors writing under apartheid. In another essay Clarkson comprehensively assesses this wealth of material and argues that throughout Coetzee's critical works there emerges an 'accreted conception of the term "writing"' ('Coetzee's Criticism', 224) that functions as the connection between a series of linguistic, political and ethical questions that are raised by both the fictional and non-fictional works. This critical work is hence not seen as a merely secondary or parasitical exercise compared to the task of writing fiction. Building on Clarkson's account of the 'dialogic' (*Countervoices*, 8) nature of Coetzee's oeuvre, and his efficacy as a creative critic, in this study I explore the critical power of the creative works. The authority of Coetzee's literary thinking is thus conceived as a commitment to uncovering truth whilst nonetheless refusing the position of authority or authoritative statement. This mirrors what Chris Danta terms 'the Janus face of literary authority' (*Strong Opinions*, xv); a doubledness that I argue locates the political in the ethical and vice versa.

\*

In the first chapter I trace the origins of Coetzee's literary thinking to the doctoral thesis on Beckett and the gestation of Coetzee's work as a critic in the contexts of structuralism and mathematics (contexts which appealed to the young Coetzee as a computer programmer). Rather than apply life to a reading of the works, or search for repressed symptoms of some underlying structure of life, I therefore start by reading Coetzee's non-fiction to substantiate how life is related to an emergent literary thinking. Ultimately, Coetzee's rejection of the 'general positivism' (*The English Fiction*, 17) of his adopted methodology in the thesis is seen to arise from the resistance of the 'anarchic life' (4) of language, in Beckett's novel *Watt* (1953), to a quantitative or even a summative approach to literary meaning. This leads to a nascent understanding of the temporal and dynamic constitution of literary works (to be later substantiated by the discourse of embeddedness) that anticipates the influence of Coetzee's later engagement with post-structuralism. The relation between form and content, key to Coetzee's discussion of style, thereby opens onto a wider philosophical terrain that structures Coetzee's inheritance of Beckett's modernism (I discuss in this chapter the two strands of modernism that bear on Coetzee's inheritance). This opposition is key to Coetzee's own immanent critique of realism in the early novels, which pivot on the question: to what extent does language obscure our access to reality or, conversely, constitute that very reality?

Although this project unfolds according to a relatively smooth chronological trajectory, in the second chapter I move beyond the framework of influence to a comparative exploration of the late modernist legacy of Beckett's linguistic scepticism in Coetzee's most philosophical work, *Elizabeth Costello* (2003). I trace an indebtedness therein to the notion of private languages and to an early twentieth century movement of language scepticism that informs both Beckett's and Coetzee's works (a key intertext being Hugo von Hofmannsthal's 1902 *The Letter of Lord Chandos*). I then explore Beckett's notion of the unword in relation to an aesthetics of inhuman life. In this chapter I reverse the angle of approach: if the anarchic life of language informs how Beckett's works evaded systematic or rational meaning in the thesis, here I explore how Beckett provides a language of life, specifically inhuman life, that structures a sensory aesthetics of negation that Coetzee later adopts and adapts. Beckett's anti-vitalism, I argue, is key to the development of Coetzee's own later literary thinking of life in opposition to an affectless reasoning perceived to be complicit with forms of political violence, as thematised in Coetzee's first novel, *Dusklands* (1974).

In my third chapter I further substantiate how the critique of language, that underpins Beckett's challenge to both anthropocentrism and the mimetic premise of Western art, is transformed in Coetzee's works to interrogate conditions of historical representation (namely, narrative storytelling). I trace below how Beckett's notion of nothingness is transmuted in Coetzee's early fictions, namely *In the Heart of the Country*, *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life & Times of Michael K*, through a sense of inscrutable otherness. I explore here how a thinking of embeddedness, in terms of both life form and literary form, that will reach a zenith in later works (notably *Elizabeth Costello*), emerges from Coetzee's account of a politics of the non-position, as outlined in the essay on Erasmus in *Giving Offense*. The archive helps elucidate Coetzee's debt to deconstruction and an influence that, if traced attentively through the works, reveals how the non-position of the writing requires that we do more than oppose the prerational (in terms of affective or bodily experience) to the rational, but rather excavate how the rational is itself dogged by a fundamental madness or strain of irrationality. This I derive in part from Coetzee's discussion of the judicial discourse of rights in his later non-fiction. Although these works are undoubtedly engaged in critiquing the rational foundations of sovereign violence and biopower (including ethico-political issues such as torture, imperialism, and sovereign or state-sanctioned violence), they nonetheless refuse any clear viewpoint or position outside or beyond the realm of complicity; that is, any position not itself embedded. Coetzee's

writing of the non-position in the late 1970s and 1980s is thus more closely aligned with a conception of negative freedom often attributed to Beckett which, I argue, troubles a tendency in the criticism to subordinate politics to ethics, the latter especially configured around a notion of alterity (this is particularly the case in the Levinasian criticism of Mike Marais).

Despite marked stylistic differences between both authors – observed increasingly across the first three chapters – Coetzee’s accounts of embeddedness and positionality reveals an underlying affinity with Beckett: both writers subject constructions of value to an ineluctable contingency that proliferates rather than nullifies differences. In my fourth chapter I explore the construction of life in *Elizabeth Costello* – Coetzee’s most notoriously philosophical novel, comprised of ‘Lessons’ rather than chapters – and show how the notion of embodiment therein is constantly checked by a structural logic of embeddedness that continues to resist both political *and* ethical discourses of mastery. Costello’s overt critique of instrumental rationality or binary thinking, however, does not therefore constitute a flight into a mode of embodied or vitalist life outside the domain of history. Instead, a Beckettian indeterminacy, that situates death at the heart of life, difference at the heart of identity, emerges through a logic of embeddedness that ties life to a modality of literary thinking. This indeterminacy or embeddedness is just as palpable in the earlier *Disgrace* (1999). The presentation of animal life in Coetzee’s account of post-apartheid South Africa, which is intrinsically linked to the romantic and religious themes of the novel, is therefore not seen as a triumph of ethics over politics. Rather, any such construal of life as a determinate value (as sacred) is seen as both ineluctably linked to the possibility of sacrifice that underwrites political theology and complicit with what Coetzee’s Elizabeth Costello terms the tautology of reason (‘Of course reason will validate reason as the first principle of the universe – what else should it do?’, *Elizabeth Costello*, 70).

In my fifth and final chapter I further relate how life, configured as a question of form as subject to time and death as much as different orders of being, is related to a literary thinking as Coetzee’s metafictional later works stage and undermine their own authority (focusing on the life-writing trilogy, *Scenes from Provincial Life*, and the exploration of the writer’s life conducted in *Age of Iron*, *Master of Petersburg* and the so-called Australian fictions, including *Slow Man* and *Diary of a Bad Year* – both published after Coetzee emigrated to Australia in 2002). I start by tracing the philosophical turn marked by the 1985 confession essay and follow how Beckett’s inheritance, which is more overtly

present in the earlier works, is transmuted through Coetzee's later writings, focusing on the relation between literary authority and secular confession. The death of the author in *Summertime*, Coetzee's third fictionalised memoir written from the perspective of the dead John Coetzee's biographer, is seen to lead directly into the most recent Jesus fictions, *The Childhood of Jesus* (2012) and *Schooldays of Jesus* (2016). The non-position of these later works is marked in terms of their peculiarly (non)allegorical status, staged through a consideration of life that rests uneasily between the sacred and profane, the infinite and the finite. The Jesus fictions also return to the philosophical contexts that animated Coetzee's earlier writings (questions of justice, truth, mathematical idealism, and the link between life and the notion of private languages), and the politics of sacrifice that structures *Disgrace*.

In my conclusion, through a discussion of the concepts of censorship and democracy, I expand on how, by implicating the reader and emphasising the affective-temporal dimension of our experience of the works, Coetzee's works situate life at the border between ethics and politics. It is worthwhile, however, to briefly expand on my privileging of politics in the title to this study. Both Coetzee's non-fiction and literary writings display an almost paranoiac reticence towards politics, specifically conceived as the obligation to take a position and thereby linked to a conflictual understanding of the term. Indeed, the works can be read together as an attempt to circumvent the issue outlined by Coetzee's orthonym, JC, in *Diary of a Bad Year*: 'Why is it so hard to say anything about politics from outside politics?' (9). Of course, adopting a non-position, the position of the Beckettian outsider, is itself a political gesture (this is famously Theodor Adorno's reading of Beckett in 'Trying to Understand Endgame'). Coetzee's works, as they seek to juxtapose life (affective and somatic modalities of being as well as life itself as an indeterminate field of value) to the impersonal, sacrificial and abstract forces of political power, provide an answer to JC's quandary; they provide a means of talking about politics that remains irreducible to the political. Against the logic of position-taking and the assertion of dogmatic truths, Coetzee's works suggest an equality of suffering rather an equality of intelligence as a way of reconfiguring the possibility of community: 'Whatever else, the body is not "that which is not", and the proof that it *is* the pain it feels. The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt' (*Doubling*, 248). As I've indicated above, Coetzee's standard of the suffering body is not simply an ethical or moral truth that would privilege the works as a form of discursive or theoretical argument. Rather, life is immanent to how the writing evades the totalizing discourses of either ethics or

politics and thereby indicates how the ethico-political import of the works is tied to their status as literary objects. The suffering body as ineluctable standard thus resembles the negative freedom that characterises Beckett's oeuvre; a freedom that is never articulated as such but nonetheless demarcates the absence of certain conditions of unfreedom (which include fixed meanings or sovereign truths).

A key influence behind this study is Attridge's account of the literary work. However, by situating life in a way that attests to the ambiguity (a concept I take from Blanchot's writings) of literary meaning, I aim to challenge Attridge's privileging of ethics over politics. Attridge's approach, which builds upon the post-structuralist philosophies of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, is centred on the observation that the literary work bears within it an ontological question: what is the being of a work of literature? By thus situating uncertainty and alterity at the heart of our experience of literature, both as an object and as an event of reading, Attridge argues for the ethical nature of a work's unpredictability, inventiveness, and fundamental *otherness* to received discourses of knowledge. Drawing upon Coetzee's relation to Beckett, I conversely argue that the otherness of Coetzee's literary thinking – in both its dimensions as an event of reading and act of writing – cannot be determined as principally ethical without sacrificing the very ambiguity, indeterminacy, or openness to otherness that supposedly grounds the ethical move. Rather, life attests not to an ethical field of value in itself but to the ineluctability of an embeddedness that both situates the self and other in a finite, contingent and living present, as that which makes possible the ethical relation but makes this present simultaneously *infinite* or intractable, thereby withdrawing the possibility of any ultimate ethical modality or decision that would foreclose it. Insofar as this embeddedness is staged in our reading, as the inability to close or finalise the meaning of the works, the vigilance of a perpetual negotiation with otherness in the present corresponds to a mutual entanglement of ethics and politics. As Adorno argues of Kafka: 'As long as the word has not been found, the reader must be held accountable' ('Notes on Kafka', 246).

## 1: The 'Anarchic Life' of Writing: *The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett*

‘A writer, not a thinker. Writers and thinkers: chalk and cheese. No, not chalk and cheese: fish and fowl. But which is she, the fish or the fowl? Which is her medium: water or air?’ — J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 10.

Coetzee’s privileging of Beckett’s pre-1952 works situates *The Unnamable* as a limit text, as Coetzee argues in *Doubling the Point*: ‘Beckett’s first after-death book was *The Unnamable*. But the after-death voice there still has a body, and in that sense was only halfway’ (23). In the 2006 Grove essay the novel is contrasted to the ‘increasingly mechanical stripping process’ undertaken in the later fictions: ‘By the eleventh text [of the *Texts for Nothing*], that quest for finality – hopeless, as we know and Beckett knows – is in the process of being absorbed into a kind of verbal music, and the fierce comic anguish that accompanied it is in the process of being aestheticized too’ (*Inner Workings*, 170). As Coetzee argues in another earlier essay on Beckett’s *Lessness* from 1973, the lifelessness of Beckett’s later works spring from a privileging of form as an all-eclipsing totality which, rather than fleshing out the body of the work, instead becomes its own content. Accordingly, texts like *Lessness* and *Ping* represent a ‘killing of time’ (‘Samuel Beckett’s *Lessness*’, 198), a key trope and concept in the earlier doctoral thesis. This lifeless body is then animated artificially by a ‘stylisation of autodestruction’ (*Doubling*, 45). This is represented in *Ping* by what Coetzee describes as a ‘tomb-like, womb-like structure where the light waxes and wanes inexplicably and an unspecified event, “ping,” occurs regularly’ (‘Samuel Beckett’s *Lessness*’, 195).<sup>1</sup> On first consideration, then, Coetzee’s later commentaries do not portend much promise regarding the significance of Beckett’s influence in his own writing. Before discussing the thesis at length in part one of this chapter, however, I show how the central concerns and concepts of Coetzee’s engagement with Beckett nonetheless frame the emergence of a literary thinking that can be traced through to the most recent works.

Beckett’s non-realist post-1952 works are characterised, in *Doubling the Point*, as a form ‘anti-illusionism’ (27), a designation that betrays an ambivalence with regard to Coetzee’s

---

<sup>1</sup> Alongside the unpublished doctoral thesis of 1969, ‘The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett: An Essay in Stylistic Analysis’, Coetzee published ‘The Comedy of Point of View in Beckett’s *Murphy*’ (1970), in *Critique*, 12.2; ‘The Manuscript Revisions of Beckett’s *Watt*’ (1972), in *Journal of Modern Literature*, 2.4; ‘Samuel Beckett and the Temptations of Style’ (1973), in *Theoria*, 41; and ‘Samuel Beckett’s *Lessness*: An Exercise in Decomposition’ (1973), in *Computer and the Humanities*, 7.4. Apart from the piece on *Lessness*, the others were republished in *Doubling the Point* (1993).



apprehension of the categories of realism, modernism, and postmodernism.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in *Doubling the Point*, as the status and question of modernism is broached by the archivist-historicist impulse of the collaborative project (with David Attwell), Coetzee's use of an alternative dichotomy illusionism/anti-illusionism (rather than realism/modernism) tacitly highlights the manner by which contemporary literary studies tends to displace the stylistic questions of Coetzee's thesis through terms of literary history and generic categorisation.<sup>3</sup> The argument that follows in later chapters builds on this insight and discusses the way in which Coetzee's own anti-realism, indebted to a sustained reading of Beckett, transcends mere generic or historical questions of definition.

If novelistic realism is nothing but a shallow propagation of illusion, however, then Beckett's 'anti-illusionism', which privileges 'language as a self-enclosed game' (*Doubling*, 393), is not heralded as the solution. Coetzee sees anti-illusionism more widely as a fleeting postmodern moment defined by an increase of formal reflexivity and self-consciousness ('displaying the tricks you are using instead of hiding them' [*Doubling*, 27]). The naive idealism of illusionism is thus juxtaposed to the sceptical mode of an anti-illusionism which also risks, by enclosing itself off from the world, the naivety of a self-sufficient mode of existence. This philosophical pairing, of idealism and scepticism, not only informs Coetzee's 1969 doctoral thesis but can be seen to ramify across Coetzee's later writings as demonstrative of the way in which the early engagement with Beckett continues to structure Coetzee's writings. This includes the philosophical turn of the 1985 confession essay. Coetzee's own terms, therefore, appositely highlight what is at stake in a literary engagement with lived reality. That is to say, by drawing on the notion of illusion Coetzee makes explicit the relation of literature, and of a literary way of thinking, not only to questions of aesthetic experience but to the fundamental question of truth itself.<sup>4</sup>

Such a relation is integral to the earlier doctoral thesis as Coetzee's focus on specific stylistic questions cannot be separated, so he argues, from 'a theoretical question of great generality: in what sense can we speak of language imitating or mirroring thought?' (*The*

---

<sup>2</sup> Coetzee also addresses this in the interview with Begam: 'I should add [...] that Stanley Rosen makes a good case for regarding a division between modernism and postmodernism as mistaken' ('An Interview with J.M. Coetzee', 427).

<sup>3</sup> Coetzee states: 'Illusionism is, of course, a word I use for what is usually called realism' (*Doubling*, 27). An embryonic account of this connection between realism and illusionism is established in the 1972 essay entitled 'The Manuscript Revisions of Beckett's *Wait!*': 'This flippant treatment of narrative decorum reminds one of *Murphy* [...] It may be that this flippancy stands for a rejection of the illusionism of the realistic novel' (*Doubling*, 42).

<sup>4</sup> Questions of truth and illusion in literature are often related by Coetzee to Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, a key intertext in the two recent Jesus fictions.

*English Fiction*, 36). The possibility of a relation between language and thought provides a focus of a number of later works and is pushed to an extreme through Coetzee's thematization of the Wittgensteinian notion of private languages (whereby language loses its communicative function and becomes radically separated from reality).<sup>5</sup> Coetzee's emphasis on language and thought, and on writing as a form of thinking or truth-seeking, further manifests wherever he chooses to distance himself from the novel form. This distancing is evidenced in a recent endorsement of David Shields's 2010 anti-novelistic polemic *Reality Hunger*. Coetzee writes: 'I, too, am sick of the well-made novel with its plot and its characters and its settings. I, too, am drawn to literature as (as Shields puts it) "a form of thinking, consciousness, wisdom-seeking". I, too, like novels that don't look like novels' (qtd. in Zadie Smith, 'An Essay is an act of imagination. It still takes quite as much art as fiction', 2). Coetzee here seems to share with Beckett an 'attitude of reserve' towards the novel, as conveyed in a discussion of Beckett's *Murphy*: 'The play on conventions of point of view that we find in *Murphy* and to a lesser extent in *Watt* is the residue of an attitude of reserve toward the Novel, a reluctance to take its prescriptions seriously' (*Doubling*, 37). Similarly, in 'The Writer and Theory' (1980) Coetzee states: 'die beste kritiek vir my meer inhou as die letterkunde. Dit is miskien 'n skande, maar ek lees liewer Girard oor Sofokles of Barthes oor Balzac as romans [I must now admit that to my mind the best criticism contains more than literature does. It may be a disgrace, but I prefer reading Girard on Sophocles or Barthes on Balzac to novels]' (160).<sup>6</sup>

These statements on the novel are intractably entangled with a shift in the later critical writings away from the rigidity of structuralist linguistics of the 1960s to what Attwell terms a more 'fluid, protean, open-ended version of textuality' (*Doubling*, 143). This is exemplified by 'The Novel Today' (1988) where Coetzee argues that 'Storytelling is another [...] mode of thinking' (4). Coetzee's investigation of the relation between language and thought in the thesis is inseparable not only from Coetzee's later development as a critic, however, but also as a writer of creative works. Seeking to do justice to both Coetzee's writings and to the distinctiveness of the literary works, in the

---

<sup>5</sup> Although Wittgenstein does not feature in Coetzee's doctoral thesis on *Watt*, an earlier postgraduate essay from 1966, entitled 'Wit in Samuel Beckett's *Watt*' indicates Coetzee's familiarity with this context. Coetzee therein writes of conventional readings of Beckett's novel that draw upon modes of 'parody, irony, etc., or that Beckett wrote *Watt* with Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* in his left hand' (HRC, MS Coetzee Papers, Box 117, Folder 7). Wittgenstein writes expansively of the notion of private languages in the later *Philosophical Investigations* (1953).

<sup>6</sup> Coetzee expresses a similar disaffection with the form in a letter to Auster: 'I don't get much pleasure out of consuming novels; and – more important – I think that indifference to reading as a recreation is spreading in society' (*Here and Now*, 165).

following chapters I explore the resonance of Coetzee's critical engagements in the fictions not in symptomatic terms (i.e. diagnosing corresponding themes across the fiction and non-fiction) but as a framework to witness how the novels achieve another 'mode of thinking'.

This other mode of thinking thus stems from a tension which can be first traced to Coetzee's doctoral thesis: a tension between a model of writing that refutes novelistic realism whilst simultaneously steering clear of the Beckettian impasse of stylised 'autodestruction'. Therein Coetzee can be seen as moving away from a totalising or anti-illusionist account of form, at the expense of content, while nonetheless posing philosophical concerns that refuse to settle or fix the relation in conventional literary-critical terms of genre. Hence, in the later 'The Novel Today' Coetzee writes: 'a story is not a message with a covering, a rhetorical or aesthetic covering. It is not a message plus a residue [...] There is no addition in stories. They are not made up of one thing plus another thing, message plus vehicle' (4). Coetzee's privileging of the literary work's independence from the field of lived historical and social reality belies a sympathy for the modernist avant-garde, epitomised by Beckett, but also complicates the account of how such a conception of the literary work's autonomy can engage with, or *think*, historical, political and ethical questions of life.

The solution to this impasse – an incompatibility, to use Coetzee's terms, between rivalry and supplementarity, an artwork's autonomy versus its social existence – comes into view through Coetzee's handling of the pairing of form and content in the doctoral thesis. Indeed, the thesis enables us to reconfigure and even challenge Coetzee's later commentaries on Beckett. Opposed to Beckett's perceived solipsism Coetzee's later writings construe a poetics of embodiment whose principal standard bearer in the oeuvre is the character and authorial avatar, Elizabeth Costello.<sup>7</sup> However, this later opposition between embodiment and disembodiment does not merely supplement the earlier pairing of form and content but rather, to follow the logic of the earlier thesis itself, falls under the domain of content. On the one hand, when Coetzee wishes to distance himself from Beckett in later works, a metonymic slip occurs as Coetzee transposes the thematic

---

<sup>7</sup> Coetzee's charge against Beckett's disembodied formalism generates a powerful descriptive passage in the Grove essay. The Beckettian world is one of: '[C]onfined spaces or else bleak wastes, inhabited by asocial and indeed misanthropic monologuers helpless to terminate their monologue, tramps with failing bodies and never-sleeping minds condemned to a purgatorial treadmill on which they rehearse again and again the great themes of Western philosophy' (*Inner Workings*, 169).

elements of the works (Beckett's dualism) onto a description of their formal characteristics. Form thereby becomes a lifeless extension of the content. On the other hand, however, when Coetzee appeals to Beckett approvingly as both as a stylistic model and intellectual forebear, form is privileged as separate from content, as separate from its role as transmitter of the central themes or ideas of a work. Through Coetzee's critical writings, therefore, it is possible to isolate a model of writing, enacted by the later fictions themselves, that is irreducible to a mere idea or content yet neither wholly abstract and detached from the world. This model, more indebted to Beckett than some later writings seem willing to suggest, accords with a notion of form as itself capable of a certain agency or literary thinking; that is, of impacting upon the world as literature and not as propositional discourse.

**i. *The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett: An Essay in Stylistic Analysis***

In order to account for this complex relation between form and content it is worth turning to the doctoral thesis on Beckett's *Watt*, and to the contexts of linguistic relativity and stylostistics that inform Coetzee's approach.<sup>8</sup> Coetzee didn't know prior to his arrival in Texas that the university housed the manuscript materials of *Watt* (at the Humanities Research Center). This propitious discovery led to subsequent weeks spent analysing the six notebooks: 'It was heartening to see from what unpromising beginnings a book could grow: to see the false starts, the scratched out banalities, the evidences of less than furious possession by the Muse' (*Doubling*, 25). The congruence of *Watt* and stylostistics – a quantitative branch of linguistic study – seems to be derived from inherent foregrounding of linguistic material in the novel: 'the language of the work has been pushed into the foreground and the action into the background' (*The English Fiction*, 30). As Coetzee later recalls: 'Beckett's prose, which is highly rhetorical in its own way, lent itself to formal analysis' (*Doubling*, 23). Ultimately, however, Coetzee argues that the 'general positivism' (17) of his adopted method of quantitative stylistics fails to account for the 'rhythm of doubt' (*The English Fiction*, 95) that comprises the formal operation of Beckett's *Watt*. A fundamental presupposition of this structuralist-inspired approach to the literary work is that the meaning of a text can be isolated, defined, and quantified. In other words, that the formal distinctiveness of a work of literature can be categorically

---

<sup>8</sup> The question of 'language imitating or mirroring thought' situates Coetzee's 1969 doctoral thesis in the wider context of linguistic relativism (associated with the Sapir-Whorf thesis and critics like Richard Ohmann, a key figure in Coetzee's later linguistic essays). Pushed to its extreme, the relativity thesis results in a form of linguistic idealism, a notion glossed by Coetzee in *Doubling the Point* – as 'the view that reality and history are purely constructs of language' (145) – and thematised by Beckett in *Watt*.

separated from whatever non-literary ideas or themes constitute the content of a work. For Coetzee, however, insofar as *Watt* refuses definitive meaning, at the level of both form and content, the impossibility of isolating content from form (following a conventional historical or allegorical reading) mirrors the impossibility of isolating form from content (as a series of quantifiable literary operations).

It is possible to trace Coetzee's repudiation of his structuralist and mathematical leanings by reading two writing projects that book-end the thesis (published respectively in 1969 and 1971) on the work of the renowned stylostatistician Wilhelm Fucks.<sup>9</sup> Stylostatistics can be understood, as Peter Johnston defines it, 'as a branch of stylistics concerned with those features of a text's style that can be subjected to numerical analysis' (J.M. Coetzee's *Work in Stylostatistics*). By the time of the later 1971 book review, of Fucks' *Nach allen Regeln der Kunst*, Coetzee's oppositional stance to stylostatistics is even further entrenched: following the thesis, no longer was the possibility of codifying the qualitative aspects of a literary work in quantitative terms seen as desirable. Writing on Fucks, Coetzee remarks: 'He has a distaste for the "swarms of associations and emotions" that accompany reading and for the "whole layers of primitive taboos and antiquated mythology" concealed in natural languages; these, it would seem, as not open to objective analysis' (94).

In the doctoral thesis, however, Coetzee attempts precisely such an objective analysis via stylistic measures of sentence length, noun usage, and rare vocabulary – principally lexical features – which are plotted using numerous tables and charts which follow the logic of *Watt*'s rhythmic thinking. Coetzee establishes two antithetic positions early on: Beckett's and that of the theorist Bernard Bloch, a key figure in the development of American structuralist linguistics pioneered by Leonard Bloomfield.<sup>10</sup> To Bloch, style is defined as the statistical distribution of syntactic and lexical variables across a work or body of work, by an author, thus predicated on 'the idea of a text as a collection of sets of linguistic features (phonemes, morphemes, words, etc.) which can be treated like members of statistical populations' (*The English Fiction*, 2). Underlying Bloch's synchronic approach is the capacity to reduce 'a word [...] to a dimensionless and immaterial point' (3) for the

---

<sup>9</sup> They are, 'Statistical Indices of "Difficulty"', in *Language and Style*, 2. 3 (1969), and 'Review of Wilhelm Fucks, *Nach allen Regeln der Kunst*', in *Style*, 5. 1 (1971).

<sup>10</sup> Coetzee's doctoral research in Texas coincided, as Attwell explicates in *Doubling the Point*, 'quite dramatically it seems, with the emergent moment of linguistics in the West, both as method and as a model for the analysis of culture', where the power in American linguistics was 'shifting from the American structuralism associated with Leonard Bloomfield to generative-transformational grammar' (23), the latter associated with Noam Chomsky. As Coetzee adds: 'It makes a great deal of sense to assimilate Chomskyan linguistics to structuralism [...] if only because of the similar weight the two enterprises give to innate structures' (24).

purposes of analytical study.<sup>11</sup> Most importantly, however, is that the above ‘expresses in a succinct and extreme form the idea of style as deviation from a norm’ (154). For Beckett, however, style is a matter of a particular form matching a particular content, and arises as a problem when ‘a certain kind of form, associated with the English language, is no longer adequate to express a certain kind of content’ (3).<sup>12</sup> This perceived ‘crisis in the relation of form and content’ (3) hence manifests a desire, as Beckett puts it in the 1937 German letter, to escape, the Flaubertian *mot juste*, the ‘terrible arbitrary materiality of the word surface’ (*Letters of Beckett*, 518).<sup>13</sup> Coetzee broaches this at the start of the thesis through an account of Beckett’s post-war switch to French as a desire to write ‘*sans style*’ (2).<sup>14</sup> To write without style, Coetzee hypothesises, is therefore paradoxically to attempt to regain control of one’s expression and limit the autonomous ‘anarchic life’ (4) of language.

Coetzee’s seemingly innocent use of a metaphoric of life in fact surreptitiously inaugurates in the opening pages of the thesis that which by the end of the study will constitute the failure of quantitative stylistic analysis to synchronise with literary meaning. That is, the problem of metaphor itself, specifically the ‘metaphor of linearity, a conception of language as a one-dimensional stream extending in time’ (*The English Fiction*, 160) and of ‘the mind as a computer with an input system which reads linear strips of coded information’ (160), both of which doggedly mark the positivist approach of stylostatistics.

The thesis goes on to explore *Watt*’s incapacity to avoid the ‘connotative freight’ (‘Statistical Indices of “Difficulty”’, 226), as Coetzee phrases it in his first ‘Fuck’s’ piece, of its own medium, yet Coetzee repeatedly relies on an oppositional metaphor of life to do so. By seeking to account for the unaccountable, Coetzee’s thesis is thereby inscribed by an inherent and self-conscious tension. On the one hand, Coetzee seeks to disprove the notion that the stylistic qualities of a work are only accessible via metaphor or allegory.

---

<sup>11</sup> Coetzee is critical of Bloch’s quantitative stylistic methodology, and its underlying positivism. Bloch’s ‘ideology’ prevents the critic from ‘explaining stylistic features in the light of an overall conception of the work’ (6-7). This linear hierarchy of form (an ‘aggregate of linguistic elements’, 6) that precedes meaning ignores the mutually constitutive nature of form and content which Coetzee senses in Beckett’s antithetical understanding of style.

<sup>12</sup> Coetzee speculates as to the cause of Beckett’s transition as derived from a distaste for English’s ‘grammatical laxity and sensory evocativeness’ (*The English Fiction*, 7).

<sup>13</sup> In his Master’s thesis Coetzee associates this aesthetics with Ford Madox Ford. Beckett’s subversion and resistance to statistical analysis in the doctoral study can be interestingly contrasted, in retrospect, with Ford, who Coetzee cites as ‘probably the finest example of literary pure mathematics in English’ (HRC, MS Coetzee Papers, Box 112, Folder 2, x).

<sup>14</sup> Although the earlier thesis privileges Beckett’s English fiction, in the later Grove essay Coetzee subtly revises his position and argues: ‘it can be fairly said that Beckett did not find himself as a writer until he switched to French and, in particular, until the years 1947-51’ (*Inner Workings*, 169).

Indeed, ‘the question of metaphorical description’ is associated with New Criticism or ‘Scrutiny criticism’ (‘Statistical Indices of “Difficulty”’, 226) and explicitly with the work of critics such as Hugh Kenner and Ruby Cohn, who write from a ‘tradition of literary criticism [...] in which insight into the nature of a style is a partly intuitive act’ (*The English Fiction*, 10).<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, Coetzee’s own use of metaphoric description (‘anarchic life’) echoes the intuitive leap of earlier critical orthodoxies, as he notes: ‘Writers on *Watt* have resorted to a number of curious metaphors to describe its style: the compulsive evacuation of reason, the graph of a half-absent mind, counting, the turning out of the coins of logic from a die’ (78). That critics should have produced metaphoric figures both dissimilar yet fundamentally alike seems plausible, for Coetzee, only if there is ‘some incessant, half sleeping, computational quality to *Watt* accessible only to metaphor’ (78). In other words, what makes ‘*Watt* *Watt*-like’ (77) may be unquantifiable. Life emerges again as Coetzee asserts ‘a single principle, a central nervous flexion which causes the tics we see on the verbal surface’ (78), and comments that the eponymous protagonist, Watt, is ‘like Leibniz’s automaton with a spark of life’, and ‘standing Bergson on his head, Watt is something living encrusted on the mechanical’ (32).

The characterisation of *Watt* as amongst Beckett’s most mathematical novels accords with an existing consensus (echoing Kenner), yet this conception of the Watt’s condition bears noting as illustrative of the philosophical stakes Coetzee teases out of the positivist methodologies ultimately jettisoned in his thesis. Coetzee considers it ‘characteristic of Watt that he believes that an empirical question can be solved by logical analysis’ (81):

No empirical data are introduced into his chains of speculation. The multiplication of these chains depends on a manoeuvre in four stages: statement of a question, proposal of a hypothesis, breakdown of the hypothesis into components, and analysis of the implications of the hypothesis and its components. [...] The third stage typically breaks the chain into two or more branches. The only qualification Watt demands of a hypothesis is that it answer the question: his criterion is one of logic rather than of simplicity (81).

Coetzee is here specifically addressing an episode near the middle of the novel where Watt ponders the meaning of Erskine continually running up and down the stairs all day in Mr. Knott’s house:

---

<sup>15</sup> Coetzee illustrates this with recourse to Hugh Kenner’s work: ‘Thus, for example, of the “unique translucent enumerating style” of *Watt* he writes: “It is an austere prose, not narcissistic, nor baroque. It is not opulent. It moves with the great aim of some computation, doing a thousand things but only necessary ones”’ (*The English Fiction*, 9-10).

Or perhaps Erskine, finding the first floor trying, is obliged to run upstairs every now and then for a breath of the second floor [...] just as in certain waters certain fish, in order to support the middle depths, are forced to rise and fall, now to the surface of the waves and now to the ocean bed. But do such fish exist? Yes, such fish exist, now (*Watt*, 102).

Coetzee extended analysis concludes: ‘Watt’s original question, Why does Erskine run up and down stairs?, grows six branches [and] terminates in the solipsism that is one of Watt’s answers to the infinities of logic: fish that need to rise and fall exist because my naming of them calls them into existence’ (81). The abrupt end to the impending infinite series arises from ‘the logical comedy’ of the novel: that is, a ‘bland disregard’ (81) of the criterion of simplicity. Watt’s consciousness represents the self-enclosed logical systems of mathematics, yet exposure to a sensory world beyond this system ushers in experiential data that evade capture. Coetzee recounts the consequences of this self-referring circuitry:

The attempt to apply logic to the absurd dispensation governing Knott’s establishment, to discover the causes behind effects, leads to infinite causal regression. The attempt to understand the nature of the simplest sensory perceptions leads to infinite sequences of nested hypotheses. The attempt to describe the simplest phenomenon leads to a description of the whole universe (35).

The intrusion of external stimuli announces the start of the computational process, yet the axiomatic logical model of Watt’s nominalist consciousness (he is unable to separate abstract objects from real phenomena) is not predicated on experience and is therefore not able to make qualitative value distinctions beyond the meanings already embedded in its logical categories.<sup>16</sup>

This is paralleled by Watt’s need for ‘semantic succour’ (68), as exemplified by the famous pot episode:

Watt was greatly troubled by this tiny little thing, more troubled perhaps than he had ever been by anything [...] by this imperceptible, no, hardly imperceptible, since he perceived it, by this indefinable thing that prevented him from saying, with conviction, and to his relief, of the object that was so like a pot, that it was a pot (68).

As Coetzee argues in an unpublished 1966 graduate essay, ‘Wit in Samuel Beckett’s *Watt*’: ‘The world of things and the world of language are systems closed to each other. It is presumably this dichotomy that lands Watt in the asylum’ (HRC, MS Coetzee Papers, Box 117, Folder 7). Indeed, Watt’s mental processes further resemble Coetzee’s account,

---

<sup>16</sup> As Peter Johnston argues: ‘Watt’s consciousness [is thereby] analogous to the type of deterministic formal axiomatic system of which the modern computer is perhaps the most familiar model’ (J.M. Coetzee’s Work in Stylostatistics).



in ‘Surreal Metaphors and Random Processes’ (1979), of a possible computer poetry based on a grammatically programmed ‘master routine’. However, as Coetzee argues: ‘The crucial difference between this master routine and a human being is that the master routine has no interface with the world’ (24). This missing ‘interface’, an empirical or causal ground in Watt’s thinking, similarly afflicts the inhuman or divine-like David in Coetzee’s *The Childhood of Jesus*; not checked by what Baylee Brits terms the ‘necessity of natural law’ (Brits, 137), the young David cannot understand the principle of sequence and thereby the abstract processes of addition and subtraction. Instead, for David, numbers are real: ‘A number can fall out of the sky like Don Quixote when he fell down the crack’ (178). For Coetzee, importantly, Watt’s tautologous reasoning mirrors the dilemma of transposing numerical values into natural-language statements, a process necessary to stylostistics in the transposition from the neutral categorical definitions of mathematics to statements of literary meaning.<sup>17</sup>

The metaphor of life, in Coetzee’s analysis of *Watt*, that seems to evade critical capture or inscription, resonates in the light of Coetzee’s later critical commentaries on Beckett. Life in these later commentaries frames the inauguration of an aesthetics of disembodiment and automatic negation, seen as ‘utterly appropriate for an artist to whom defeat constitutes a universe that he should march with eyes open into the prison of empty style’ (*Doubling*, 49). We can thus relate Coetzee’s rendering of the crisis of form and content in relation to the framing of realism as illusionism. To write without style in the pursuit of a ‘Literatur des Unworts [literature of the unword]’ (*The Letters of Samuel Beckett: Volume 1, 1929-1940*, 515; my translation), thus abandoning the Joycean legacy of the ‘apotheosis of the word’ (*Letters of Beckett*, 519), constitutes Beckett’s assault on literary realism. Beckett’s transition to French to regain control of his creations inaugurates an aesthetics of reduction; a reduction of anarchic life of language.

The question we might pose then is whether Beckett’s flight from the ‘real’ is not pursued in the name of another, truer sense of the real (an example of which would be the conception of certain modernist techniques, such as stream of consciousness, as a form of psychological realism). Indeed, the paradox of a truer sense of the real is made manifest in the ‘strange twist’ that style takes on: conventionally understood as the axiomatic designation for a *subjective* mark (the signature of the author), Coetzee outlines how for

---

<sup>17</sup> A recent example of a quantitative or digital approach, more attuned to the epistemological peculiarities of the literary object, is outlined in Stephen Ramsay’s *Reading Machines: Towards an Algorithmic Criticism* (2011).

Beckett style encapsulates the intransitive, material and *objective* remainder of a work as that which evades writerly agency. As Beckett ultimately fails with *Watt* to fully annul the anarchic life of language, and hence to reduce style to a zero point, this oscillation comes to constitute the ‘rhythm of doubt’ (95) that structures the novel: the tension between an activity and passivity that is played out in the form of Watt’s thinking as a binary rhythm of ‘answer against question, objection against answer, qualification against objection’ (95). After the episode with the fish Watt contemplates: ‘Perhaps who knows Mr Knott propagates a kind of waves, of depression, or oppression, or perhaps now these, now those, in a way that it is impossible to grasp. But that does not at all agree with my conception of Mr Knott. But what conception have I of Mr Knott? None’ (*Watt*, 102).

In this textual economy each further reduction restores an anarchic life-force that parodically deconstructs ‘logic, epistemology and ontology’ (*The English Fiction*, 35) in a spiralling causal regression. In a later article Coetzee further formalises this insight and argues that the bulk of Beckett’s revision to the manuscripts are directed to reinforce this ‘principle of symmetry’, which is ‘the stylistic reflection of the mental rhythm “On the one hand X, on the other hand not-X”’ (*Doubling*, 39-40). However, for Coetzee, *Watt*’s overall structural disunity prevents the neat synthesis of language and thought, form and content, and the consummation therefore of an unrestricted anti-illusionism: ‘*Watt* aspires to the condition of music. It does not attain that condition because, as its confused genesis and formal fragmentation indicate, it is unfinished’ (163). This means that ‘we must regard Beckett’s failure to carry *Watt* through to the ideal of total self-cancellation as a failure of nerve, a failure which he made good when, in *L’Innommable*, he eventually and far more harshly constructed a complete work out of doubt alone’ (164). Without the union of subject (the doubting self) and object (doubt itself) achieved by *The Unnamable*, *Watt*, like the earlier *Murphy*, is yet to reach the formal reflexivity where: ‘consciousness of self can only be consciousness of consciousness. Fiction is the only subject of fiction’ (*Doubling*, 38). Instead, in *Watt*: ‘We are not sure of the *telos*, the formal principle expressed as aim or function, but we know, so to speak, the shape of the *telos* [...] Decline and inversion are reflected in Watt’s language, as reported by the narrator Sam. Decline and inversion constitute what I call the shape of the *telos*’ (35-36).

In the late works, then, form subsumes content, as the generative principle coincides seamlessly with its material substance, the ‘tics we see on the verbal surface’ (78). Ultimately, however, *Watt* holds back from this consummation and hence troubles the relation between form and content by eluding the inductive stylistic methodologies

through which Coetzee approaches the text: '[I]he search for a single strict formal principle governing *Watt* may be in vain because *Watt* is not a strict unit [...] the search for the neat allegorical interpretation may be vain because the allegory of Watt is only partial' (32). If Watt the character is therefore trapped in a tautology of reasoning (that mistakenly conflates word for world), then *Watt* the novel mockingly stages the impossibility of ever reaching a living or embodied world through language. Language is thereby paradoxically both inextricable from reality yet nonetheless wholly heterogeneous to it. This is depicted by the narrator Sam who notes Watt's increasingly indecipherable discourse:

The following is an example of Watt's manner, at this period: *Days of most, night of part, Knott with now. Now till up, little seen so ob, little heard so ob. Night till morning from. Heard I this, saw I this then what* [...] From this it will perhaps be suspected: that the inversion affected, not the order of the sentences, but of the words only; [...] that there was perhaps more than a reversal of discourse; that the thought was perhaps inverted (*Watt*, 140-141).

The complicity of language and thought situates Watt the character in the position of the idealist tilting at windmills yet, framed through the novel's ironic perspective, the reader is exposed to an irreducible scepticism that ties the meaning of the work to the indecipherable verbal paroxysms of Watt's speech.<sup>18</sup>

By aligning *Watt* with a suspensive and inconclusive modality of both writing and thinking, substantive of what Beckett refers to in the 1937 letter as a form of 'nominalist irony' (*Letters of Beckett*, 520), Coetzee implicitly postulates a conception of the relation between style and meaning as both inextricable yet nonetheless incommensurate. This is paralleled in Coetzee's answer to the philosophical question of the thesis; rather than being determinate of thought, language, is seen as 'associative' (157). In his own later fictions, such an account of style will give rise to a poetics of embeddedness whereby the necessity of being situated or bound by context (linguistic; cultural; political; biological) is also the condition of impossibility for any single or ultimate context to dominate the living. This can be explicated through the centrality of the notion of time as evidenced by

---

<sup>18</sup> An example of Coetzee's enduring interest in questions of linguistic idealism can be witnessed in a letter to Auster that concerns Aristotle's reasoning: 'One cannot be friends with an inanimate object, says Aristotle (*Ethics*, chapter 8). Of course not! Who ever said one could? But interesting nonetheless: all of a sudden one sees where modern linguistic philosophy got its inspiration. Two thousand four hundred years ago Aristotle was demonstrating that what looked like philosophical postulates could be no more than rules of grammar. In the sentence "I am friends with X," he says, X has to be animate noun' (*Here and Now*, 2).

the early doctoral work through the implicit staging of the structuralist opposition between synchrony and diachrony, as explored below.

\*

Coetzee's thesis thus helps to delineate the position on style taken in the later critical essays regarding the later problematic of literary anti/illusionism. In contradistinction to the 'symbolist ideal' behind a post-romantic aesthetic of "'organic" unity' (*The English Fiction*, 15), Coetzee adopts the middling position: 'content is the aggregate of elements, form the relations among them' (*The English Fiction*, 15). We can follow this position throughout. The introduction, which sets out the task of the thesis to demonstrate that a statistically based stylistics cannot 'integrate the study of style in overall literary study' (7), is substantiated in the conclusion by the appeal to the literary work as structured by an 'internal economy' (151). This prevents the isolation of the 'verbal dimension' from 'plot, structure, and the style of its context' (151). Coetzee further argues that: 'an approach to the understanding of one of them leads to greater understanding of the others; conversely, no one aspect can be fully understood unless one considers its relation to the others' (151). This economic and, I argue, temporal formulation implies both the impossibility of separating form and content but *also* the impossibility of convergence in terms of an organic whole, as Zimbler argues. Zimbler takes Coetzee's preference for the conception of style he finds in Beckett as illustrative of the way in which the relation between form and content enables one to speak of the various elements of the work as related 'such that the work appears as if it were an organic whole' (Zimbler, 10). Although I similarly appeal to a relational understanding of style, Coetzee's economical thinking emerges precisely through a repudiation of this organic metaphor.

This is especially evidenced in the conclusion whereby Coetzee illustrates how the organic metaphor is seen to license an illusory model of surface and depth criticism: 'The convenience of a metaphor of organic unity or of a single system is that it allows the critic to start where it most suits him and to expand thence to cover the whole work' (*The English Fiction*, 152). This is later challenged again in 'The Writer and Theory' as Coetzee critiques the homologous pairing of periphery and kernel that he argues derives from a 'romantiese wantrouwe van redelikheid [romantic distrust of reason]' (156) that privileges the organic or ideal kernel of the work as that which exceeds hermeneutic exegesis. For Coetzee, conversely, literature resists meaning not by transcending given forms of sense but rather by proliferating a sense of embeddedness (Coetzee describes the work's

embeddedness in the thesis as ‘an interpenetrating system of systems’ [151]) that refuses to yield to both the finite or quantifiable unit of measure and to a romantic sense of the immeasurability of the artistic work.

A further challenge to the metaphor of linearity, that underpins the causal logic of surface and depth, is mounted in Coetzee’s conclusion. Turning again to Bloch and the proposition that the style of an author is defined by its modes of deviation from normative language, Coetzee discusses the difficulty of defining any such norm. Any such definition of the norm, whether in idealised terms of language as a unified whole or as a limited sample appropriate to a specific textual analysis, ultimately has to contend with the insurmountable problem of historical contingency: ‘[T]here is no reason to believe the approaches which we today regard as divergent will always remain so’ (155).<sup>19</sup> The problem of deviation, identified by Coetzee, generates an implicit logic of style that is inherently contradictory, and it is through this inherent contradiction that the anarchy of life is broached. This contradictory logic of literary style thus derives from the observation that literary language is both immanent to structures of everyday language and transcendent of them. Literary works hence distort the field of reference pertaining to everyday language usage since the words deployed in a given work refer both to real phenomena and to the internally represented textual realm (indeed, this duplicitous effect is what comprises the nominal irony of *Watt*). Beckett’s works dramatise this inherent state of contradiction by challenging the realist premise of what Hayes terms the ‘logocentric illusion of objectivity’ (*J.M. Coetzee and the Novel*, 38). For Coetzee’s Beckett, therefore, the literary work is not only an autonomous reality but is constituted by a medium – language – that is itself inherently anarchic, self-referring, and structurally figurative.

The gestating logic that emerges throughout the thesis – one of reciprocity between inextricable and yet incommensurate poles (form and content, activity and passivity, and ultimately, art and life) – is also perceivable in temporal terms: rather than a linear procession of causal change from norm to deviation, from thought to language, Coetzee reveals the ultimately atemporal aspect of the structural ‘metaphor of linearity’, since in

---

<sup>19</sup> Again, in the discussion of infrequent nouns the circularity inherent to squaring intuition with mathematics is akin to Watt’s infinite regressions: ‘But we have now opened the floodgates. For we are not concerned, for example, with absolute rarity (whatever that is) but with rarity in a context’ (*The English Fiction*, 49).

order to account for the strict demarcation between cause and effect one appeals to a stable and unchanging system or structure; linearity is nothing but a cyclicity.

The temporality of Coetzee's later writing – the insistence on the continuous present tense and the thematic sense of alterity as an openness to un-predicated time – thus surfaces in the thesis in relation to the verbal forms of writing, thinking and, ultimately, reading. For Coetzee, 'the crippling weakness of stylostistics [is] its domination by this metaphor of linearity' (161-162); that is 'a conception of language as a one-dimensional stream extending in time' (160) where 'the experience, and particularly the stylistic experience, of a work of literature is a linear experience composed of a series of smaller experiences succeeding each other in time' (161). However, as Coetzee argues, the temporality of the reading experience devastates this metaphoric linearity: 'as we read we are continually reformulating formal hypotheses to account for what we are reading and what we have read [...] No description of the act of reading on a linear analogy can account for this incessant recursion' (161).

Indeed, what Coetzee posits as the 'complexity of literary language' (162) occludes the teleological and linear succession of linguistic units ('sentences or phonemes or stresses or whatever', 160) from the possibility of accounting for the stylistic whole. This results from the relation of style to context: 'our experience of a work is more than the sum of a number of experiences of small contexts' (161). This is essentially because the reading experience, one of 'incessant recursion', renders each context inherently *divisible*, i.e. related to the preceding and succeeding contexts of the text through which we grasp style; each context is inscribed with 'the memory of all the contexts that have preceded it' (161). This divisibility is structurally informed by the critique of stylistic deviation, which is underwritten by a logic of normativity which literary works intrinsically question since it is only by dint of context (and hence a mutable, contingent and *readerly* perspective) that a literary language sample can be apprehended as *literary*.<sup>20</sup>

The logic of Coetzee's critique of the positivist premise of his thesis can also be traced in the later 'Surreal Metaphors and Random Processes': 'We must never lose sight of the fact that, since language is always changing, a synchronic grammar is an artificial construct' (28). The inherent divisibility of context is thus derived from the insight that time is essential to the contexts of both 'production and reception' (27). In light of the

---

<sup>20</sup> Hence Coetzee stresses, in a discussion of Russian formalism: '[A]ny theory or style as deviation from the norms of language as a whole would be riddled with tautology' (*The English Fiction*, 14).

later essay, Coetzee's ongoing critique of structuralist methodologies, in the 1970s, can be seen as parallel to that of Derrida (I explore Derrida's influence in the next chapter). Derrida's essay 'Force and Signification' (1968) aims to explicitly critique the spatial terms of the structuralist approach which overlook questions of time and history: 'Th[e] history of the work is not only its *past*, the eve or the sleep in which it precedes itself in an author's intentions, but is also the impossibility of its ever being *present*, of its ever being summarised by some absolute simultaneity or instantaneousness' ('Force and Signification', 15). Similarly, the theoretical insights of Coetzee's thesis ground a later approach to the literary that invites a consideration of the works' effects (on the reader), and hence the relation of literature to extra-textual or lived reality.<sup>21</sup>

This invitation can be witnessed in the later fictional works themselves, especially through Coetzee's use of metalepsis to stage issues of literary authorship and the relations between creator and creature (I explore this in greater detail, especially in relation to Coetzee's life-writing, in chapter five).<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Costello, in Coetzee's eponymous novel, thus describes writing as a commingling of activity and passivity: '[P]oetic invention [...] mingles breath and sense in a way that no-one has ever explained and no-one ever will' (*Elizabeth Costello*, 98).<sup>23</sup> JC, Coetzee's initial-sake in *Diary of a Bad Year*, issues a similarly phenomenologically inflected account of literary writing and invention:

Is it ever good enough, as a phenomenological account, to say that somewhere deep inside I knew what I wanted to say, after which I searched out the appropriate verbal tokens and moved them around until the words on the page "sound" or "are" right, and then stop fiddling and say to myself, "That must be what you wanted to say"? If so, who is it who judges what sounds or does not sound right? Is it necessarily I ("I")? (196).

---

<sup>21</sup> After all, in the absence of what Coetzee terms a 'special literary language' (13), the meaning of a work cannot therefore be reduced to the level of statement (seen as correlate to an isolable zone of literary language) but is linked to an ability to perform meanings.

<sup>22</sup> I draw upon Gérard Genette's definition of metalepsis to mean a transgression between narrative levels; that is, 'any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.), or the inverse' (*Narrative Discourse*, 234-5). For a recent study of metalepsis in Coetzee's works see Alexandra Effe's monograph *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Narrative Transgression: A Reconsideration of Metalepsis* (2017). For Effe, metalepsis in Coetzee's works is the cornerstone of a narratological self-reflexivity that, by performing rather than stating truths and, thereby, fostering a dialogical uncertainty, constitutes an 'ethics of writing' (20). In later chapters I foreground the contradictory aspect of metalepsis – the capacity to sustain conflicting positions simultaneously – as key to Coetzee's literary thinking.

<sup>23</sup> For Attridge, the notion of invention encapsulates the duality of both actively creating and 'the event of coming upon' ('Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other', 22), since for something to be entirely new there can be no recipe for its coming about, and therefore it cannot be entirely willed.

For Costello and JC poetic invention constitutes both an auto-affecting and a hetero-affecting endeavour, a dynamic that can be traced back to Coetzee's economic account of literary works in his thesis.

Questions of writing and authorship are not simply thematised in Coetzee's later fictions, however. These texts stage this complicity between self and other through the works' own self-reflexivity. In *Elizabeth Costello* this self-reflexivity bonds Costello's account of literary creation – between breath and sense – to the very meaning of the novel we are reading. On the one hand, we are prompted to actively equate the sense or content of the work (notably the content of Costello's lectures) with its overall meaning and, on the other, this possibility is withdrawn since the work's self-reflexivity indefinitely displaces univocal meaning. This sense of ironic awareness is thereby linked both to the ineluctable possibility of *other* readings and to a certain passivity (the breath in Costello's account) that cannot be aligned with propositional knowledge, or what Hayes terms, 'extractable truth' (*J.M. Coetzee and the Novel*, 73).

The first chapter or 'Lesson', entitled 'Realism', establishes this ironic mode by exploiting the difference between the notions of embodying and embedding. In this chapter the famous Australian author, Elizabeth Costello, presents a lecture on the topic of realism to an audience at the fictional Altona College, Pennsylvania. The pressing concern of Costello's lecture, but also the chapter in which it appears, is how the novel form handles ideas. The third-person narration introduces the topic accordingly:

Realism has never been comfortable with ideas. It could not be otherwise: realism is premised on the idea that ideas have no autonomous existence, can exist only in things. So when it needs to debate ideas, as here, realism is driven to invent situations [...] in which characters give voice to contending ideas and thereby in a certain sense embody them. The notion of *embodying* turns out to be pivotal (9).

Costello's ensuing lecture, 'What is Realism', announces the breakdown of this premise as the loss of faith in the 'word-mirror' (19) that facilitates the relation between abstract ideas and material reality. This breakdown is attested to by the very framework in which we receive Costello's lecture; the anonymous and authorial third-person narrator tells us of the importance of the notion of embodying from an entirely disembodied or god-like perspective.

The third-person narrative voice further estranges the very idea of realism as a mode of embodying abstract ideas by interrupting the diegetic level of the narrative through a series of metaleptical interventions that self-reflexively break the mimetic illusion of the



story, the story of Costello's presentation: 'The presentation scene itself we skip. It is not a good idea to interrupt the narrative too often, since storytelling works by lulling the reader or listener into a dreamlike state [...] unless some scenes are skipped over we will be here all afternoon' (16). This creates a problem, as Mark Currie outlines: 'How are we to object to intrusion, on the grounds that it interrupts the realist illusion, when the intrusion is itself an articulation of that complaint?' (*Postmodern Narrative Theory*, 161). This creates a paradox: 'the idea of skipping seems to uphold the referentiality of the narrated sequence as much as it exposes its artificiality' (161). By self-reflexively engaging with the question of the novel's authority, with questions of belief, truth, and illusion, *Elizabeth Costello* anticipates the summative analysis of the critic in advance, and thus prevents the extraction of any disembodied ideal kernel or truth-content.<sup>24</sup> The meaning of this work will not therefore simply be embodied in the text but rather related to *how* the text goes about *embedding* its ideas.

When Costello features again as a character in the subsequent novel *Slow Man* (2005), this doubled sense of activity and passivity is further emphasised as her authority (her dominion over a writerly realm which we are led to believe includes the novel's protagonist, Paul Rayment) is impeded by the entanglement of the mimetic and diegetic levels of the narrative. The ambivalent position of the literary author, and by extension the ambivalent meaning of the literary work, is staged through a notion of life and of the writer as a bearer of life. The sense of 'bringing to life' proper to the literary work, however, is different to simply mastering or actively moulding a mimetic or representative account of life. As she implores Paul to seize his own life-story and to also bring her to life (a task she no longer seems capable of despite dominating their exchanges), this task is envisaged as a more complex co-implication of self and other, activity and passivity, whereby the act of creation also *creates* the creator:

Bringing me to life may not be important to you, but it has the drawback of not bringing you to life either. Or the ducks, for that matter, if you prefer not to have me at the centre of the picture. Bring these humble ducks to life and they will bring you to life, I promise. [...] But please, as a favour to me, please stop dithering. I do not know how much longer I can support my present mode of existence (*Slow Man*, 159).

---

<sup>24</sup> The chapter 'What is Realism' was originally presented as lecture by Coetzee himself in 1996 at Bennington College. Much like Coetzee's Tokyo address on Beckett, the use of fictional devices in conventionally discursive mediums (such as the academic lecture or public address), attests to a desire to engage the world of ideas, and social reality, through the use of literary forms.

Rather, then, than the syntactic dissolution of Beckett's later prose – such as *Lessness* or *Ping* – Coetzee's draws on a metafictional framework that both deploys and undermines the techniques of the realist novel simultaneously.

In 'The Comedy of Point of View in Murphy' (1970), an essay included in *Doubling the Point* and derived from the opening chapters of the doctoral thesis, Coetzee frames such an operation as a 'comic antigrammar of point of view' (*Doubling*, 36). Coetzee's analysis therein of Beckett's mixing of authorial statement and narrative voice constitutes an early example of his interest in how the writing figure comes to be embedded in the written work.<sup>25</sup> In the doctoral thesis Coetzee explicitly highlights the problematic nature of the author-figure:

But how sharply is it possible to draw a line between this author's sentences and those of his characters? Does each sentence in the text fall into one of these two classes, or are there also sentences of indeterminate origin or sentences which belong in both classes? In other words, can narrative point of view be treated as a small-scale matter, a matter of sentences? (61).

At the end of the thesis, the notion of a 'fictionalised intelligence' (159) emerges that is neither that of the biographical author, nor that of the narrator or principal character, but constitutes instead a middling formation that portends Coetzee's later extensive use of agentless sentences, free-indirect discourse, and third-person present tense narration (I discuss these techniques in reference to *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello* in chapter four).

This formation, what I have termed a literary thinking, affords a mixture of proximity and distance, activity and passivity, that refuses the reduction of a work's meaning to either the exterior realm of the author or the interior realm of the stated opinions or ideas of the characters and narrators that populate the works. It is this inability to finally attribute or pin down singular meanings that generates the intractable irony of the opening chapter of *Elizabeth Costello*.<sup>26</sup> Ostensibly concerned with how works of fiction come to embody certain ideas, Coetzee's metafictional distancing *disembodies* this very idea from any ultimate authority while nonetheless attesting to the necessity of an embeddedness (which

---

<sup>25</sup> The ineluctability of the author's situatedness, especially in historical terms, is reinforced by the dissertation's closing paragraph, where Coetzee reminds his readers that *Watt* was 'begun in 1941 and completed in draft in 1944. It is not entirely strange that during these years, while a statistician in Cambridge was copying *De imitatione Christi* word by word on cards [...] that an Irishman in France should have been recording for posterity all the permutations which the nouns door, window, fire, and bed can undergo' (164).

<sup>26</sup> Attridge's account of Costello 'lessons' as 'arguings' (*J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 198), in the present tense, seems an accurate description of how the works seek to stage their own truth-claims as subject to an embeddedness or inherent divisibility.

in later novels take the form of a potentially risky complicity) that implicates the reader, as is the case with Adorno's reading of the missing 'word' in Kafka.

This paradoxical combination of impossibility and necessity – the impossibility of a singular or sovereign truth yet the necessity of a work's fundamental embeddedness in finite structures of meaning – constitutes the aesthetic imperative of Beckett's writing. That the literary work is both irreducible to internal *and* external criteria is what permits a literary thinking that can advance and withdraw from taking a position simultaneously. In the third chapter I explore Coetzee's writings on the possibility of adopting a '(non)position' (103), as outlined in the 1996 volume *Giving Offense*, and the ethico-political import of Coetzee's literary thinking as that which follows from the insight that, as Danta argues: 'To write without authority is [...] to make authority a question in and through one's writing' (*Strong Opinions*, xii).

Coetzee's archived research materials further illustrate the origins of a later literary thinking through an earlier thinking of literature, notably exemplified by George Poulet's 1969 'Phenomenology of Reading'. Coetzee highlights this section: 'Reading, then, is the act in which the subjective principle which I call *I*, is modified in such a way that I no longer have the right, strictly speaking, to consider it as my *I*. I am on loan to another, and this other thinks, feels, suffers, and acts within me' (HRC, MS Coetzee Papers, Box 97, Folder 1). The activity of reading, as with Coetzee's account of writing, is defined by a passivity; an abnegation of one's 'subjective principle'. To recall Coetzee's thesis, the reading experience becomes one of continuous reformulation between the activities of reader and of the text itself and is affected temporally by the accretion of past textual contexts as well as the expectation of future ones. Reading as 'incessant recursion', then, marks both a temporal and subjective displacement: just as the stylistic experience of a literary text doesn't unfold across a linear plain, the subjective acts of reading and writing refuse to correspond to the linear causality of an intentional consciousness. In both cases the 'anarchic life' under the surface of the page affects the reader and writer into being *simultaneously* both a reader and a writer. Coetzee highlights another passage from Poulet that encapsulates this paradoxical account of autoaffection as heteroaffection through the intersection of writer and reader:

To understand a literary work, then, is to let the individual who wrote it reveal himself to us *in* us [...] But biographical interpretation is in part false and misleading. It is true that there is an analogy between the works of an author and the experiences of his life. The works may be seen as an incomplete translation

of the life [...] Each of the works, however, whilst I am reading it, lives in me its own life (HRC, MS Coetzee Papers, Box 97, Folder 1).

This is because, as Poulet continues: ‘the subject that presides over the work can exist only in the work’.

Considering Poulet’s phenomenologically inflected approach to the literary work it becomes possible to further envisage Coetzee’s understanding and use of style as less syntactically oriented and more *narratological*; that is, rooted in the activity of dynamic activities of writing and reading as the matrix behind a relational understanding of form in terms of time rather than space. This distinction similarly marks his later fiction as a more distinctly metafictional anti-realism rather than a syntactic anti-realism of Beckett’s later prose. Similarly, the metaphor that underpins Coetzee’s reading of Beckett against stylostistical linearity – the ‘anarchic life’ – becomes an instrumental mode for Coetzee to posit in the thesis, as seen above, the dissociation of syntax and rational thought, just as it signals the dissociation of authorial intention and textual meaning: ‘the habits of a writer’s mind can only be a metaphor for habits (or patterns) of the text’ (158-159). As reading becomes a process of continual reformulation, an ongoing activity and event in the present responding to past and future contexts, writing is caught between the active and passive poles of a similarly divisible or *contradictory* temporality. *Watt* not only embodies such a contradiction – between the anarchic life of language and the intentions of an author – but parodically and self-consciously stages it (through Watt’s nominalist consciousness).

In a later essay, ‘Linguistics and Literature’ (1982), Coetzee explicitly draws on the concept of metaphor itself to describe the inadequacy of syntactically based stylistic approaches: ‘Chomsky’s syntactically based grammar of the 1960’s provided no way of dealing with metaphor except as an infringement of lexical category boundaries, such as the boundary between animate and inanimate’ (‘Linguistics and Literature’, 43). Indeed, that Coetzee perceives a ‘quality to *Watt* accessible only to metaphor’, which he then posits in the form of an ‘anarchic life’, importantly plays out as the primary locus through which a reading of the novel will be harnessed against the tautologous entrapment of stylostistics. Seemingly, then, metaphor itself, as a category of literary language, refutes the linear approach of the kind of syntactical analysis (characteristic of stylostistics) practised by Bloch. Life, in Coetzee’s schema, isn’t therefore simply one metaphor among others but, in fact, comes to denote the operation of metaphor itself as that which eludes linear or causal temporality; the living temporality of metaphor necessitates, through the act of

reading, its implication in past and future textual contexts which continually reform the metaphorical hypotheses at work in a literary text.

This logic of a mutually constitutive activity and passivity (of both reading *and* writing), that generates the work as irreducible to summative meaning, is further expounded in a short essay included in *Doubling the Point* entitled ‘A Note on Writing’ (1984).<sup>27</sup> In this essay Coetzee discusses Roland Barthes’ essay ‘To Write: An Intransitive Verb’, where Barthes frames the verb ‘to write’ as belonging to the ‘middle voice’, between active (the agent of the verb) and passive (the affected object or subject of the action): ‘[T]oday to write is [...] to effect writing in being affected oneself’ (qtd. in *Doubling*, 94). The conventional grammatical account of ‘to write’ as a transitive verb in the active voice accords with a ‘common conception of the subject’, Coetzee writes, ‘a subject prior to, independent of, and untouched by the verb’ (95). Hence Barthes’ essay announces a challenge to a logic of linear causality from subject to object, thought to language and, by extension, to a conception of the human subject as *a priori* or self-sufficient. Coetzee’s thesis, and the later writings (specifically those on autobiography) take up this challenge; the writer cannot help but be embedded within the concerns and exigencies of the present. As Coetzee writes in his inaugural lecture: ‘There is a sense in which going over the history of his life from a specific point in time, *the time of writing*, an autobiographer can be said to be *making* the truth of his life [my emphasis]’ (‘Truth in Autobiography’, 3-4). To be embedded in the present, the time of writing, is not only to be excluded from the possibility of a wholly objective perspective or truth, and thereby afforded the position of mastery over one’s life, it is also the condition of possibility for the self to be *other* than itself. This co-implication of self and other is integral to the ethico-political import of Coetzee’s writings, as I explore in later chapters. The insight, therefore, as outlined in *Doubling the Point*, that ‘languages spoke people or at the very least spoke through them’ (*Doubling*, 53), is integral to the ontological questioning that marks Coetzee’s literary thinking of life.

Clarkson makes a similar observation regarding the affective-temporal constitution of the processes of writing and reading: ‘Throughout his critical reflections, Coetzee is consistent in his assertions about not quite knowing what it is that he wanted to say in advance – meaning emerges in retrospect, once he has been through the experience of

---

<sup>27</sup> My emphasis on both writing and reading accords with Attwell’s desire to complement Attridge’s approach to ‘the eventness of literature from the point of view of writing’ (‘A life in Research’, 261).

writing' (*Countervoices*, 44).<sup>28</sup> The combination of activity and passivity, that the writing paradoxically produces the writer, is epitomised by the notion of the middle voice. For Chris Ackerley, the middle voice constitutes one of 'Beckett's gifts [...] perhaps the most insistent and enduring' ('Style: Coetzee and Beckett', 30). In Beckett's writings the middle voice constitutes a complex experience of the past in the present that disarticulates Beckett's misanthropic monologues as they are, as in *Malone Dies*, 'flayed alive by memory' (97). In Coetzee's fictions the breakdown of ontological boundaries, as the works operate through a transgression of narrative levels and an undermining of textual authority, accords with the disarticulation of subjectivity that marks Beckett's oeuvre. That is, this challenge to the *a-priori* human subject not only operates across a spatial plane but rather through a relation between literary forms and life-forms that embeds, as in Beckett's works, death as fundamental and immanent to life. This challenge to the human mode of being as self-sufficient is intimately aligned with the indeterminate effects of the literary work and to the possibility of a literary thinking whereby 'truth is related to silence' (*Doubling*, 65). In the next section I explore how Coetzee's relation to Beckett situates him at odds with an alternative modernist tradition.

## **ii. Organic Poetics and Vitalist Ontologies: On Inheriting Modernism**

Coetzee's later disavowal of his youthful positivism (he calls his doctoral thesis: 'A wrong turning [...] both in my career and in the history of stylistics', *Doubling*, 22) thus originates from the insight that questions of style cannot be detached from the contexts in which the work is otherwise embedded, produced, and received. The synchronic fallacy of stylostatistics is to predetermine the field of context through which certain elements can then be added together to comprise the stylistic whole. Equally, however, a post-romantic or high modernist account of literary style (aligned with movements of New Criticism and the Leavisite tradition, the latter alluded to in Coetzee's Fucks review by the name of Leavis' journal *Scrutiny*, 1932-1953) is similarly guilty of exorcising time through the synthesis of poetic elements in attainment of an 'organic unity' (152).<sup>29</sup> Conversely, Coetzee's economic model maintains the idea of the work as comprised of multifarious contexts but refuses to restrict in advance the contexts which constitute it (both in terms

---

<sup>28</sup> As Clarkson elucidates: '[T]he writer's intentions are [therefore] not reducible to the meanings produced, just as the production of meaning is not reducible to authorial intention' (*Countervoices*, 45).

<sup>29</sup> For a discussion of this paradigm in New Criticism see Audrey Wasser's recent publication, *The Work of Difference: Modernism, Romanticism, and the Production of Literary Form* (2016). Therein she discusses the work of New Critic Cleanth Brooks as exemplary of how New Criticism turned to 'the organic realm for a metaphor for poetic unity' (39).

of production and reception). The later rejection of anti-illusionism, then, hints that Coetzee's writings do not seek to advance a postmodernist bad infinity of interpretation but rather seek to make finite – and therefore open to revision, contestation, and contingency – the specific contexts through which a work is constituted, notably by making finite the authority of the author. Coetzee thereby posits the work of literature as inextricable from the contexts that comprise it but also incommensurate with them since the matter of context cannot be pinned down or made certain. This doubled procedure provides the model for both my own reading of the novels in later chapters and my broader ambition to isolate a notion of literary thinking.

This treatment of literary form manifests a corollary suspicion of high modernist or idealised notions of form as self-sufficient; as following a logic in accordance with what Coetzee terms, in a 1978 notebook entry, the 'Romantic heresy of immanent meaning' (HRC, MS Coetzee Papers, Box 33, Folder 3).<sup>30</sup> If the anarchic life of language resists the assimilation of the qualitative to the quantitative, then the alternative sublimation of this resistance to propositional forms of knowledge through a romantic notion of the self-sufficiency of the artwork is also profoundly inadequate. This is staged in *Youth* as the young John repeatedly fails to live up to the principles of high art in his own life, a failure made palpable through the thwarted romantic quest for transcendent love. He believes that the right woman, the 'destined one, will see at once through the odd and even dull exterior he presents to the fire that burns within him', enabling him 'to emerge, one day, into the light: the light of love, the light of art' (3). John's romantic temperament, which is both inspired and contradicted by his modernist forebears (specifically Pound, Eliot and Ford), is swathed in bathos and irony:

If he is to censor himself from expressing ignoble emotions – [...] shame at his own failures as a lover – how will those emotions ever be transfigured into poetry? And if poetry is not to be the agency of transfiguration from ignoble to noble, why bother with poetry at all? Besides, who is to say that the feelings he writes in his diary are his true feelings? Who is to say that at each moment while the pen moves he is truly himself? (10).

If John is to coincide with the author of *Youth*, as we are led to believe, then the irony of this concession is impossible to ignore. The truth of the authorial self, the young writer

---

<sup>30</sup> This note, dated 10 September 1978, derives from Coetzee's self-commentary in the notebooks for the novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*: 'What is at work of course, is the same Romantic heresy of immanent meaning that is at the heart of *Dusklands* and *In the Heart*. What I need to do is to read crucial texts on this subject, which links the origins of curiosity (Freud) with the conflict between the world as a labyrinth of signs and the notion of truth' (HRC, MS Coetzee Papers, Box 33, Folder 3).

coming into being but also the writer who is writing the very account of that transfiguration, is displaced beyond recovery. Yet the truth is not infinitely ungraspable because transcendent, beyond the woeful reality of the embedded here and now of John's dreary life in London. Rather, it is because the truth is embedded, and thus subject to any number of contexts of interpretation and appropriation in the writing present, that it cannot ultimately be settled.

Just as John mourns the loss of artistic transcendence, then, the work itself performatively testifies to a more capacious account of aesthetic transfiguration. This is staged in the narrative of John's literary gestation as it crescendos with the encounter with Beckett's *Watt*. '*Watt* is quite unlike Beckett's plays. There is no clash, no conflict, just the flow of a voice telling a story, a flow continually checked by doubts and scruples, its pace fitted exactly to the pace of his own mind' (155). Like *Elizabeth Costello*, this episode violates what Coetzee terms, in reference to Beckett's *Murphy*, 'the principle of the separation of the three estates of author, narrator, and character' (*Doubling*, 36). This 'antigrammar' of perspective, generated by a use of free indirect discourse, dissociates the thoughts presented from both John and the authorial J.M. Coetzee. The first sentence – '*Watt* is quite unlike Beckett's plays' – can be read alternately as a neutral evaluative statement, as John's initial thoughts, and as John's later summative opinion. By delaying the naming of the pronominal subject, the interruptive flow of sub-clauses in the next sentence also tracks mimetically the way of thinking it describes. Even in *Youth*, therefore, Coetzee's engagement with Beckett is animated by a network of issues related to the capacity of literary language to represent or rather think both affective and intellectual states of being beyond the twin poles of scientific positivism and idealised romanticism.

Accordingly, the thesis and the later critical writings on Beckett establish a way of framing Coetzee's renunciation of an alternative post-romantic strain of modernism, associated variably across the oeuvre with Wallace Stevens, Vladimir Nabokov, Rainer Maria Rilke, and T. S. Eliot.<sup>31</sup> This strain is exemplified by the *urtext* of Coetzee's 'Eight Ways of Looking at Samuel Beckett', that is, Wallace Stevens' poem *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* (1954). Stevens' thirteen *haiku*-inspired stanzas, like Coetzee's essay, emphasises sight as the dominant perceptual mode, each conjuring a perspective on a blackbird. Stevens' imagistic perspectivism induces a sensory experience that seeks to merge the

---

<sup>31</sup> For a good account of the legacies of romanticism in modernism see Carmen Casaliggi's and Paul March-Russel's, *Legacies of Romanticism: Literature, Culture, Aesthetics* (2012).



signifying substance of the poem with the signified. As Boxall summarises, Stevens' poem 'is at its heart about the capacity of the gaze to cross the species barrier' ('The Threshold of Vision: The Animal Gaze in Beckett, Coetzee and Sebald', 128), and its imagist stanzas attempt to performatively collapse the gulf that separates subject and object in the poem by enacting a unified and vitalist poetics of embodied life. This entanglement is established in the first stanza:

Among twenty snowy mountains,  
The only moving thing  
Was the eye of the blackbird (*Selected Poems*, 34).

The establishing gaze of the poem, given to the reader, creates both the scene and the scene *as it is seen*. The narrator's act of seeing, through which we see, merges with eye of the blackbird which is looking, similarly, at the snowy scene. As this entanglement of gaze with gaze is furthered throughout the poem, we arrive at the situation, as Boxall describes, that 'the mind of the poet, or of the poem, is composed both of human and of bird' ('The Threshold of Vision', 128). This consubstantial unity of bird and human minds results in a commingling presence of perception and thought that seems a polar counterpart to Beckett's blocked encounter with the animal other, the inscrutable whale:

But I know, too,  
That the blackbird is involved  
In what I know (36).

This hetero-affecting consciousness (where the self is both itself and an-other) seems at a far remove from Beckett's misanthropic monologuers, stuck in the interminable purgatory of Cartesian auto-affection.

However, Stevens' fluid and harmonious commingling sensitivity is not echoed in Coetzee's text on Beckett, which balances the act of looking, or the gaze itself, against the overwhelming opacity of the inscrutable body. This is presented through the figure of the author in the final section. Like photographs of Kafka, Coetzee writes, 'photographs of Beckett show a man whose inner being shines like a cold star through the fleshly envelope' ('Eight Ways', 31). In the context of the previous seven meditations, including the short scene depicting a laboratory animal, Coetzee can be seen to hold back from Stevens' 'consubstantial' sense of life or organic unity. Ultimately, Beckett's photographed image

forbids the possibility that thresholds might be transgressed: ‘no photograph will ever tell the truth’ (‘Eight Ways’, 31).<sup>32</sup>

The Romantic conception of organic unity – of a synthesis of life and art – not only resonates in reference to the discussion of Stevens but also in the context of Beckett’s own discussion of Joyce in ‘Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce’. Beckett writes of Joyce’s ‘Work in Progress’: ‘Here form is content, content is form [...] His writing is not about something; it is that something itself’ (27). Indeed, Beckett discusses Joyce’s works in similar terms to Coetzee’s account of Beckett’s works after *The Unnamable* as an automatic stylised negation where the form and content of the works are indissociable. In an essay on Nabokov, from 1974, Coetzee further appeals to Beckett as a contradictory figure through which to both frame and critique Nabokov’s late modernism. For Coetzee, Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* (1962) is insufficiently radical by comparison to Beckett’s *The Unnamable*, since although the former ‘interrogates its own fictional premises’, it ‘does so with an irony [...] that nudges us toward consenting in the reality of its major construct in the Imaginary’ (‘Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* and the Primacy of Art’, 5). Intriguingly, Stevens’ notion of a ‘fictive covering’, from ‘Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction’ (1942), is drawn upon to distinguish the two: ‘To Beckett this fictive covering is the shirt of Nessus. To Nabokov it is the emperor’s new clothes’ (‘Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* and the Primacy of Art’, 5).<sup>33</sup> Beckett’s rejection of the organic unity implicit in what he terms Joyce’s ‘apotheosis of the word’, and the foundation of his own sceptical aesthetics of the unword, ultimately distinguishes Beckett from a modernist ideal that Coetzee witnesses as still operative in Nabokov:

*Pale Fire* is after all only another version of the same Romantic myth (a version whose clearest expression is J. Alfred Prufrock): that an ironic consciousness permits transcendence of a bad infinity of exegesis. The ideal of *Pale Fire* is a symbolist ideal: a state of being in which, having incorporated into itself all

---

<sup>32</sup> In *Diary of a Bad Year*, which is contemporaneous with the ‘Eight Ways’ address, JC alludes to the probable inspiration for Coetzee’s comments on photography: ‘In Javier Marias’s book *Written Lives* there is an essay on photographs of writers. Among the photographs reproduced is one of Samuel Beckett sitting in the corner of a bare room [...] Did Beckett really decided of his own free will to sit in a corner, at the intersection of three dimensional axes [...] or did the photographer persuade him to sit there?’ (201). JC continues by suggesting that photographers inevitably project a clichéd image of their subject onto the real and living subject of the photograph, ‘Thus we arrive at a paradox: the more time the photographer has to do justice to his subject, the less likely justice will be done’ (201). In other words, the more one attempts to secure an immediate or *organic* representation, the more pressingly the operation of the medium – of mediation in general – will be realised. Photography, as a figure for work of narrative representation in general, plays a similar role in *Slow Man* in relation to history (both biography and collective).

<sup>33</sup> Stevens’ notion resonates across Coetzee’s oeuvre and reappears in *Slow Man* as Elizabeth tells Paul to embrace the ‘rhythm of life’: ‘Your thoughts and feelings. Follow them through and you will grow with them. What was it that American poet fellow said? There weaves a fictive covering from something to something. My memory is going’ (158).

possible interpretations of itself, the work of art has, like a closed system of mirrors, shut itself off forever from interpretation and become a monument of unageing intellect ('Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and the Primacy of Art', 6).

Contrary to Nabokov's 'frozen music of high art' (6), then, the anarchic life of Beckett's prose offers a model in contradistinction to the vitalist or idealised forms of a post-romantic modernism.

In the later 'Surreal Metaphors and Random Processes' the link between modernism and a romantic aesthetic is further elaborated in a discussion of Surrealism. As Coetzee suggests:

If we find it difficult to attach meaning to such phrases as "the synthesis of the real and the imaginary", we may find it easier to think of Surrealism as elaborating a Utopian myth which included, like so much of high Modernism, the renovation of language (think of the efforts of Pound and Eliot, in their different ways, to "purify the dialect of the tribe", or of the universal language of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*) (25).

The unifying impulse of surrealism is identified explicitly with André Breton, for whom 'the imagination [is seen] as an active, liberating force [...] in the Romantic tradition of insurrection against not only forces of oppression but any conception of man as limited by his own nature' (26). In later writings, including *Doubling the Point* and 'Homage', a German strand of influence comes increasingly to the forefront. Coetzee comments on Robert Musil's modernist writings as comprising a 'late romantic symphony' (*Doubling*, 208), and Rilke in particular is privileged as a post-romantic modernist figure (I discuss Rilke's influence on the recent Jesus fictions in chapter five).<sup>34</sup>

Although Coetzee undoubtedly remains indebted to this tradition (he comments in *Doubling the Point* that 'there remains in me a tug toward sensual elaboration', 208) – which I trace through the heart-speech of the later writings – the prevailing stylistic ethos of the works align Coetzee's writings with those of Beckett, Kafka, and what Shane Weller refers to as a movement of late modernism. Unlike the 'commitment to the renewal of language in many of the major modernists (especially Joyce and Pound)' ('Beckett and Late Modernism', 97), Weller suggests that Beckett's late modernism compounds a linguistic

---

<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Coetzee draws upon Rilke's famous 1925 letter to his Polish translator, Witold Hulewicz, in the Nabokov essay to illustrate the latter's latent romanticism. The letter laments the loss of an 'intimate' language, the loss of an unmediated and *living* access between the human and the world: 'Even for our grandparents a "house," a "well," a familiar tower, their very clothes, their coat: were infinitely more, infinitely more intimate: almost everything a vessel in which they found the human and added to the store of the human. Now, from America, empty indifferent things are pouring across, sham things, dummy life' (qtd. in 'Nabokov's *Pale Fire*', 5).

scepticism and distrust of the word that, considering the Holocaust and historical events of the mid-twentieth century, is inseparable from a more radical questioning of the human as such. Coetzee's works, I argue, follow in Beckett's footsteps (or footfalls) and offer neither transcendence nor redemption while nonetheless refusing to give up on the high modernist ideal that the aim of art is truth.

### **iii. The Imperative of a Literary Thinking.**

If the positivist premise of the doctoral work is ultimately disavowed – in *Youth* we are told, just prior to John's encounter with *Watt*: 'Finally he has no respect for any version of thinking that can be embodied in a computer's circuitry' (149) – what is preserved is the manner by which Beckett is posed as a figure by which a thinking through language is broached.<sup>35</sup> This is confirmed by the later essay, 'Homage', wherein Beckett is said to provide a model for the 'voice of the mind' (6).<sup>36</sup> In 'Homage' Coetzee directly addresses the question of influence or 'literary paternity' (5), but rather than providing a simple description Coetzee offers a twofold account of his inheritance that reflects the latent tension already present in the earlier doctoral thesis. On the one hand, Coetzee discusses his inheritance actively in terms of syntax, rhythm and lexicon, drawing on an array of technical and grammatical vocabulary, reminiscent of the earlier critical writings:

[T]he deepest lessons one learns from other writers are, I suspect, matters of rhythm, broadly conceived. But let me now turn to the simpler matter of lexicon [...] As soon as I began reading Beckett I knew I was reading someone whose sensitivity to the nuances of weight, coloration, provenance, and history of individual words was superior to mine (6-7).

On the other hand, however, the product of this exposure to a personal canon of other writers (including Eliot, Faulkner, Ford, Pound, Rilke and others) yields a debt that is not properly stylistic in a technical sense. Instead, Coetzee more passively *lives* his inheritance: 'This is about some of the writers without whom I would not be the person I am, writers without whom I would, in a certain sense, not exist' ('Homage', 5).<sup>37</sup> The difficulty of outlining in propositional terms this second kind of debt is made clear in a later letter to the novelist Paul Auster: 'I certainly wouldn't be the kind of writer I am if Beckett had

---

<sup>35</sup> After the encounter with *Watt* this is hyperbolised in the free indirect discourse of the narration: 'Death to reason, death to talk!' (*Youth*, 164).

<sup>36</sup> Faulkner is also attributed this quality of testing the relation between thought and language and pioneering a model or 'formula' for a literary thinking: 'a formula for perception racing beyond language, language just barely keeping touch with the movement of the mind' ('Homage', 5).

<sup>37</sup> As Attwell alternatively formulates it in an interview: 'Is a canon, then, properly conceived, more than a handy bag of sources – it is, rather, a mode of living?' ('An Exclusive Interview with J.M. Coetzee').

never been born, but that sort of debt – call it a debt, for want of a better word – is best not scrutinized’ (*Here and Now*, 242).

The question of the relation between the reflexivity of the academic-linguist and the reflexivity of the literary author is a fascinating one, not least since the reflexive account provided by the latter arguably contradicts the former. The linguistic or stylistic account of one’s inheritance relies on a critical or abstract distance. The latter, however, concedes that since one is discussing oneself, and more precisely what fashioned that self, one’s account of the story or narrative is already tainted by the experience of having undergone the fashioning process of influence. The abstract or critical account is thwarted by the structural ambivalence of the embedded writing subject. In temporal terms, this ambivalence problematises the logic of linear causation inherent to the linguistic account; Coetzee does not simply come after his inheritance as he must necessarily still be living through it.

Coetzee, in the ‘Homage’ piece, further relates his literary paternity to the paradoxical nature of life-writing in general: ‘The reader versed in the vicissitudes of autobiography will receive what I say with due caution’ (5). If Coetzee’s linguistic training allows him to self-consciously observe the transmutations of stylistic influence, a further reflexivity dictates a necessary, and structural, passivity. Prior to the publication of the three fictionalised memoirs, the ‘Homage’ piece is revealing for articulating the quality of a reflexivity that will later be transfigured into a performative mode of (self) enquiry, as evidenced by *Youth* (that is, autobiography at one remove, in the third-person present tense). By stressing, therefore, the position of style as a pivot between thought and language, Coetzee ultimately frees the concept from its restraints within the linguistic sciences or literary criticism. Instead style is defined as:

an approach to the world and to experience, political experience included. Ideas are certainly important [...] but the fact is, the ideas that operate in novels and poems, once they are unpicked from their context and laid out on the laboratory table, usually turn out to be uncomplicated, even banal. Whereas a style, an attitude to the world, as it soaks in, becomes part of the self, ultimately indistinguishable from the self (‘Homage’, 7).

The paradox that we arrive at is this: Coetzee’s reflective capacity, gained through an exposure to the critical methodologies of the linguistic sciences, enables him to *actively* sense the inherently *passive* nature of the subject of inheritance (himself). The subject of inheritance, the inheritor, is *subjected* to inheritance, but nevertheless remains able to actively acknowledge or even mutate the nature of this inheritance (for instance, in the

later Nobel interview with Attwell Coetzee asserts the importance of Musil and Wordsworth – figures not included in the ‘Homage’ essay).<sup>38</sup> The definition of stylistic inheritance is hence emblematic of the simultaneous effect of activity and passivity that Coetzee elsewhere attributes to writing, and that I am taking to be definitive of the literary thinking embedded in the works. It is only when style is freed from the constraints of propositional knowledge (or abstracted ideas) that it can serve, paradoxically, as an approach to knowledge or truth (i.e. of the world and experience).

Style, in Coetzee’s later writings, is hence no longer the bearer of a perfective or constative knowledge of a work but rather informs a performative, embedded, and non-propositional mode of thinking. As both writing and thinking, Coetzee’s medium questions the boundary between novelistic and critical discourse and is simultaneously, in the words of the narrator in *Elizabeth Costello*, both water *and* air. As an ‘approach to the world’, Coetzee’s literary thinking is inscribed as much in the philosophical (or political or ethical) content of the form as it is in the philosophical themes of the content.

Consequently, if structuralism, and specifically quantitative stylistics, ultimately failed to engage Coetzee then, what Attwell terms, ‘the promise of structuralism [...] the rule-governedness of things’ (*Doubling*, 23) would endure in Coetzee’s works, non-fictional and fictional.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, the thesis sets up an abiding interest in the relation between language as an epistemic frame and informs the later works’ engagements with forms of myth, discourse, and ideology. Therefore, if I have privileged certain binary configurations in my analysis (idealism and scepticism, form and content, embodiment and disembodiment) then this is in part because the binary mode continues to inform Coetzee’s literary thinking. This is evidenced by the dual narrative structure of *Dusklands*, Coetzee’s first fiction published in 1974. From *Dusklands* onwards, Coetzee continues to flesh out a dynamic and contradictory literary thinking, first identified in the comic anti-rationalism of Beckett’s *Watt*, in opposition to a reductive or binary mode.<sup>40</sup> In *Youth* this

---

<sup>38</sup> Derrida describes the paradoxical nature of inheritance accordingly: ‘the being of what we are is first of all inheritance [...] And that [...] we can only bear witness to it. To bear witness would be to bear witness to what we are insofar as we inherit, and that – here is the circle [...] we inherit the very thing that allows us to bear witness to it’ (*Spectres of Marx*, 68).

<sup>39</sup> In a 1986 interview with Jean Sévry, Coetzee is keen to establish this relation: ‘[M]uch of my academic training was in linguistics. And in many ways I am more interested in the linguistic than in the literary side of my academic profession. I think there is evidence of an interest in problems of language throughout my novels. I don’t see any disruption between my professional interest in language and my activities as a writer’ (‘An Interview with J.M. Coetzee’, 1).

<sup>40</sup> As Clarkson argues: ‘we read in the emergent writer an increasing disaffection with deductive assumptions of an innate and self-contained structure – assumptions shared by structuralist approaches to narrative

is made explicit – and in terms that foreshadow the later 2016 essay on literary thinking – through John’s concern that the Atlas computer he is using in the production of poetry might ‘burn either-or paths in the brain of its users and thus lock them irreversibly into its binary logic’ (160). This prospect spawns the desire to find ‘the moment in history when either-or is chosen and and/or is discarded’ (160). If ‘truth to fact’ is of a second order, as Coetzee suggests in *Doubling the Point*, and thereby in accordance with the ‘general positivism’ of the linguistic sciences, the nascent formulation of a literary thinking we find in Coetzee’s thesis, and reflected back upon in the later life-writing, broaches an alternative *truth to life*.

In Coetzee’s own novels, the problematic ontology of the literary work – an in-built resistance to conceptuality or propositional discourse that is in part attributed to the function of figurative language, discussed further in the next chapter – engenders, in Thacker’s sense, a non-Aristotelian thinking *through* contradiction that broaches life as both embedded and finite yet in excess of any master discourse. Like Coetzee’s account of stylistic inheritance, life therefore emerges as a complex condition for its own experience and evades the grasp of a disembodied or philosophical knowledge. By using life as a means by which to broach the question of literature *qua* literature – in the context of Beckett’s works – Coetzee goes on, in his own later works, to develop a powerful literary thinking by which to broach the difficult question of life *qua* life.

The approach to literary meaning that emerges out of the thesis thus enables one to reconsider Coetzee’s broader relation to modernism in the context of the latent philosophical and ontological positions that underpin his most significant precursors. Insofar as Coetzee inherits from Beckett a sense of the inextricability *and* incommensurability of word and world, art and life, Coetzee’s fictions can be seen to disavow both the illusionistic ‘word-mirror’ of novelistic realism and the idealised organic unity presupposed by a post-romantic or vitalist strand of modernism. In the next chapter I explore the origins of Beckett’s linguistic scepticism (derived less from Wittgenstein than from a reading of Fritz Mauthner), and the gestation of a literature of the unword, in relation to a radical interrogation of the human mode of being. As we shall see, such

---

clearly rooted in Saussurean linguistics, and by approaches in other disciplines that apply the binary systems of computational logic’ (*Countervoices*, 14).

an interrogation is pivotal to Coetzee's transmutation of the Beckettian nothing into an engagement with social, cultural, and biological otherness.



## **2: Unwording Life: Late Modernism and the Inhuman.**

‘No symbols where none intended’  
— Samuel Beckett, *Watt*, 223.

Contrary to the disembodiment reading outlined in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee in the 2006 Grove essay praises the later short fiction of the *NoHow On* trilogy (which includes *Company*, *Ill Seen Ill Said*, *Worstword Ho*, and the related *Stirrings Still*, published later in 1988), for capturing a revived sense of narrative potential: ‘[Although] *The Lost Ones* (1970) is hell to read and was perhaps hell to write [...] with *Company* (1980), *Ill Seen Ill Said* (1981), and *Worstword Ho* (1983), we emerge miraculously into clearer water’ (*Inner Workings*, 171). Coetzee cites two reasons for this transformation. Firstly, these late works cancel the ‘self-laceration’ of a mechanical and trapped self, opening onto ‘individual existence [as] a genuine mystery worth exploring’; and secondly, the more expansive, ‘genial’ prose style contains a new element, ‘the autobiographical’ (171). The reappraisal of Beckett’s work conducted in the 2006 Grove essay testifies to a shift in Coetzee’s apprehension of his forebear. What occurs in the meantime, bridging the critical gulf that separates Coetzee’s structuralist study of Beckett in the 1960s and early 1970s, and the publication of the 2006 essay, is precisely Coetzee’s own career as a writer and novelist (begun with the publication of *Dusklands* in 1974, discussed below in the second section of this chapter).

As argued in the previous chapter, the primary asset Coetzee takes from his submersion in structuralism is the sense of language as a formative entity, resistant to rational instrumentalisation. By the same measure, this is what finally causes Coetzee’s break from the structuralist approach of a quantitative stylistics; if language has to an extent a metaphorical life of its own, then this necessitates a corollary sense of time that exceeds the restrictions of the method’s own linear and static analytical models. Coetzee’s renunciation of quantitative stylistics is evidenced by the 1971 ‘Review of Wilhelm Fucks, *Nach allen Regeln der Kunst*’. Fucks’ work on the statistical description of language argues that, as Coetzee elucidates: ‘the artist, like any other organism, exhibits regularities of behavior which can be exposed by statistical analysis’ (92). However, Coetzee is suspicious of the ideological premise of objectivity that underscores Fucks’ sense of a universal ‘formalized language’ (94). Although Fucks recognises Whorf’s thesis that languages, as Coetzee writes, have ‘built-in epistemological biases’ (94), Fucks’ appeal to a universal objectivity fails to question ‘whether the bias of the language constructed by his “linguistic engineers” will not tie succeeding generations into a twentieth-century

positivist mythology more tightly than natural languages tie us into mythologies of the past' (94). Coetzee's critique is revealing of the way in which his own writing emerges from the backdrop of an immersion in both Beckett and quantitative stylistics. In his first novel, *Dusklands*, the character Eugene Dawn embodies the self-sufficient position of the 'the linguistic engineer' and Dawn's mental breakdown exposes the underlying myth of twentieth-century techno-scientific positivism.

Coetzee's distaste for the synchronic and perfective forms of structuralist analysis is evidenced by a literary thinking, staged across his fictions, that refuses the static account of positivist truth claims by undermining their attendant subject-position of the self-sufficient human. The essay on Fucks hence foreshadows the commentary on the nature of writing in *Doubling the Point*, whereby an 'automatism built into language' (18) entails that, to an extent, 'writing writes us' (18). The self, as torn between an automatism and a 'push into the future' (18), situates the writer (but also the reader) in relation to a dynamic sense of the present as constitutively open to revision.

Coetzee's account of a joint writerly activity and passivity echoes the earlier description of the 'internal economy' of *Watt* in the thesis, and a metaphor of economy also implicitly structures the other essays published on Beckett in the early 1970s that derive from the thesis. In 'Samuel Beckett and the Temptations of Style' (1973), Beckett's 'art of zero' involves 'two opposing impulses that permit a fiction of net zero: the impulse toward conjuration, the impulse toward silence' (*Doubling*, 43). This self-cancelling economy constitutes a trap: 'the experience of actually reading Beckett's late fictions, his *Residua*, is an uncomfortable one [...] They are miniature mechanisms for switching themselves off: illusion therefore silence, silence therefore illusion. Like a switch they have no content, only shape' (*Doubling*, 49). An answer as to how the *NoHow On* works circumvent this logic of auto-destruction lies in Coetzee's essay on *Lessness*. For Coetzee, the combinatory composition of *Lessness* yields no 'magical combination that will bring wealth', but instead provides merely the 'solace of the game, the killing of time' ('Samuel Beckett's *Lessness*', 198). These earlier remarks portend the significance of time to Coetzee's later reassertion of life in the *Nohow On* trilogy; in particular, the significance of time as a means through which life is constructed in relation to the mystery of individual existence and to the question of auto- or *autre*-biography. In other words, time is not only a vital context for envisaging a dynamic relation between self and other but also opens onto a vision of the self as constitutively other or *divisible*, thereby linking the ontological and ethical register of Coetzee's works to their formal constitution as a modality of literary thinking.

Coetzee's own life-writing (discussed in Chapter 5) is exemplary of this overlap between content and form since the narrated subject or life can be seen as split or other (*autre*) insofar as the narrating subject, and therefore the narrative mode itself, is seen to remain inextricably embedded in the contingent present of both writing and reading.

If the necessity of temporal mediation underscores Coetzee's rejection of positivist truth-claims about both literary forms and life-forms, then Beckett similarly develops a literary critique of the extra-temporal truth claims of religion and metaphysics. By othering or estranging the concept of life, as it is conventionally figured through anthropocentric frameworks of both the rational sciences and theology, Beckett's works refuse life the possibility of being a positive value.<sup>1</sup> This equivocation between reason and religion is attested to by Molloy's quip in Beckett's eponymous novel that: 'the next pain in the balls was anthropology [...] What I liked in anthropology was its inexhaustible faculty of negation, its relentless definition of man, as though he were no better than God, in terms of what he is not' (*Molloy*, 37-38).

The negativity of Beckett's works has, nonetheless, often been drawn upon as the source of ethical readings that situate Beckett at the apogee of a wider critical modality, often referred to as the 'ethical turn'.<sup>2</sup> Such criticism takes the very bleakness and otherness of life in Beckett as the source of an irreducible value.<sup>3</sup> This ethical strand of criticism (influenced by the work of Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas) constitutes a nebulous 'ethics of alterity' that has also become a key paradigm in the criticism of Coetzee's works, as I discuss in more detail in the ensuing chapters.<sup>4</sup>

Coetzee's proximity to this field as a critic is also verified by the archival research materials for the Grove essay, which reveal the changing context of his engagement with Beckett. The research materials – listed as 'Samuel Beckett, unmarked page proofs and

---

<sup>1</sup> The positive affirmation or evaluation of life structures the Christian-theological tradition and its moral precepts, including the assertion of the inherent sanctity of life and the related prohibition of suicide and murder. As Simon Critchley elucidates: 'Following a concept first formulated by Augustine and then refined by Thomas Aquinas, life, for the Christian, is something given – a *datum* – over which we have the right of use, *usus*, but not governance, *dominion*, which can only be the prerogative of God' (*Notes on Suicide*, 18-19). As a gift from God, life is immeasurably valuable, which prevents us from committing the act of suicide: 'To kill oneself is to exercise dominion over one's life and to assume the power that is only possessed by the deity' (19).

<sup>2</sup> This is described by Russell Smith, in the introduction to *Beckett and Ethics* (2008), as a 'Levinasian model of ethics that forms [...] a turn seen variously as an attempt to give ethico-political substance to what was perceived as the empty linguistic formalism of deconstruction' (2-3).

<sup>3</sup> As Steven Connor suggests, criticism of Beckett 'has learnt to give every extremity of dilapidation in his work a positive reflex of value' (*Theory and Cultural Value*, 82).

<sup>4</sup> I take this phrase from the title of Shane Weller's 2006 study, *Beckett, Literature and the Ethics of Alterity*.

research materials, circa 2006' – included with the manuscript drafts of *Inner Workings* (where the 2006 Grove essay was republished) reveal Coetzee's engagement with a broadly deconstructive field of Beckett criticism at the time of writing.<sup>5</sup> For instance, in his introduction to *Saying I No More* (1999), Daniel Katz discusses 'a widespread sentiment that Beckett is in certain ways particularly close to the writers and questions associated with [poststructuralism]. The feeling is especially acute with regard to Derrida' (4). Katz quotes Stephen Barker as evidence: 'One's first reaction to reading Beckett is that he is not only the most obvious choice of an author to whose works one can apply poststructuralist strategies but that he is almost too good, programmed, it seems, for a Derridean treatment' (qtd. in Katz, 4).<sup>6</sup> Pencilled in the margin Coetzee's annotation reads: 'Back to front' (HRC, MS Coetzee Papers, Box 57, Folder 6). This parenthetical aside became substantiated in the finished Grove essay. For Coetzee, Beckett is not so much Derridean as Derrida is Beckettian:

The satiric interrogation to which he subjects the Cartesian cogito (I am thinking, therefore I must exist) is so close in spirit to Derrida's program for exposing the metaphysical assumptions behind Western thought that we must speak, if not of Beckett's direct influence on Derrida, then of a striking case of sympathetic vibration (*Inner Workings*, 172).

If Coetzee endorses an affinity between Derrida's and Beckett's works, it is Beckett's influence on Derrida that is of import. This move can be seen as strategic in the context of Coetzee's wider reading of Beckett: Beckett's work is not reducible to any philosophical system, even the anti-system of deconstruction.

The earnest reassertion of life in the Grove essay requires explication, therefore, both in light of the disparaging account of Beckett's 'lack of imaginative courage' in 'Eight Ways' and Coetzee's later immersion in poststructuralist modes of criticism. Coetzee's reticence towards attributing a redemptive sense of embodied life to Beckett's works certainly accords with an oeuvre characterised by an ebbing of vitality that afflicts both characters and narrators. When life itself is named as such it is often deployed as a source of bathos or target of abuse (much like the frequent exhortations to God): 'fuck life' (*The Complete*

---

<sup>5</sup> Coetzee's research materials for the later Grove essay include: Carla Locatelli's *Unwording the World: Samuel Beckett's Prose Works After the Nobel Prize* (1990), John Robert Keller's, *Samuel Beckett and the Primacy of Love* (2002), Daniel Katz's *Saying I No More: Subjectivity and Consciousness in the Prose of Samuel Beckett* (1999), Richard Begam's *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity* (1996) and David Pattie's *The Complete Critical Guide: Samuel Beckett* (2000).

<sup>6</sup> Barker echoes Attridge's comment on Beckett's work, put to Derrida directly in an interview in *Acts of Literature*: 'Is there a sense in which Beckett's writing is already so "deconstructive", or "self-deconstructive", that there is not much left to do?' (61).

*Dramatic Works*, 442) as the protagonist in *Rockaby* (1980) puts it, or ‘Bugger life!’ (*Mercier & Camier*, 94) as Watt exclaims in the novella *Mercier & Camier* (1946). In *Molloy*: ‘I was limply poking about in the garbage saying probably, for at that age I must still have been capable of general ideas, ‘This is life’ (57). The theological affirmation of immortal life is also the target of ridicule, as in *Endgame* when Clov asks: ‘Do you believe in the life to come?’, to which Hamm replies, sardonically stripping away the religious overtone: ‘Mine was always that’ (*Dramatic Works*, 116). Life as a positively charged source of affirmation or value is thus rendered problematic and always threatens to recede to a point of absolute non-value, like an everyday or commonplace platitude.

If a vital or embodied sense of life as a positive value is thereby denied, the Grove essay provokes a consideration of an alternative understanding of life in Beckett’s works more closely aligned to the economical thinking of the doctoral thesis. This economical thinking of life form and literary form is epitomised by the ‘dynamic stillness’ of the palindrome on/no in the ‘nohow on’ (103) of *Worstward Ho*.<sup>7</sup> The dynamic stillness of Beckett’s later works, that simultaneously asserts and negates value, constitutes and a *literary* thinking, or unwording of life, that defies thematic criticism.

The conjunction of textual economy and an approach to life as neither wholly present (embodied) nor absent (disembodied) – as Molloy sums up: ‘My life, my life, now I speak of it as of something over, now as a joke which still goes on, and it is neither, for at the same time it is over and it goes on, and is there any tense for that?’ (*Molloy*, 34) – is rooted through a doubled sense of time, of both mortal finitude and of narrative temporality. If the experience of living in time, for Beckett’s characters and narrators, is one of being perpetually haunted, then the irruption in the present of the past attests to the fundamentally divided condition of finite life; to the ineluctability of death as *internal* to life itself and as what makes life both lacking and, paradoxically, omnipresent. Life itself haunts the individual lives of Beckett’s narrators and characters, and is figured as an incapacity to choose life, to coincide with one’s own life, or to ascribe a value to life. Life as ceaselessly divided from its own present ground results in a proliferation; the absence of a certain or self-identical life also presupposes the absence of a certain or self-identical

---

<sup>7</sup> Wilm uses the phrase ‘dynamic stillness’ – sourced from Mary Bryden’s essay ‘Beckett and the Dynamic Still’ (2004) – in his study *The Slow Philosophy of J.M. Coetzee* to describe the reflexive or inquisitive nature of Coetzee’s texts. Interestingly, in Coetzee’s *Diary of a Bad Year*, J.C. deploys a notion of ‘dynamic stability’ (80) to illustrate the incongruence between natural life (specifically the ecosystem of jungles) and metaphors of survival and competition that permeate the discourse of political economy, particularly in the form of a myth that seeks to devalue non-productive forms of life.

death. As Molloy writes: '[T]o decompose is to live too' (*Molloy*, 22).<sup>8</sup> Such a condition – where, as Hamm in *Endgame* puts it, 'The end is in the beginning' (*Dramatic Works*, 126) – can be named after Molloy's notion of 'the mythological present' (*Molloy*, 23). This sense of the present, in both the senses of life-form and literary form, situates the reading experience in a paradoxical economy where meaning is extracted or possessed only insofar as it resists extraction and possession, thus denying the possibility of either a positive ontology or ethics of life.

In other words, Beckett's works don't simply thematise life as ineluctably indeterminate and finite, they stage life – via techniques of epanorthosis, parataxis, subjective displacement, and metaphor (discussed here and in chapter three) – as a site of contestation between values. This is what constitutes the distinction between a literary thinking as opposed to a propositional or logical thinking. Both Beckett's and Coetzee's works are constitutively averse to any attempt to posit life since to do so necessarily opens the possibility of a judgement or decision regarding the right to life or death. The inability to define or categorise life in the form of a positive ontology or ethics is not a denial of life but rather a concession to the impossibility of escaping life, of standing above or outside it to make it the object of an affectless reasoning. As such, Beckett's sense of 'life without end' (*Molloy*, 11), as Molloy phrases it – of life without a fixed teleology or purpose – disavows rational appropriation (a thinking, in accordance with a principle of non-contradiction, that would seek to delimit and master life).

In the first section, below, I explore the origins of Beckett's 'unreason' (*Ill Seen Ill Said*, 55) by elaborating the philosophical context behind *Watt*, returning to the topic of linguistic scepticism and the 'anarchic life' of language, notably of the propensity of figurative language to take on a structural rather than supporting role regarding thought. Beckett's literary unwording is seen to arise from a thorough grounding in philosophical questions and issues accreted around the notion of life. I explore Beckett's engagement with a post-Enlightenment emphasis on life that characterises modern philosophy, especially via concepts of nothingness, subjectivity, and time, with reference to his writings on Schopenhauer and Proust. I extrapolate Beckett's long-documented vexation with a notion of the 'nothing' as fundamental to the inauguration of an economical

---

<sup>8</sup> This co-implication of life and death is glossed across Beckett's works by the trope of the 'wombtomb' (*Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, 45). Beckett discovers this constitutive absence expressed memorably by C. G. Jung as the failure of consummated birth, and as a lived condition thereafter felt, as in the addenda to *Watt*, of 'never been properly born' (217).

aesthetic of sensory life – of seeing (unseeing) and hearing (unhearing) – in the *NoHow On* trilogy.

In the second section, I explore how Beckett's unwording practice anticipates Coetzee's literary thinking of embeddedness in Coetzee's first novel, *Dusklands*. Coetzee's repudiation in the thesis of what Beckett in an early manifesto terms the 'hypnosis of positivism' (*Poetry is Vertical*, 148) manifests as a devastating portrayal of the crisis of post-Enlightenment subjectivity. Through metafictional techniques Coetzee ironically displaces the self-sufficient subject of Enlightenment rationality (associated with the Cartesian cogito). This early example of Coetzee's literary thinking, by insisting on the material, affective, and embedded site of the subject of knowledge, follows Beckett in disavowing an extractable or propositional value of life *through* life, through the dynamic activities of both writing and reading that constitute the life of the work.

In the final section I return to Beckett's last works, the *Nohow On* trilogy, and explore how a textual economy (of the simultaneous assertion and retraction of meaning) constitutes an entanglement of embodiment and disembodiment, of life and death. Following Coetzee's metaphoric description of Beckett's literary form, I utilise the same tropes of embodiment and life – as they emerge in Beckett's late sensory aesthetic – to describe how metaphor itself is put to work in the late fictions. I stake the enduring legacy of Beckett's influence on Coetzee's literary thinking, therefore, to how Beckett's late works suspend the distinction between literal and figurative levels of meaning and thereby broach a distinctly literary modality of truth. Beckett's tensile deployment of sensory metaphors do not attest to the liberating possibility of a thing to become other than itself but rather to the impossibility for a thing to ever be contained in itself. In other words, Beckett's late works (contrary to a thematic preoccupation with disembodiment, dilapidation, and death) performatively envisage the possibility of a contradictory thinking whereby to be embodied is precisely seen as to be subject to disembodiment, and vice versa.

### **i: Beckett's Unwording of Life and Coetzee's Chandos Paradox.**

In August 2001 Coetzee received a letter from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* inviting him to contribute to a commemorative publication, 'Letters to Lord Chandos', in celebration of the centenary of Hugo von Hofmannsthal's 1902 *Ein Brief* (translated in English as *The Letter of Lord Chandos*). Hofmannsthal's famous text is written as a letter from a fictional Lord Chandos to Francis Bacon and describes a breakdown of faith in language.

Coetzee's contribution appears in the form of a short epistolary postscript in *Elizabeth Costello* written from the perspective of Chandos' wife, 'Elizabeth, Lady Chandos'. It begins: 'Dear and esteemed Sir, You will have received from my husband Philip a letter dated this 22nd August [...] and now I add my voice to his [...] These many months have I known of my Philip's affliction, and suffered with him' (*Elizabeth Costello*, 227). In Hofmannsthal's fictional text, Lord Chandos writes to Bacon, in 1603, to explain his abandonment of literary activity: 'My case, in short, is this: I have lost completely the ability to think or to speak of anything coherently' (*The Letter of Lord Chandos*, 133). No longer trusting the connection between language and reality, he is in a state of unremitting despondency, unable to access 'the core of things' (130), and is only occasionally alleviated by astonishing, mystical visions of 'the presence of the Infinite' witnessed in diminutive life-forms: 'In these moments an insignificant creature – a dog, a rat, a beetle, a crippled apple tree [...] mean more to me than the most beautiful, abandoned mistress of the happiest night [...] my enchanted eye can find nothing in sight void of life' (137-138).

The irony of Lord Chandos' poetic coherency is given a more corrosive potency in *Elizabeth Costello* through the impassioned heart-speech of Lady Chandos as she becomes aware of the tautology of her prose as a paradoxical indictment of language *through* language: 'I yield myself to the figures, do you see, Sir, how I am taken over?, *the rush* I call it when I do not call it *my rapture*, the rush and the rapture are not the same, but [...] they are clear to my eye, *my eye* I call it, *my inner eye*' (229). On the one hand, the piece stages the act of poetic production, and Lady Chandos is caught in the double-bind of writing as both active and passive. The estranging otherness or *privacy* of language, is thereby linked to an apprehension of the fundamental otherness of life. On the other hand, the irony of both pieces, more explicit in Coetzee's, makes impossible the evaluation of any vitalist order of life by staging how such an order depends upon the very embedded, linguistic, and all too human mode of apprehension that it supposedly transcends.

Hofmannsthal's *Ein Brief* was published a year after Fritz Mauthner's *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache* ('Contributions toward a Critique of Language'), in 1902. The latter was a key influence on Beckett, especially in the writing of *Watt*, and central to his autodidactic immersion in Western philosophy in the 1930s.<sup>9</sup> Both publications are emblematic of

---

<sup>9</sup> This influence was first substantially documented by Linda Ben-Zvi, see 'Samuel Beckett, Fritz Mauthner and the Limits of Language', in *PMLA*, 95 (1980). Recent empirical criticism dates Beckett engagement with Mauthner to 1938. Beckett's notes, largely transcriptions, are handwritten in the 'Whoroscope Notebook',



Austrian and German turn of the century *Sprachskepsis* (language scepticism) that was rooted in a philosophical lineage, extending from Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, that refutes the Kantian model of transcendental philosophical and the possibility of extra-temporal truths; that is, truths seen as independent from the finite modes of human representation.<sup>10</sup> Instead, as Nietzsche argues ‘On Truth and Lying in an Extra Moral Sense’ (1873), truth becomes: ‘A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed’ (250). Echoing Nietzsche, Mauthner writes: ‘Real truth is a metaphorical concept; men have reached the concept of truth, like the concept of God, without relying on experience. In this way it is possible to say that God is truth’ (qtd. in Ben-Zvi, 191).<sup>11</sup>

The task of escaping the tautologous and ceaselessly figurative nature of language – that which obscures the inscrutable account of life intimated by Lord and Lady Chandos – is undertaken by Mauthner over three volumes of the *Kritik*, and is recorded in Beckett’s notes accordingly: ‘[T]he critique of language alone can unlock these gates [of truth] and show with friendly resignation that they lead from the world and thought into the void’ (qtd. in Feldman *Beckett’s Books*, 117).<sup>12</sup> The sceptical imperative of Mauthner’s philosophy underpins Beckett’s aesthetic of the ‘unword’ or ‘logoclast’: ‘[T]he idea is ruptured writing, so that the void may protrude, like a hernia’ (*Letters of Beckett*, 521). Mauthner is key to Beckett’s negative aesthetics insofar as the incommensurable gulf between subject and object – language and life – that marks Beckett’s earlier writings is later re-cast so that the negation of language can bring forth an extra-linguistic reality. It is in *Watt* that this process is first foregrounded. Through Beckett’s parodic satire of seventeenth-century philosophical prose, and Watt’s own floundering attempt to decipher Mr. Knott and his

---

and Feldman documents eleven separate entries, ‘overwhelmingly taken from Mauthner’s chapters ‘The Metaphor’ and ‘Origins and History of Reason’ (*Beckett’s Books*, 138), from Volume II of the *Kritik*.

<sup>10</sup> These philosophical concerns were given literary form by several contemporary authors, including Hofmannsthal, but also Musil and Rilke, both of whom are key precursors for Coetzee. I return to this important intertextual context – an affinity between philosophical and literary modernism – in the final chapter.

<sup>11</sup> Coetzee’s familiarity with Mauthner is evidenced by an essay on J.L. Borges in *Stranger Shores*. Coetzee, discussing the Argentine author’s ‘idealistic fictions about worlds created by language’ (170), notes that Borges’ own version of French structuralist ‘*textualité*’ was not derived from Saussure but ‘via Schopenhauer and, particularly, Fritz Mauthner’ (171).

<sup>12</sup> For further details of Coetzee’s relation to language philosophy see Peter D. McDonald’s recent essay ‘Coetzee’s Critique of Language’.

house, the novel undermines the pretensions of systematic thought.<sup>13</sup> Beckett's postulation of a 'nominalist irony' in the German letter hence becomes enshrined as an aesthetic procedure that seeks to conjure the nothing that evades language through the ineluctable material remainder – Coetzee's rhythm of doubt – that language itself constitutes.

Prior to the re-assessment of Beckett's later works in the Grove essay, but following the doctoral work of the 1960s, Coetzee's continued interest in the Beckettian-Mauthnerian matrix of issues that hinge of the vexed relation between word and world is evidenced by a flurry of articles that appeared between 1980 and 1982. Three of these pieces appear republished in *Doubling the Point*: 'The Rhetoric of the Passive in English' (1980), 'The Agentless Sentence as Rhetorical Device' (1980), 'Isaac Newton and the Ideal of a Transparent Scientific Language' (1982). These essays remain concerned with the core issues identified in the thesis of 1969, specifically Richard Ohmann's notion of style as 'epistemic choice' (qtd. in *The English Fiction*, 157), the ineluctability of metaphor, and the broader context of linguistic relativity and determinism. These essays also evidence a greater engagement with the question of metaphor, as in 'Isaac Newton and the Idea of a Transparent Scientific Language' (1982) where Coetzee investigates Newton's *Principia* and finds therein 'a real struggle [...] to bridge the gap between the non-referential symbolism of mathematics and a language too protean to be tied down to single, pure meanings' (*Doubling*, 194). Recalling the critique of stylostistics in the doctoral thesis, Coetzee argues that Newton's struggle to describe a reality perceived in mathematics (pertaining to theory of gravitational force) was the struggle for a *characteristica universalis*; a 'pure language in which a pure, pared-down, unambiguous translation of the truths of pure mathematics' (193-194) could be found.<sup>14</sup>

The intractability of figurative language destabilises rational systems of thought. Given the importance of Beckett to the gestation of Coetzee's literary thinking, it is not surprising, therefore, that Descartes' Cogito typifies the model of affectless rationality

---

<sup>13</sup> As Coetzee argues: '[P]arodying these traits [of philosophical prose] Beckett also refines them, until finally his intricate syntactic structures develop a purely plastic content, losing, in the process of their sound and rhythm, all meaning, even the most literal' (*The English Fiction*, 147).

<sup>14</sup> Coetzee focuses on Newton's attribution of agency to a gravitational force and discusses Newton's early reception in terms of a debate as to the relative novelty of a theory that, by 'attributing agency and even volition' (*Doubling*, 188) to celestial bodies without cause, seemed as animistic as medieval physics. Coetzee illustrates Newton's awareness of the problems involved in popularising his work by building on the syntactic hypothesis of Richard Ohmann's account of style, already utilised in the thesis on Beckett, that syntactic patterns mirror habits of meaning and have 'psychological correlates' (qtd. in *Doubling*, 161).

that, as epitomised by Elizabeth Costello in her lecture on animal life, is associated across the works as complicit with ethical violence:

“Cogito, ergo sum,” he famously said. It is a formula I have always been uncomfortable with. It implies that a living being that does not do what we call thinking is somehow second-class. To thinking, cogitation, I oppose fullness, embodiedness, the sensation of being [...] alive to the world (*Elizabeth Costello*, 78).

Nevertheless, Coetzee’s inheritance of Beckett cannot be separated from latter’s unbroken ‘concern for rationality’ (*Doubling*, 26), and the ironic and metafictional framework of the novel attests equally to the difficulty of maintaining a purely anti-rational or vitalist account of life (I explore how Costello’s sense of embodiedness is undermined by the novel’s strategy of narrative *embeddedness* in chapter four). Rather than *positively* asserting a vision of life, Coetzee’s literary thinking inherits instead the critical impetus of Beckett’s Mauthernian enterprise of exposing the falsely anthropocentric premises of human reason.<sup>15</sup>

Integral to this questioning of the possibility of any positive ontology of life is the question of the ‘anarchic life’ of literary works. In the thesis Coetzee takes aim at static or linear approaches to literary meaning that are premised on a division between deep and surface level structures of meaning (including Noam Chomsky’s Cartesian framework). Coetzee’s suspicion of the depth metaphor – notable for its paralleled application in New Critical and high modernist formulations of an artwork’s organic unity – is illustrated through a discussion of Leo Spitzer’s 1928 essay on Proust (‘Zum Stil Marcel Prousts’) as an example of the ‘uncritical belief in the imitative potential of syntax’ (*The English Fiction*, 86) to mirror thought. As Coetzee argues, there can be no hierarchical separation between syntax and thought since:

Proust is dead. Even if he were alive it would be unlikely that he would be prepared to tell us what “the movements of his soul” were when he composed his fiction. Even if he were prepared we would have no means of verifying it because, for the moment at least, our only approach to the preverbal mental activity that results in language is through that language itself (87-88).

Coetzee’s disavowal of the depth metaphor – of underlying or ideal structures of meaning that determine linear syntactical correspondences on the surface of the page – can be extrapolated as a disavowal of the metaphysical presupposition that the subject exists

---

<sup>15</sup> As Mauthner writes: ‘Whatever the human may dare to do through superhuman strength in order to discover the truth, he always finds only himself, an anthropomorphic picture of the world’ (qtd. in Feldman, ‘Beckett and Philosophy’, 168).

before language (for Chomsky this is precisely by virtue of being innately capable of language acquisition), is self-sufficient, and like Descartes' Aristotelian conception of the speaking and, therefore, rational human, is in command of the language through which the human subject comes to be identified and prioritised in opposition to animal life (I discuss this in greater detail in Chapter 4).

Coetzee's thinking here prefigures an affinity with post-structuralist thinkers, such as Foucault and Derrida, both of whom feature explicitly in later writings. Especially regarding the latter, the refutation of a pre-verbal mental activity – or at least our access to such an entity – echoes Derrida's contemporary critique in *Of Grammatology* (published in 1968 and translated in 1976) of the philosophical hierarchy that privileges speech over writing. However, the central locus of Coetzee's relation to Derrida is arguably the essay 'White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy' (1974).<sup>16</sup> It is this essay that Attwell asserts as key to the post-structuralist re-orientation in Coetzee's critical thinking towards the end of the 1970s.<sup>17</sup> In 'White Mythology' Derrida takes up the question of metaphor and of the relation between figurative language and truth in the history of philosophy. By unearthing the figurative ground of Western thought Derrida implicitly challenges the anthropocentric foundations of philosophy. I return to Derrida's essay and the question of metaphor in Coetzee's writings in the final section of this chapter.

The starkest account of this disaggregation of the rational human in Beckett's oeuvre arguably occurs in *The Unnamable*. The speech of the narrator – the unnamable – commences with a radical questioning of its own conditions of possibility: 'Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving. Questions, hypotheses, call them that' (1). As the very possibility of the 'I' is withdrawn, the disembodied voice of the novel materialises the Chandos paradox; the subject is constituted precisely by being de-constituted through language. This displacement of linear causality, that relates the subject as active to the object as passive, undermines the self-sufficient rational subject: 'But enough of this cursed first person, it is really too red a herring, I'll get out of my depth if I'm not careful. But what then is the subject? Mahood? No, not yet. Worm? Even

---

<sup>16</sup> The title of Derrida's essay recalls Coetzee's volume of critical essays *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (1988). Seeking to circumvent the empiricism of conventional literary historical writing, Coetzee in an interview reminds his readers that his project is aligned with a philosophical impetus that, we might add, closely resembles Derrida's: '*White Writing* isn't about writing by people with white skins but about European ideas writing themselves out in Africa' (*Doubling*, 338-9).

<sup>17</sup> Attwell's thesis is confirmed by the prominent presence of 'White Mythology' in the archive of Coetzee's 'Research Materials' at the HRC, alongside various other Derrida texts, including: 'Freud and the Scene of Writing' (1972), and 'Signature, Event, Context' (1977).

less. Bah, any old pronoun will do, provided one sees through it' (57). In the essay on Newton, Coetzee similarly discusses 'the link between syntactic subjecthood and semantic agency' (*Doubling*, 189) as key to Newton's difficulty in attributing agency to the concept of force. This is because conventional syntactic ordering is 'iconic both of time order and of causal order' (190), and hence 'the meaning superadded by Subject-Verb order is metaphorical in the sense that it imposes a temporal-causal order over a syntactic order' (192). In other words, grammar and syntax don't merely reflect but rather engender a temporal-causal order of linearity that cannot therefore be guaranteed outside the realm of convention.

This repudiation of the anthropocentric bias of Western thought and art is arguably established by Beckett's earlier writing on visual art from the 1930s. In a letter of 1934, Beckett discusses Paul Cézanne as the first artist to envision an 'atomistic landscape with no velleities of vitalism', the consequence of which is celebrated as 'one bright spot in a mechanistic age – the deanthropomorphization of the artist' (*Letters of Samuel Beckett*, 222-223). In another letter a little later in the same year Beckett discusses the 'incommensurability' of reading Cézanne's life in his works, since 'he had the sense of his incommensurability not only with life of such a different order as landscape but even with life of his own order, even with the life [...] operative in himself' (227). Coetzee's direct commentary on this letter concludes: 'Herewith the first authentic note of Beckett's mature, post-humanist phase is struck' (*Late Essays*, 183). The fundamental incommensurability of life, which in 'Recent Irish Poetry' (1934) amounts to a 'rupture of the lines of communication' (70) between subject and object, grounds an aesthetics of the posthuman or 'inhuman', the latter a notion that is famously substantiated in Beckett's commentary of Jack Butler Yeats (writing to MacGreevy in 1937 Beckett suggests that Yeats produces a 'nature almost as inhumanly inorganic as a stage set' that reveals 'a sense of the ultimate inorganism of everything', *Letters of Samuel Beckett*, 540). Beckett's earlier art commentary in this period is thus demonstrable of how an aesthetics of the unword is rooted in a thinking of life. The perceived severance of subject and object nevertheless leaves a middling ground, what Beckett terms a 'no-mans-land' ('Recent Irish Poetry', 70).<sup>18</sup> This disconnect fosters a non-anthropocentric vision of life that is incarnated by

---

<sup>18</sup> Beckett grasps the work of Franz Marc in similar terms: 'Interesting notes in Marc re subject, predicate, object relations in painting. He says: paint the predicate of the living, Picasso does that by the inanimate. By that he appears to mean not the relation between subject and object, but the alienation (my nomansland)' (qtd. in Feldman *Beckett's Books*, 15).

the art of the unword in *The Trilogy*: ‘I have been a man long enough, I shall not put up with it anymore, I shall not try anymore’ (*Molloy*, 184).

In Beckett’s later post-war art criticism this inhuman vision of life is aligned with an aesthetic mode whereby the imperative of art is to represent the resistance of the object to representation, as outlined in ‘The New Object’ (1948) where Beckett writes: ‘For what remains to be represented if the essence of the object is to elude representation? [...] there remains to be represented the conditions of that elusion’ (879). I trace such an imperative in Coetzee’s early novels, notably in relation to their postcolonial context and their refusal to construe a positive or ethically sanguine sense of life as simply other to colonial regimes of power (since to construe life as other is precisely how such regimes operate).

The consequent indeterminacy of life, in both Beckett and Coetzee, derives, therefore, not only from an implicit questioning of different forms of life, however, but from a consideration of the relation of form to time. The resistance of the literary work to *static* modes of analysis (structuralism for Coetzee and philosophy proper, as the pursuit of extra-temporal truth, for Beckett) is thereby aligned with an apprehension of the fundamental indeterminacy of life. In Beckett’s monograph, *Proust* (1929), the question of time underpins a discussion of philosophy, represented via Schopenhauer. Beckett’s vexation with the fraught axis of subject and object relations unfolds in *Proust* as a framework for critiquing the French writer’s idealist or romantic solution to the problem of ‘Habit’ (18), the stultifying illusions of everyday life. This solution, the account of involuntary memory, is reminiscent, for Beckett, of Schopenhauer’s definition of artistic procedure as ‘the contemplation of the world independently of the principle of reason’ (87). Ineluctably embedded in a realm of representations that separate us from the Thing-in-itself (*ding an sich*) – the noumenal realm Schopenhauer adopts from Kant’s transcendental philosophy – it is the task of art to negatively undo these illusions from the distorting grasp of, as Beckett summarises, ‘intelligibility [...] of cause and effect’ (86).<sup>19</sup> For Schopenhauer:

Subject and object do not form a continuum. That of which we are immediately conscious is bounded by the skin [...] Beyond this lies a world of which we have no other knowledge than that gained through pictures in our mind. Now the

---

<sup>19</sup> The relation of both Hofmannsthal’s original Chandos letter, and Coetzee’s Chandos postscript, to the intersection between post-Kantian thought and linguistic scepticism is made clear by one of Coetzee’s annotations to Hofmannsthal’s text in the archived research materials for *Elizabeth Costello*. In the margins, next to a sentence that details Chandos’ inability to communicate – ‘For me everything disintegrated into parts’ – Coetzee writes ‘ding an sich’ (HRC, MS Coetzee Papers, Box 38 Folder 6).

question is whether and to what extent a world existing independently corresponds to these pictures (*The World as Will and Representation*, 10).

This world ‘of which we have no other knowledge’ pertains to what Schopenhauer terms the will (*Wille*) or the will-to-life. Through art we can free ourselves of the machinations of the will, but to negate this incessant life-drive the artist is obliged to disavow the order of intelligibility or representation and act negatively. Accordingly, in *Proust* it is possible to infer Schopenhauer’s palpable influence on Beckett in his summation of ‘[t]he artist [a]s active, but negatively, shrinking from the nullity of extracircumferential phenomena, drawn in to the core of the eddy’ (65).

The division between the phenomenal and noumenal realms – the world as it appears to us and the ideal world of things-in-themselves – is the focus of Schopenhauer’s critique of post-Kantian Idealism. The latter, as Eugene Thacker argues, can be characterised as an attempt to bridge the gulf between subject (the one who thinks life) and object (life as that which is thought) by positing a form of ‘Absolute Life’ (‘Darklife: Negation, Nothingness, and the Will-To-Life in Schopenhauer’, 15) which renders Kant’s division redundant.<sup>20</sup> By seeking to render subject and object continuous, post-Kantian Idealism affirms life as a form of immanent becoming, ‘an infinite process of becoming, flux, and flow, an infinite expression of the living in an organic whole called life’ (‘Darklife’, 15). Life as such becomes superabundant or over-present; by turning the static or transcendent category of being into a dynamic and immanent category of vitalist becoming, post-Kantian idealism affirms life as a positive infinity.<sup>21</sup> Such an account of life can arguably be traced through a post-romantic or vitalist strand of modernist aesthetics that Coetzee attributes to writers such as Stevens and Nabokov but is also explored explicitly by Elizabeth Costello, in Coetzee’s eponymous novel, in relation to D.H. Lawrence and Ted Hughes (I discuss this in chapter four).

---

<sup>20</sup> Thacker argues that life, in Idealism, essentially serves as a metonym for the Absolute (as per the concept of ‘Absolute life’ in Fichte).

<sup>21</sup> If Coetzee inherits an anti-systematic thinking of life from Beckett it bears note that Beckett’s philosophical interests also converge around figures who pose life itself as resistant to Western rationalism. It is of course perilous to group Beckett’s multifarious philosophical influences under a single banner, yet figures such as Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Bergson, and Proust are pivotal to what Ingo Farin argues constitutes ‘modern life-philosophy’, much of which ‘addresses the polarity of life and reason [...] Life-philosophy of this sort is primarily *protest philosophy*’ (‘Heidegger and Hegel: The Time of Life and The Time of Life-Philosophy’, 24). Beckett’s favoured post-idealist and post-Romantic philosophers drew upon life to systematically undermine previous pretensions that claim universal truth by ignoring questions of subjectivity, time, and perception. Much work has been done on Beckett’s philosophical auto-didacticism, due to the brevity and focus of this project I am unable to re-capitulate these debates.

For Beckett, the ‘Proustian solution’ (*Proust*, 75) of involuntary memory repeats this idealist fallacy of romantic or vitalist becoming by seeking to tear down the veil of habit that lies between our perceptions of the world and the world as it really is. Untainted by the Will’s motivations, involuntary memory offers the artist both a conduit to extra-temporal truth and a sublimation of time as becoming. This immediate access with past experience Beckett terms the ‘ideal real [...] this mystical experience communicates an extratemporal essence’ that negates ‘Time and Death’ (*Proust*, 75). Indeed, for Beckett, Proust’s solution is ‘romantic’ precisely in its ‘substitution of affectivity for intelligence’ (*Proust*, 81). Nevertheless, Proust’s art avoids the fallacy of a lifeless or static rationalism: ‘Thus his purely logical [...] explanations of a certain effect invariably bristle with alternatives’ (*Proust*, 81). Proust’s romanticism is naive but by emphasising the somatic and temporal as opposed to the rational and static, Beckett finds a source that chimes with his apprehension of Schopenhauer.

Rather than a vitalist sublimation of the material conditions of life, Beckett’s later works conceive of life in terms of a negative infinity that constitutes a limit to any master-discourse on life, whether ontological, biological, or theological. The negative infinity of temporal life marks an ineluctable condition that situates death at the heart of life, dividing the self from itself, and thereby disrupts both ontological fixity and ethical evaluation. Instead, time, as Beckett writes in *Proust*, is a ‘[d]ouble headed monster of salvation and damnation’ (11). In Beckett’s later works the temporal alterity of life manifests, following Schopenhauer, as an aporetic desire for nothing which undermines desire itself as a relation between subject and object. In *Murphy* (1938) this manifests as the eponymous character’s pursuit of ‘the positive peace that comes when the somethings give way, or perhaps simply add up, to the Nothing, that which in the guffaw of the Abderite naught is more real’ (154). It is perhaps with *The Unnamable*, however, that Beckett’s most productive use and abuse of the ‘nothing’ is manifested. Therein the ‘nothing’ functions as a material excess that marks any given act of representation or expression. In the words of the novel’s narrator: ‘Having nothing to say, no words but the words of others, I have to speak. No one compels me to, there is no one, it’s an accident, a fact. Nothing can exempt me from it, there is nothing, nothing to discover, nothing to recover, nothing that can lessen what remains to say’ (25). Having ‘no language but theirs’ (38) the narrator has the task of ‘nothing to say’; that is, as Hayes puts it, ‘he must endeavour to express the nothingness occluded by the concepts he has inherited’ (*J.M. Coetzee and the Novel*, 46).



The nothing therefore informs an incalculable or infinite negativity that cannot be appropriated by a propositional or rational thinking. As *The Unnamable* makes paradoxically clear, Beckett's text 'wants for nothing' (10), meaning both that it desires nothing and, therefore, lacks nothing. However, to lack nothing also has a double meaning; by wanting for nothing the work lacks nothing, by lacking nothing the work wants for nothing.<sup>22</sup> It is through this double bind that Beckett's works stage the question of life between human and non-human modes of being; of life itself in a state of contradiction as *both* something and nothing.

This alternative thinking of life – a thinking generated through the paradoxical economy of Beckett's negative or unwording aesthetic – can be further expounded with recourse to Coetzee's archived research notes on Nathan A. Scott's 1965 *Samuel Beckett* (typed up around the time of *Dusklands*, in the early 1970s). Coetzee quotes a lengthy section that discusses the paradox of the nothing in Martin Heidegger's 'What is Metaphysics?' (1929) and transcribes: 'through the experience of the Nothing, all the structures and categories of reason disappear' (HRC, MS Coetzee Papers, Box 99, Folder 3). A unique comportment is required to apprehend the nothing since, as Heidegger suggests, 'thinking, which is always essentially thinking about something, must act in a way contrary to its own essence when it thinks of the nothing' ('What is Metaphysics', 97). This contradictory thinking is delineated as a form of affective attunement (*Stimmung*), comparable to the thinking *through* contradiction which underpins the dynamic stillness of Beckett's works.

Indeed, it is with the *NoHow On* trilogy where this logic or counter-logic of dynamic stillness reaches an apotheosis. These later works perform the double-bind of the nothing through figurative systems of sensory and affective experience – of sight and sound – that continually unravel or become disfigured, posing an ineluctable remainder. This is crystallised through the trope of the imagination. Following the contradictory imperative substantiated by the title of Beckett's 1965 short prose piece, *Imagination Dead Imagine*, the imagination is linked in the later works to the material or affective experience of an aporetic economy of unknowing epitomised by the final lines of *Ill Seen Ill Said*: 'Grace to breathe that void. Know happiness' (78). The ambiguity of the silent 'K' echoes the earlier

---

<sup>22</sup> This paradox is encapsulated in one of Beckett's favourite propositions – which appears in *Murphy* and *Malone Dies* – derived from Democritus: 'Nothing is more real than nothing' (*Malone Dies*, 17). That is, the nothing is real, and the most real since it is more real than itself, but as nothing this means similarly that it is less real, and hence both real but also not self-identical.

*Watt* and the character Mr. Knott, establishing the continuity of a paradoxical negative knowledge that resists both systematic appropriation and metaphorical or allegorical transposition; as *Watt* concludes: ‘no symbols where none intended’ (223).<sup>23</sup>

Accordingly, if an account of life re-emerges, as Coetzee argues in the Grove essay, this cannot be captured as a vital phenomenon or site of positive value. Instead, these final texts enact a shift from the problem of representing matter (the subject and object split), to the material of representation. This manifests as the representation of the resistance of life itself to representation as the inescapable condition of finite life is rendered through a non-representational modality – a literary thinking – that profoundly disrupts the positive appropriation of life as a possibility of value (existential, ethical, or religious).

A close reading of the late *Stirrings Still* attests to the non-representational mode and to the entwinement of the temporal economies of both life and literature. Divested of Beckett’s earlier allusive style, *Stirrings Still* deploys a parataxis or staccato phraseology of rhythmic syntactic repetitions that obfuscates both semantic and referential meaning. Written in the present tense – ‘So on unknowing and no end in sight’ (113) – the text further blurs the division between the figurative and literal meaning, generating a profound indeterminacy which structures the third-person narrative voice: ‘First rise and stand clinging to the table. Then sit again. Then rise again and stand clinging to the table again. Then go. Start to go. On unseen feet start to go. So slow that only change of place to show he went’ (107). The almost total absence of proper nouns across the text generates repetitions of improper nouns and the predicates of an unnamed male subject. Figurations of sight and sound, which mark the passing of time, restage the economy of unknowing through a supplementary metaphorical system which *catastrophically* (that is, via a counter-trope or counter-turning) undermines the transposing effect of metaphor. A distillation of this process can be witnessed via the trope of the clock: ‘Till so many strokes and cries since he was last seen that perhaps he would not be seen again’ (110). The abbreviated preposition ‘Till’ (until) is missing a corresponding future conditional verb (‘will’ and/or ‘have’), and hence clashes with the simple past ‘was’ which acts to retroactively disrupt the opening, rendering the tense indecipherable. The causality at

---

<sup>23</sup> The sense of Beckett’s *Watt* as a failed allegory – insofar as what is said (what Coetzee terms the verbal surface in the doctoral thesis) seems always detached from meaning or what is meant – can be seen as a crucial precursor to Coetzee’s own staging of allegory, including in the most recent Jesus fictions. This challenge to allegorical reading, to a critical model of surface and depth, is further reflected by Beckett’s general dislike of allegory, as manifest in the commentary on Jack Butler Yeats’ *The Amaranthers*: ‘There is no allegory, that glorious double-entry, with every credit in the said account a debit in the meant, and inversely’ (*Disjecta*, 90).

work in this sentence doesn't correspond to temporal tense, as if means and ends, causes and effects, were all equivalent. The missing verb or verbs perform an erosion of both grammatical cohesion and expressive coherence; a dynamic process of 'unknowing' that is not simply stated but performed. This dynamic textual economy is further epitomised by the title which plays with slippage of the dual spatial and temporal designations of 'still'. The duplicity of 'still' in the title generates both the sense 'stirring still' (i.e. temporally now) and the sense of 'still stirring' (i.e. a spatial stasis, that the stirring is in fact a *stilling*).<sup>24</sup> The effect echoes the impossible simultaneity that marks the troubled voice of *The Unnamable*: 'I say what I hear, I hear what I say' (132). By thus enfolding a contradictory narrative temporality into a portrayal of life as paradoxically permanently impermanent, or finite, Beckett renders life in opposition to a positive appropriation by creating a text in opposition to summative modes of reading.

Beckett's dynamic stillness is established further in both *Ill Seen Ill Said* and *Company*. Both texts evoke a clock and the motion of a second hand over a dial, connoting what Ian Maclachlan terms 'an unending cycle of ending' (*Marking Time*, 120). As in *Ill Seen Ill Said*: 'Close-up of dial. Nothing else. White disc divided in minutes. Unless it be seconds. Sixty black dots. No figure. One hand only...It advances by fits and starts' (69). In *Company* a watch face is thrust under the reader's gaze through the use of the second person: 'Your eyes light on the watch lying beneath it. But instead of reading the hour of night they follow round and round the second hand now followed and now preceded by its shadow' (38). Time is again spatially figured and disfigured through metaphoric cycles of dark and light, night and day: 'What visions in the dark of light!' (39). This logic of self-dissolution, of a simultaneous affirmation and negation – 'the dark of light!' – engenders a temporality of a 'stirring still' present that situates a remainder at the heart of the internal economy of these texts. This remainder makes the prospect of summative or extractable meaning impossible by preventing the possibility of any absolute value; any value not subject to the self-division of the present, and therefore to an ineluctable contingency definitive of both the dynamic activities of reading and writing (as per Coetzee's account of the literary

---

<sup>24</sup> This indeterminacy is compounded in *Ill Seen Ill Said*. The old woman in the story appears to us as both past and present, dead and alive: 'Time truth to tell still current' (49). As Christopher Ricks notes: 'What is it, when contemplating someone who may be alive now in memory only, for that time of hers to be 'still current', where not only does 'still' have its own internal cross-currents but where one of the senses of *still*, the unmoving one, precipitates a further oxymoron as it moves on into 'still current'?' (*Beckett's Dying Words*, 136).

work across the critical writings) and of finite life itself (as inherently resistant to conceptualisation).

Beckett's implicit critique of value reaches a zenith in the textual economy of negation and affirmation in *Worstward Ho*. Beckett's staging of value further substantiates a paradoxical or aporetic logic (what Malone terms 'my old aporetics', *Malone Dies* 5) that enacts a process of reversibility hypostasised by the palindrome on/no<sup>25</sup>: 'On. Say on. Be said on. Somehow on. Till nohow on. Said nohow on' (81). As the text proceeds in this paratactic mode, the aporetic pursuit of failing better becomes intrinsic to the narrative economy; any extraction of a 'best' or 'worst' meaning from the text is subjected to a constitutive contingency since every negation, or 'no', constitutes yet a further saying and hence a going 'on'. The possibility or origin of value is thus situated at the site of what the text terms the 'boundless bounded' (83). This is both the possibility of evaluation in the present and the impossibility for any posited value to be indivisible, that is absolute or self-sufficient. Hence, the nothing is not some supreme ideal, as the text makes clear: 'The 'least [is] never to be naught' (95). The present or still moment is instead constitutively stirring. 'For to gain time. Time to lose. Gain time to lose' (88).

The aporetic logic of Beckett's unwording or unknowing hinges on the collapse of the distinction between figurative and literal meaning that safeguards rational thought. By unravelling the metaphoric association of light with knowledge (presupposed by the notion of 'Enlightenment') Beckett's works make a mockery of binary or oppositional thinking, as in *Company*: 'A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine' (3). Through the imperative to imagine, the text generates a performative mode of knowing or unknowing epitomised by a notion of enlivenment: 'Mentally perhaps there is room for enlivenment. An attempt at reflexion at least' (*Company*, 17). This performative mode is issued through a plural narrative voice that stages the possibility of its own speech. Consequently, the disaggregation of the literary form of the pronominal narrating subject – split between first, second- and third-person pronouns – also constitutes a disaggregation of the represented life-form of the narrated subject.

---

<sup>25</sup> These texts intensify the literary thinking of the earlier work, and in some instances directly reference their predecessors. *Company*'s 'nought anew' (8) condenses the 'the nothing new' (3) of *Murphy*'s opening, and similarly follows *Ill Seen Ill Said* in embodying a negative infinity that structures the text's account of life, marking the present of the text as one haunted by both a past and future: 'Might not the voice be improved. Made more companionable. Say changing now for some time past though no tense in the dark in that dim mind. All at once over and in train and to come' (*Company*, 21).

In *Company* the narrated subject is also the autobiographical subject. This disavowal of a masterful or authorial position, at the levels of both narrating and narrated subject, manifests an unavoidable embeddedness. The subject or subjects that comprise *Company* are hence radically indeterminate yet as a result also grounded in a material, sensory and aporetic nexus of speaking and hearing:

Now faint from afar and now a murmur in his ear. In the course of a single sentence it may change place and tone. Thus for example clear from above his upturned face, You first saw the light at Easter and now. Then a murmur in his ear, You are on your back in the dark. Or of course vice versa (9).

Alluding to Beckett's own birthdate, on Good Friday 1906, the oscillating third and first-person pronouns nevertheless confuse any account of agency, rendering the personal and the impersonal, ambiguous. Coetzee's own autobiographical writings will similarly stage a disaggregation of the subject by deploying a third-person narrator – as in *Youth* – that estranges the narrating subject from the narrated subject (I discuss Coetzee's life-writing in greater detail in chapter five). Such a displacement of the enunciating centre of the work invokes the staging of the writer-figure taken up across Beckett's *Trilogy* and further highlights a central aspect of Coetzee's inheritance: rather than merely disaggregating in a postmodern fashion the possibility of certain truths and self-presence, that Beckett 'always pulls us back to the question of who speaks' (*Beckett Writing Beckett*, ix) – as H. Porter Abbott argues – attests to the *truth* of the living and writing being itself as constitutively embedded and therefore finite; that is, as constitutively evasive of categorical or definitive truth claims.

In *Company*, the disaggregation of linguistic subjecthood implicitly stages the question of life, as I argue is the case in Coetzee's works, not simply in terms of form but of form as subject to time; subject to the inherent division of the present which both necessitates the possibility of value and evaluation and the impossibility of any absolute value. By staging a constitutive temporal alterity through a narrative economy Beckett's late texts are themselves subject to an ineluctable finitude that prevents our extraction of any absolute account of life. Consequently, Beckett's 'account of life' is tied to the condition of an embedded and material finitude – in terms of both life form and literary form – that cannot be transcended. This condition entails that which enables anything to be (the same) is also that which prevents it from being *in itself*: '[W]hat but life ending. Hers. The other's. But so otherwise' (*Ill Seen Ill Said*, 51). This implies, as Steven Connor argues, the necessity of 'living through, or [...] "living off", the reversibility of value' (*Theory and*

*Cultural Value*, 83). The ceaseless unending-ending of Beckett's late works enact this paradoxical reversibility of value; as the texts vainly seek to live off life, to consign its oppressive company to the abyss of a desired nothing, they also ceaselessly posit life.

This economy of value is already present in Adorno's 1961 essay 'Trying to Understand Endgame': 'The ultimate absurdity is that the repose of nothingness and that of reconciliation cannot be distinguished from each other' (150). The complicity of plenitude and penury in Beckett leaves life ineluctably embedded in the here and now, in both space and time. As for instance in *Worstward Ho*, where the positing of a body necessarily requires 'A place. Where none. For the body. To be in. Move in. Out of. Back into. No. No out. Not back. Only in. On in' (81). If life is to be valued, it cannot be so from outside the material experience of living a finite, contingent and fallible life, since any such outside beyond temporal and spatial embeddedness would in fact negate life itself. The literary thinking of Beckett's work thus produces a value that, as Connor elucidates, 'cannot without violent abbreviation merely be cited, mentioned or transmitted by a critical discourse, since it consists in a perturbed transaction of thought that has always to be renewed, lived through or off, in order to be known' (*Theory and Cultural Value*, 89). This account of the economy of value in Beckett is complemented by a more recent essay on Beckett's 'radical finitude' where Connor argues: '[I]f finitude means never being able quite to coincide with one's being here and now, it also means the inability to live anywhere "but" in the here and now' ("On Such and Such a Day...In Such a World": Beckett's Radical Finitude', 38). This conjunction of literary form and life form structures Coetzee's inheritance of a literary thinking; a thinking that cannot be separated from the exigencies of the living and affective present (including the present of writing and reading) and therefore cannot, 'without violent abbreviation', be reduced to a rational or discursive truth-claim or procedure.

## **ii. *Dusklands***

In the above section I argued that Beckett's negative aesthetics, rendered through a figuring and disfiguring of somatic life and sensory perception, informs a questioning of the human. Such a questioning is also fundamental to Coetzee's works and can be traced from the very first novel. *Dusklands* (1974) deploys Beckettian simulations of fragmented interiority that disrupt the process through which rational systems of thought are brought to bear in engulfing attempts to dispossess the living. Indeed, the very title of the work gestures towards an eclipse of Enlightenment reasoning, a form that is associated –

following Beckett – with a dualism that subordinates embodied life to the life of the mind. The drama of *Dusklands* is hence inscribed from the beginning with the problem of life. Eugene Dawn, the narrator-protagonist of the first of the two narratives, ‘The Vietnam Project’, is tasked with devising a military report (euphemistically entitled ‘the New Life Project’, 1) on the potential of broadcast propaganda for his supervisors. Instead, he writes a short treatise advocating the destruction of the natural and ecological life of the enemy and imagines an ‘assault of the mothering earth herself’ (28). This destructive programme follows in accordance with a deep-seated vexation with his own body; we are told early on of Dawn’s entrapment within the white walls of his skull: ‘I am the subject of a revolting body’ (7). Dawn’s hypertrophied self-consciousness establishes a theme that continues throughout Coetzee’s writings and can be related to the last of Coetzee’s trilogy of fictionalised memoirs, *Summertime*. Therein John takes on the form of a Beckettian disembodied consciousness: ‘He wasn’t any kind of animal, and for a very specific reason: his mental capacities were overdeveloped, at the cost of his animal self. He was *Homo sapiens*, or even *Homo sapiens sapiens*’ (58). In *Dusklands*, much like Coetzee’s later life writing, hyperbolic forms of rationality and self-consciousness establish an uncertainty of tone and a rabid form of self-questioning that both engenders a *Watt*-like comedy and a critical irony.<sup>26</sup>

Alongside Dawn, the fragmentation of the self is portrayed through the breakdown of another colonial consciousness, the eponymous hero of the second narrative, ‘The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee’. Through a binary structure at the level of the narrative whole – a structure that signals Coetzee’s narratological rather than syntactic manipulation of style – these first-person perspectives convey the brutal inhumanity of two world historical events; the American bombing of Vietnam and Cambodia, in the 1960s and early 1970s, and the colonial exploration into the interior of South Africa conducted by white Europeans in the eighteenth century. The uncompromising vision of life at the receiving end of imperial power and violence is made manifest through the breakdown of each protagonists’ psychic constitution. Through Dawn’s work in the pseudo-scientific field of ‘Mythography’ (4) in the first narrative, and the self-serving frontier rhetoric and frame narrative of ‘The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee’, a

---

<sup>26</sup> Dawn’s reflexive consciousness relates him to the eternal doubt of *Watt*, and the end of ‘The Vietnam Project’ concludes with Dawn unable to grasp the distinction between things and their names: ‘It has all come down to this (I ease myself in and tell over the clear, functional words): my bed, my window, my door, my walls, my room. These words I love. I sit them on my lap to burnish and fondle. They are beloved to me, each one, and having arrived at them I vow not to lose them’ (43).

surreptitious notion of life emerges as the arena of contestation between subjective desire and the intractability of an embedded and impersonal materiality; namely, the recalcitrant body.

Like Beckett's later writings, however, embodied life does not emerge as a negative totality or absolute value but rather arises indirectly from the disfiguring of the narrative reality as the work stages its own material and textual embeddedness. This staging is rooted in the work's self-reflexivity. In *Dusklands*, history is opaquely connected with Coetzee's own biography, hence structurally figuring inheritance as a form of historical complicity through which writing functions as a form of self-confrontation. Indeed, Dawn ranks as the first of Coetzee's writer-protagonists. The opening lines of the novel proceed: 'My name is Eugene Dawn. I cannot help that. Here goes' (1). Dawn then informs us that he is writing his report, which features in the narrative, for a father-like supervisor named 'Coetzee'. This section ends with a direct address: 'Tear this off, Coetzee, it is a postscript, it goes to you, listen to me' (30). This self-confrontation is again fundamental to the question of patrilinear descent that informs 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee', a fictional account of a real historical and ancestral figure. Alongside this authorial dimension the metalepsis, that structures the work's self-reflexivity, is similarly embedded in the two first-person accounts. Dawn's narrative stages the processes of historical and documentary composition by incorporating elements of his assigned project. This is further dramatised by the framework of 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee', which features a 'Translator's Preface', 'Afterword' and an 'Appendix' which consists of the original (although slightly amended) 'Deposition of Jacobus Coetzee (1760)'.<sup>27</sup>

The metafictional framework and reflexive qualities of the text, by interrupting the conventions that foster literary authority (notably verisimilitude and omniscient narration), establishes an immanent critique of colonial authority and rationalising discourses that would seek to master life. Coetzee's linguistic training, contemporaneous with the study of Beckett, provides a vital context for understanding this critique of the putatively universal ground of Western thought. As he recalls in an interview: 'What structuralism did for me [...] was to collapse dramatically the distance between high European culture and so-called primitive cultures' (*Doubling*, 24). In *Dusklands*, the Eurocentrism of high art is inflected in the hierarchical mindset of the colonialist. Indeed,

---

<sup>27</sup> For details of the textual and historical background of *Dusklands* see Anthony Uhlmann's 'Dusklands and the meaning of method' (2016).



Coetzee's discussion of the capacity of language to determine thought, in the 1982 essay 'Isaac Newton and the Ideal of a Transparent Scientific Language' (included in *Doubling the Point*), begins with the work of Wilhelm von Humboldt and the origins of a scientific attempt to hierarchically order different cultures and languages according to the hypothesis that different languages accord with different world-views. Coetzee is attentive to the colonial context of Humboldt's work, and its status as forerunner to *Volkerpsychologie*, the study of ethnic or national psychologies that led to the racist ideologies of the first half of the twentieth-century. For Coetzee, the 'von Humboldt-Sapir-Whorf hypothesis' (*Doubling*, 182) establishes a vital context for discussing how Newton's effort to attain an ideal language reaches the peak of a 'philosophical struggle' where we find 'a yoking of the passive to a project of using agentless sentences to describe a physical universe regarding which consideration of agency is to be postponed' (167-168). This results in a combative use of 'passivisation' – a typical 'characteristic of the English of scientists' (192) – that seeks to nullify the in-built biases of natural languages yet inevitably discloses a universalist position that cannot be separated from the legacy of Western Enlightenment rationality (and its attendant gendered and racialised forms).<sup>28</sup>

In *Dusklands* the affectless irony that, through the first-person narration, frames the mental breakdown of both protagonists from the inside, attests to the impossibility of asserting such a neutral, objective, or affectless form of Enlightenment reasoning; what Dawn in the final section of his report describes as a 'meta-historical consciousness' (*Dusklands*, 26). This projected Western self-ascendency, defined via the capacity to negate the emotional guilt that has plighted the US bombing campaign, is ironically delivered in an impassioned and confessional mode that mocks the conventions of the hitherto passive and neutral report: 'I am a story not of emotion and violence – the illusory war-story of television – but of life itself, life in obedience to which even the simplest organism represses its entropic yearning for the mud' (27). Dawn's perception of himself as if from outside not only recalls Beckett's narrators but establishes a mock-rationality that, across both narratives, effects an 'unknowing' of the Western mind and the complicit mastery of rationalism and imperialism. Indeed, Descartes features explicitly in Dawn's report for Coetzee as the voice of American radio-broadcasting propaganda: 'It is the voice of the doubting self, the voice of René Descartes driving his wedge between the self in the world

---

<sup>28</sup> In an earlier essay 'The Rhetoric of the Passive in English' (1980), Coetzee discusses the use of the passive in Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, where passivisation 'emphasises the object at expense of the subject, and that agentive phrase deletions have a psycholinguistic correlate' (*Doubling*, 160).

and the self that contemplates that self' (20). The failure of this strategy is its lack of compatibility, Dawn argues, with 'Vietnamese thought' as the latter lacks any means to recognise an 'alienated *doppelgänger* rationality' (20).

As with *Watt*, the tonal variety of *Dusklands* is inflected by the affective states of the narrators as the monologue mode allows us to track the metamorphosis of Dawn's quasi-rationalist idiom into a form of dehumanised paranoia. David James argues that Coetzee seeks to achieve a 'psychological realism' ('*Dusklands* (1974)', 52), and indeed the pseudo-science that informs Dawn's quasi-rational language establishes his estrangement from conventional modes of sympathetic engagement. Dawn's increasingly distraught and unnerved disposition reaches a crux in the penultimate episode of 'The Vietnam Project' as he kidnaps his own young son. Dawn's breakdown culminates with the stabbing of the child, an act that mirrors the capacity to risk life taken as the ultimate value of the ascending historical consciousness described in his report. However, Dawn's estrangement is more palpably registered by the way the narrative deliberately interrupts the psychological realism established by the interior monologue. This increasing estrangement leads to a reflexive awareness of himself as a fictional construct: 'I write from (let us see if I can get this extravagance right) the Loco Motel on the outskirts of the town of Heston [...] I write in an exuberant spirit and in the present definite' (35). Later this exuberance has dwindled, foreshadowing the violence to come: 'It is difficult to spin motels and roadhouses in long, dense paragraphs' (37).<sup>29</sup> Not only is Dawn often writing himself impossibly into the present, but an earlier metaleptic awareness of having been written occasionally infuses the narrative: 'This novelettish reading of my plight amuses me' (10).<sup>30</sup> The final scene of the stabbing encapsulates the dissolution of Dawn's monologue through these reflexive gestures that violate the relay of the interior voice:

Also, something which I usually think of as my consciousness is shooting backwards, at a geometrically accelerating pace, according to a certain formula, out of the back of my head, and I am not sure I will be able to stay with it. The people in front of me are growing smaller and therefore less and less dangerous. They are also tilting. A convention allows me to record these details (42).

---

<sup>29</sup> The manuscript drafts of *Dusklands* exhibit Coetzee's own identification with Dawn's plight, and Coetzee's running commentary helps to substantiate the uneasy relation to realism that produces the final novel. An entry dated 9 March 1973 reads: 'Like everything else in this work, [the scene in the motel room] is not taking on novelistic proportions' (HRC, MS Coetzee Papers, Box 1, Folder 2).

<sup>30</sup> As Attridge argues of the final section of 'The Vietnam Project': '[T]he first-person present-tense narrative has become an impossibility, telling as it does of events that could not by any stretch of the imagination coincide with the recording of them' (*J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 15).

'The Vietnam Project' hence draws upon a series of reflexive techniques that, much like Coetzee's later life-writing, affect an 'antigrammar' of perspective; the mention of a 'convention' (that allows the narrator to be both teller and agent of the depicted events) foregrounds the constructedness or authoredness of the scene and destabilises the neatness of any identification between character and narrator.

As Dawn struggles to find the right words a sense of linguistic determinism, engendered through the metafictional interruptions of his monologue, comes to stand for the historical determinism that fosters the consciousness of guilt and complicity that characterises his intensifying derangement. That history imposes a coercive force over life, that breaks apart Dawn's mental state, is ironic given how his own project speaks as if from a position of history itself defined as a power over life. In a passage that alludes to Beckett's *The Unnamable*, the voice of 'they' that inflicts itself on the narrator is supplanted by an 'ancient voice' of history: 'Whose is that ancient voice in us that whinnies after action? My true ideal (I really believe this) is of an endless discourse of character, the self reading the self to the self in all infinity' (*Dusklands*, 38). Dawn's eventual demise hypostatizes his own analytical conclusion: the ascending historical life of imperialism becomes the negation of natural life in the narrative's violent conclusion, the stabbing of his own son in the motel room. Dawn's attempted escape from the internal voice of historical complicity ultimately fails (neither Dawn nor his son die). This failure, however, merely re-emphasises the stakes of Dawn's flight from the totalising logic of his pseudo-scientific enterprise. Imprisoned in an 'all-male institution', he becomes the object of his analysts' hypotheses as they seek to capture Dawn's 'disturbed and disturbing act' (46) in a psychoanalytical lexicon. Now clearly speaking the language of another discourse of mastery, Dawn is hopeful that his doctors 'are going to cure me and enable me to lead a full life again' (45). The final line returns us to the suspended single-line opening of the narrative, where Dawn declares his name as if it weren't really his, by emphasising the effect of self-alienation: 'I have high hopes of finding whose fault I am' (49).

Coetzee's juxtaposition of this colonial self-mythology and a resistant, unrepresentable and unmasterable force of life reaches a zenith in the second narrative with Jacobus' metaphysics of the gun: 'The gun is our mediator with the world and therefore our saviour [...] The gun saves us from the fear that all life is within us. It does so by laying at our feet all the evidence we need of a dying and therefore of a living world' (79). The tonal affinity

– a combination of quasi-rational neutrality and impassioned solipsism – between the two narratives of *Dusklands* establishes a mutually reinforcing Beckettian incongruity between interior and exterior worlds. Jacobus’ self-mythologising, grandiloquent discourse is fundamental to the distance he perceives to lie between his elected self-identity and the colonised world of the others that surround him, his Hottentot servants and the native peoples of the Great Namaquas: ‘Savages do not have guns. This is the effective meaning of savagery, which we may define as enslavement to space, as one speaks obversely of the explorer’s mastery of space’ (80).<sup>31</sup> Evidence in Jacobus’ narrative of the prejudices of eighteenth-century Dutch frontier-settler mentality – including a proto-social Darwinism of natural selection – is found in the depiction of the master and slave relation with his Hottentot servant, Jan Klaver. Klaver is described patronisingly as an ‘old-time Hottentot’ (62), a ‘good, faithful old Jan Klaver’ (75). This is in stark contrast, however, to how the Hottentots in general are deemed to be spoilt, lacking integrity: ‘They all lacked will, they were born slaves’ (73-74). The Hottentots are thereby integral to Jacobus’ self-legitimising colonialism: they are a people he desires simultaneously to affirm as a living monument to his authority and to negate in evidence of the putatively natural power he wields over them.

This self-legitimising rhetoric unravels as a paradox that structures the tonal ambivalence and consequent effect of an unnerved and unnerving narrating consciousness. Echoing the first narrative, Jacobus’ paradoxical consciousness does not simply manifest through a form of psychological realism; that is, a direct representation of the breakdown of the protagonist’s inner world. Rather, this breakdown is not only integral to *what* we are shown but *how*, and is accordingly staged in the very mode of the representation itself. This is exemplified by Klaver’s sudden death and then unexplained reappearance in a following paragraph. The inexplicable discovery of Klaver’s non-death is rendered without warning in the narrative sequence. Given the violent negation of the first account – ‘he went to his death bearing the blanket roll and all the food’ (94) – we are left bereft of a clear perspective, reminding the reader of the metafictional framework of supposed

---

<sup>31</sup> This mode of philosophical introspection helps to violate the documentary pretence established by the frame narrative: ‘I am a hunter, a domesticator of the wilderness, a hero of enumeration. He who does not understand number does not understand death [...] The instrument for survival in the wild is the gun, but the need for it is metaphysical rather than physical’ (80). This appeal to ‘number’ – a feature that similarly marks Dawn’s appeal to the neutrality of statistics – recalls Coetzee’s doctoral thesis, as Attwell substantiates: ‘By the time he wrote *Dusklands*, the positivism of stylostatistics had even come to seem related to the mythology of the technocrats who ran the military-industrial complex’ (*J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing*, 61).

translators and other writerly agents. As Attridge argues, this disrupts the narratorial perspective by re-emphasising the textuality and constructedness of the piece and creates a ‘powerful disturbance in the hitherto relatively smooth operation of the reality effect, a breach of the contract between author and reader’ (*J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 20).

This effect is similarly integral to the deployment of interior monologue. Like Dawn, Jacobus is similarly stricken by a Cartesian dualism, and his monologue dramatically plays out the dualist mindset through a colonial-explorer lexicon of exterior and interior worlds:

How then, asked the stone, can the hammer-wielder who seeks to penetrate the heart of the universe be sure that there exist any interiors? Are they not perhaps fictions, these lures of interiors for rape which the universe uses to draw out its explorers? (Entombed in its coffers my heart too had lived in darkness all its life. My gut would dazzle if I pierced myself. These thoughts disquieted me.) (78).

The alienation of mind from body and vice versa is not only mapped onto a nexus of exploration and conquest, insofar as the sense of penetration and pierced flesh echoes Dawn’s heinous act of stabbing his own son – ‘The ball of my thumb still carries the memory of the skin-popping. At first it resists the orthogonal pressure, even this child-skin. Then: pop’ (42) – the combined narratives instil an intractable materiality that the novel embeds as that which refuses to yield. By bridging the language of discourse (in which Dawn is trapped) and the radically other order of being represented by the body of the child, the onomatopoeic ‘pop’ evokes not only a cognitive response from the reader (correlate to an idea of life being advanced as an alternative to a complicit rationality) but an affective and somatic one, as we cannot help but to *hear* the brute reality of the scene.

The materiality of the text, of the literary form, thus establishes a literary thinking of life that exceeds the mere propagation of life as an idea or value. As the subjective orders of the first-person narrators break down we are confronted by a structural incommensurability between the narrated reality and the narrative reality. Consequently, the metafictional challenge the text invokes towards its own capacity to represent otherness – that which is excluded by the discourse of Reason, namely that of the body of the colonised subject – is directly related to the fostering of an alternative approach to alterity that refuses reduction to the discourses that seek to encode and master life. The dissolution of mimetic conventions of verisimilitude or omniscient narration is therefore correlate to a model of ironic critique that undermines the discourses of colonial oppression from within. *Dusklands* thus establishes a literary thinking that disrupts the

assured affectless reasoning that structures Enlightenment thought, specifically the colonial typologies of Empire and the positivism of militarised science.

By undermining a tautologous rationality from within, *Dusklands* follows in the footsteps of Beckett's *Watt* by deploying a double bind or dynamic stillness that pins knowledge to ignorance and vice versa and constitutes Coetzee's sense of the twin Beckettian register of conjuration and silence. The dissonance in the novel between the narrative voice and the narrated events thus stages the processes of historical and textual composition and meaning, situating such processes in an internal economy of reason and unreason, knowing and unknowing, that permeates both narrative accounts. The double bind that relates knowledge and ignorance is essential to Coetzee's portrayal of historical complicity and culpability; of one's ineluctable embeddedness (both in Beckettian terms of ontological finitude and Coetzeean terms of linguistic and epistemological structures). As Coetzee alludes in the 1984 Texas memoir, recalling his own experience of the Vietnam war, '[the problem] was with knowing what was being done. It was not obvious where one went to escape knowledge' (*Doubling*, 51). *Dusklands* itself is of course partly the answer: the enactment of a literary thinking that eschews platitudes of rapprochement by advancing life not as a value in itself but as the site upon which all evaluation, any act of judgement, must be reckoned. I will argue in later chapters that such a staging, rather than positing of life, profoundly ethicises politics but also politicises ethics, not least by situating life as a site of contestation that promotes an active engagement on behalf of the reader.

### **iii: Presences of the Infinite.**

What is opposed to the tyrannical discourses of colonial power in *Dusklands* is what Elizabeth Costello, in Coetzee's later novel, calls the 'sensation of being [...] alive to the world' (*Elizabeth Costello*, 78), as figured through the 'body'. However, Coetzee's works do not merely represent embodied life as a certain truth or value but rather seek to represent the resistance of embodied life to the very modes of representation that seek to capture it in precisely such a form. As Stephen Mulhall concludes in *The Wounded Animal*, in terms that recall the aesthetic imperative of Beckett's post-war art writings: '[M]uch of reality can be captured in its true nature only insofar as our representations of it reflect its resistances to representation, and so to comprehension' (252). Coetzee's representation of that which evades representation is, therefore, embedded in the very materiality of the work. This constitutes the metafictional aspect of Coetzee's fictions; an awareness of the

falsity and problematic mastery of direct representation leads to a self-regarding deployment of narrative that ceaselessly undermines its own authority and, in so doing, implicitly questions that of others.

The problematic mastery of direct representation in Coetzee's works is thereby foreshadowed by the philosophical impossibility of direct representation that informs Beckett's. Coetzee, in 'Eight Ways', asks of Beckett's narrators: 'Why do these creatures not grasp their harpoon and hurl it through the white wall? Answer: because they are impotent, invalid, crippled, bed-ridden. [...] Because they do not have harpoons, only pencils at most' (23). However, as elucidated above it is precisely through the notion of the imagination that Beckett stages a comparable excess or otherness as similarly integral to a notion of life that cannot be simply reduced to a Cartesian schema or mere philosopheme. Indeed, the imagination in Beckett's late works, rather than a transcending or romantic faculty, by interrupting the distinction between literal and figurative meaning signals an irreducible excess that links the question of literary forms to that of life forms.

Following Coetzee's consideration of style in the context of the structural pervasiveness of metaphor, the distinction between literal and figurative meaning, understood to safeguard the separation of rational or proper knowledge (the domain of philosophy) from the supplementary operations of metaphor, can no longer be sustained.<sup>32</sup> By thereby exceeding this neat separation, Beckett's works evade any totalising reading. Malone's pencil, in *Malone Dies*, does therefore function as a sort of harpoon. Rather than the white wall of the skull, however, we have instead the white wall of the page and, like *Dusklands*, *Malone Dies* can be said to pose life not merely as an object of representation but rather, through the narrative framework itself, produces an ineliminable remainder or excess: 'All is pretext, Sapo and the bird, Moll, the peasants [...] my doubts which do not interest me, my situation, my possessions, pretext for not coming to the point [...] Yes, there is no good pretending, it is hard to leave everything' (*Malone Dies*, 107). The inassimilable sense of narrative life, of the biographical lives of Malone's characters (and of Malone himself), may not yield a sense of vitalist or embodied otherness (upon which ethical claims are staked) but attests nonetheless to the ineluctable otherness of embodied life itself, of the

---

<sup>32</sup> In *Allegories of Reading* Paul de Man, in his analysis of the rhetorical dimension of literature, suggests that a blurring of this distinction, leading to an interpretative uncertainty, is definitive of the literary as such: 'The grammatical model of the question becomes rhetorical when it is impossible to decide by grammatical or other linguistic devices which of the two meanings [literal or figurative] prevails. Rhetoric radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration [...] I would not hesitate to equate the rhetorical, figural potentiality of language with literature itself' (10).

fundamental estrangement of life as constituted by death. This is a subtle distinction that hinges on distinguishing between a sense of alterity beyond the human (and thereby quasi-divine or infinite) and a sense of alterity that lies at the heart of the human, as that which exposes all finite processes of knowing and feeling to an infinite or ineluctable contingency; to the excess of the very material ground of life itself.

Even at the peak of exhaustion, this excess marks a living on or *through* the dying framework of the literary imagination. In the *NoHow On* works especially the imagination is staged through a tropic (or entropic) nexus of (un)seeing and (un)hearing that constantly figures and disfigures life. Akin to the transfiguration of desire through the aporia of the nothing, the imagination too lives on through its own cessation. This economy or logic of survival necessitates that any finite 'figment' (*Company*, 30) is both immanently and imminently exposed to a textual and temporal succession that, just as it disfigures, constitutes the very possibility of an infinite further figuring. By refusing to give life to the metaphors of the body, by withholding the transposing capacity of metaphor itself, the works also disavow the basis of literality that founds the supposedly proper knowledge asserted by the anthropocentric discourses of science, theology, and metaphysics. *Worstward Ho* apotheosises this textual economy or logic. As the work attempts to advance towards an end, to an absence or worst, its negative accretions comprise a tangible surplus; every 'no' proceeds further 'on'. This destabilises the distinctions in the text irreversibly; the worst becomes the best, the improper the proper, the nonsensible the sensible.

For Heidegger these distinctions – notably that of the sensible and nonsensible – are what underpins the concept of metaphor as internal to metaphysics:

Because our hearing and seeing is never a mere sensible registering, it is therefore also off the mark to insist that thinking as listening and bringing-into-view are only meant as a transposition of meaning, namely as transposing the supposedly sensible into the nonsensible. The idea of 'transposing' and of metaphor is based upon the distinguishing [...] of the sensible and the nonsensible as two realms that subsist on their own. The setting up of this partition between the [...] physical and the nonphysical is a basic trait of what we call metaphysics (*The Principle of Reason*, 48).

For Heidegger, 'metaphor is the norm for our conception of the essence of language', and, 'the metaphorical exists only within metaphysics' (48). Once the distinction of sensory and non-sensory is seen to be insufficient, metaphysics loses its status as authoritative discourse. Philosophy itself is thus constituted by a self-generating and self-



erasing process of metaphorisation, or as Beckett puts in *The Unnamable*: ‘So they build up hypotheses that collapse on top of one another, it’s human, a lobster couldn’t do it’ (88). By claiming a universal status, Western reason asserts a sovereign position which, as in *Dusklands*, masks its own embedded conditions of possibility, notably that of the contingent, finite, and suffering body which it excludes. As Derrida writes in ‘White Mythology’: ‘Metaphysics – the white mythology which reassembles and reflects the culture of the West: the white man takes his own mythology, Indo-European mythology, his own logos, that is, the *mythos* of his idiom, for the universal form of that he must still wish to call Reason’ (213).

Contrary to a supposed neutrality and objectivity, Western thought is premised on the exclusion of the living or temporal context of its inception. Philosophy is understood to have moved from a sensory and physical mediacy, towards a non-sensory, metaphysical, and abstract immediacy; from word to concept.<sup>33</sup> This transposition erases its initial figuration from a particular instance (i.e. both the embedded subject and object of knowledge) to a general law. It is precisely this attempt to erase the contingent and arbitrary biases of an embedded language that Coetzee detects in Newton’s struggle to describe gravitational force. That Coetzee ultimately rejects the possibility of a pure, non-figurative scientific language is revealing insofar as his own work will turn increasingly towards attaining a notion of the truth in contradistinction to the positivist rationalism of the sciences.<sup>34</sup> Opposed to the surreptitious idealism of a pure rational language, Coetzee’s literary thinking draws upon an implicit theory of metaphor that situates the embedded and finite ground of the present (the dynamic living present and the reading present) as key to a modality of truth that rebuts both idealism and a radical scepticism.<sup>35</sup> Such a truth is neither wholly of the word nor of the world.

This builds upon the thesis on Beckett, and Coetzee’s increasingly distinctive understanding of literary language – exemplified in the writings on the passive voice, style, and metaphor – begins to emerge as a self-reflexive mediation between world and word,

---

<sup>33</sup> Derrida: ‘Abstract notions always hide a sensory figure. And the history of metaphysical language is said to be confused with the erasure of the efficacy of the sensory figure and the *usure* of its effigy’ (‘White Mythology’, 210).

<sup>34</sup> As Coetzee argues in the Newton essay, the process whereby the ‘impurities of secondary meanings [are] shed and language becomes transparent, that is, becomes thought’ (*Doubling*, 193), is regarded as inherently fallacious.

<sup>35</sup> Coetzee’s implicit theory of metaphor is delineated by Zimbler accordingly as ‘neither a function of syntax nor of linguistic deviance, but is instead fundamental to language and the way we perceive the world’ (Zimbler, 122).

life and art, where both are seen to be inextricable yet simultaneously incommensurate. The intractability of the language of life (a semantics of embodied suffering) hence broaches once again the intractability of the life of literary language. If this is staged implicitly by the metafictional framework of *Dusklands* it is made explicit in the postscript to the later *Elizabeth Costello*. As Elizabeth Chandos seeks to respond to her husband's anguish through the letter to Bacon, she repeatedly posits the abstract site of the intersubjective and bodily encounter that is redoubled by the abstract materiality of her words: '*Flaming swords* I say my Philip presses into me, swords that are not words; but they are neither flaming swords nor are they words. It is like a contagion, saying one thing always for another' (228). Nevertheless, the possibility of a commingling solution emerges as Elizabeth's raptures enjoin Philip's 'Presences of the Infinite' (230), recalling the appeal in 'Eight Ways' to the figure of the white whale, the inscrutable other beyond human cogitation. The structural irony of both works, however, implicitly posits another form of otherness; not that which is absent or beyond the finite but precisely the *finite realm itself*; the very material ground of both the present and the works, the ineluctable embeddedness of both language and life.

The ineluctable materiality of the literary work *qua* literary work – as that which evades a symptomatic or allegorical reading – thus engenders a specific thinking of life. Moreover, the vision of a life beyond words that can paradoxically only be reached through words, relates the fictional epistle of Coetzee's postscript to the Beckettian logos of *Watt*, outlined in the thesis as a question of linguistic determinism; of a relation of both necessity and impossibility between language and thought. Indeed, the Beckettian paradox of self-expression can be traced across the later works. In a letter to Auster, where Coetzee comments on Derrida's formulation: 'I have only one language and it is not mine' (*Monolingualism of the Other*, 25), this is made explicit: 'When I read this it struck me that he could have been writing about me and my relation to English; and a day later, it struck me further that neither he nor I is exceptional [...] Language is always the language of the other' (*Here and Now*, 65-67).<sup>36</sup> In a later letter the vestiges of this disquieting insight are felt directly in relation to life, as Coetzee asserts "'I = JMC" is false' (208). This play on the distinction between the lived experience of 'me' (of the 'I' that contemplates the world) and the linguistic or named experience of life (JMC; one's biography), echoes the

---

<sup>36</sup> This concern is repeated in *Diary of a Bad Year*: 'Perhaps – is this possible? – I have no mother tongue. For at times, as I listen to the words of English that emerge from my mouth, I have a disquieting sense that the one I hear is not the one I call myself' (195).

structure of embeddedness in Coetzee's literary thinking that – through an affective thinking, an enlivenment rather than an enlightenment – shirks any disembodied or propositional approach to life by drawing upon the embedded materiality, the anarchic life, of the literary work.<sup>37</sup>

Indeed, the possibility of thinking outside of language – a thinking 'with the heart' (*The Letter of Lord Chandos*, 138), as Philip writes to Bacon in Hofmannsthal's text – is staged across Coetzee's works: Magda's private language of immanence in *In the Heart of the Country*; the Barbarian girl's silence in *Waiting for the Barbarians*; Michael K's quietude in *Life & Times of Michael K*; Friday's dancing in *Foe*; JC's illegible handwriting in *Diary of a Bad Year*, and the magical numbers – both finite and infinite – through which the two recent Jesus fictions stage the question of life. Besides the emotive and overt political thematisation of characters that are bereft or dispossessed of speech, Coetzee's works enact their silence via a literary thinking that cannot be reduced to the dominating discourses of habit and power. As Beckett establishes in an interview with Charles Juliet: 'You have to work in an area where there are no possible pronouns, or solutions, or reactions or standpoints [...] that's what makes it so diabolically difficult' (*Conversations with Samuel Beckett and Bram van Velde*, 165). Foreshadowing Coetzee's account of the non-position – discussed in the next chapter – the sense of negative freedom, what Terry Eagleton describes as Beckett's 'compact with failure' ('Political Beckett?', 70), affords a standpoint against all possible standpoints; against the sovereignty of political and historical regimes of power and against the complicity of modes of representation and reconciliation that seek to exculpate the present. By similarly refusing a direct confrontation with life, Coetzee's works – as I discuss in later chapters – confront us with ineluctability of the material present and of the irreconcilable nature of suffering.

The operative metaphor in Elizabeth Chandos' letter is life; life is what evades her grasp: '*Always it is not what I say but something else*. Hence the words I write above: *We are not meant to live thus*' (*Elizabeth Costello*, 228). Yet it is also life that animates her grasping. This is staged by the way in which the words are presented as having their own life; language is a 'contagion', a '*plague of rats*' (228). Although her language purportedly excludes the living immediacy of the embodied world, across the letter the possibility of a speech beyond the confines of an affectless discourse emerges through the very chain of allusion and

---

<sup>37</sup> The great humour Coetzee finds in his early encounter with Beckett's works indicates how, as Amanda Dennis argues, from 'the fragments of stalled out rational systems, the possibility of more vital, embodied ways of inhabiting language emerge' (Dennis, 113).

reference that the letter itself ostensibly seeks to shed: ‘All is allegory, says my Philip. Each creature is key to all other creatures [...] But how I ask you can I live with rats and dogs and beetles crawling through me day and night, drowning and gasping, scratching at me, tugging at me, urging me deeper and deeper into revelation – how?’ (229). Life as an endless metaphor might be unliveable, for Elizabeth, but the force of this metaphoric chain intimates another possibility: that language, specifically *literary* language, freed from the constraints of an allegorical or propositional thinking might be able to bridge a gap to the incommunicable, to finite life conceived as an infinite mystery.<sup>38</sup>

Beckett’s economic logic of the nothing thus manifests in Coetzee’s writings a literary thinking that makes the finite conditions of life (time, space, and the body) infinitely unmasterable. Insofar as Beckett bequeaths to Coetzee a sense of the literary work’s irreducibility to allegory, a sense of the discrepancy between the verbal surface and the work’s deeper meaning (which thereby undoes a model of surface and depth that is perpetuated by both an idealised romantic aesthetic and positivist criticism), both writers refuse any positive appropriation or evaluation of life and thus profoundly trouble conventional ethical and political concepts and frameworks. By transcribing Beckett’s late modernist aesthetic into the postcolonial contexts that inform his earliest novels, Coetzee’s works attain a critical potency that transforms what Boxall terms Beckett’s ‘utopian negativity’ (‘Samuel Beckett: Towards a Political Reading’, 169) into an interrogation of the historical conditions that both produce and efface otherness.

---

<sup>38</sup> As Stephen Mulhall argues: ‘Indeed, it is only because figurative language displays such rigour that Lady Chandos can keep faith in the capacity of language to grasp reality in its otherness, for without that rigour her words could not be thought to have a specific sense, and so could not be negated with sufficient specificity to display reality in its concrete otherness to concrete utterance’ (*The Wounded Animal*, 236).

### **3: Literature and The Right to Life: *In the Heart of the Country*, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and *Life & Times of Michael K***

‘There are two ways to miss the point of Kafka’s works. One is to interpret them naturally, the other is the supernatural interpretation’ — Walter Benjamin, ‘Franz Kafka’, 123.

#### **Introduction:**

In this chapter I explore how the textual economy of Beckett’s works inform the powerful depiction of bare or reduced life in Coetzee’s early works. Such a depiction confounds conceptual appropriation, displacing both normative ethics and conventional literary-critical hermeneutics. Implicitly sharing with Beckett a founding presupposition – the association of positivistic rationalism and literary mimesis – the anti-realism of Coetzee’s early works stage the question of life through a literary thinking that estranges life both as an object of representation and source of value. Following Beckett, these novels hamper their own metaphorical and allegorical figurations; the inscrutable account of life proffered in opposition to discourses of domination is not simply posited as such but staged through the very otherness of the texts themselves.

Coetzee’s early novels demonstrate a marked Beckettian influence, as for instance; in the estranging realism of the Manichean reality of *In the Heart of the Country* (1977); the misanthropic monologuers who comprise the first-person narrators of the first three fictions; and the oppressive philosophical baggage of Western rationality as framed through forms of imperialism and civil war (in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, 1980, and *Life & Times of Michael K*, 1983). These works anticipate the formalisation of a metafictional logic where the relation of a disaggregated realism to a disaggregated subject is as much a topical concern as a formal effect. As we shall see, the disaggregated subject bears witness to a literary critique of biopower, the latter defined below as the subjugation of life to power. This occurs through a Beckettian disassembly of the distinction between human and non-human modes of being. As with *Dusklands*, however, Beckett’s influence on Coetzee is not wholly direct. There are key stylistic differences to consider, notably how Coetzee’s early works maintain a nuanced relation to realism. This accounts for how Coetzee’s late modernism reorients the nothing in Beckett towards a concept of alterity.

My argument accords with a consensus that the disembodied enterprise of the Beckettian novel is sublated by a novel form oriented towards what Hayes terms ‘socio-cultural forms of otherness’ (53). Attridge’s neologism ‘textualterity’ (*J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 30) further seeks to formalise an account of the estranging effects of Coetzee’s

fictions in relation to an ethical determination of alterity. Rather than the experimental syntactical disintegration of Beckett's late prose, I explore below how Coetzee effects a disarticulation of narrative storytelling through a use of narrative temporality, voice, and metaphor. In particular, the question of figurative meaning arises at the level of the narrative whole via the notion of allegory. Following Attridge's account of *Life & Times of Michael K*, and the positing of a mode of 'literal reading' (39), I similarly address how the novel both provokes and undermines allegorical interpretation. Foreshadowing the Chandos postscript in *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee's early novel internally stages a notion of allegory and thereby undermines, as Benjamin argues of Kafka, both a natural interpretation (a surface reading) and a supernatural interpretation (a reading beyond the surface to some hidden depth, namely a sense of life beyond capture). Ultimately, however, I take this literary evasiveness not as constitutive of an ethical modality in itself but rather as indicative of the way Coetzee's literary thinking draws upon life as a site of intersection between ethics and politics.

Accordingly, while I broadly support the above critical consensus, by analysing the inner workings of Coetzee's early fictions this chapter seeks to question the supposedly inherent ethical value of alterity (this is a reading especially prevalent in the writings of Mike Marais). The early novels thus evade systematic meaning by corresponding to an understanding of the meaning of the literary work itself – following Coetzee's doctoral thesis – as that which cannot be reduced to a single or linear point of origin (the author; the reader; history). As opposed to a rational thinking, such a literary thinking engenders a notion of life that evades discourses of both domination and resistance, i.e. any sovereign or self-sufficient position. Building upon Coetzee's sustained engagement with post-structuralist thinkers after the thesis, I draw upon the writings of Blanchot, Foucault, and Derrida to substantiate the ethico-political import of Coetzee's literary thinking, notably taking from Blanchot the notion of (literary) ambiguity. The imperative of a literary thinking stems from the attempt to speak for that which falls outside the unambiguous and self-sufficient discourse of reason. In Coetzee's early fictions this is framed as madness, silence and, ultimately, life itself. For Jane Poyner, this attempt to speak on behalf of the oppressed constitutes the paradox of postcolonial authorship: '[T]hat getting one's voice heard is always at the cost of imposing authority' (Poyner, 184). It is thus in the tumultuous context of apartheid South Africa that Coetzee's literary thinking both originates and is brought to bear to write the other without falling into the circumscribed forms and conventions of 'white writing'.

The early works, however, are not only vexed with the problem of establishing a confrontation with discourses of power, but with the very problem of positionality or authority in general, thereby foreshadowing the philosophical turn and, notably, Coetzee's Chandos paradox: that the authoritative subject is not only constituted through language but also *de*-constituted.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, the conditions of authority (discourse and language) retain within them a certain complicity with a suppressed exteriority or otherness. Indeed, by elaborating a politics of the non-position, in the essay 'Erasmus: Madness and Rivalry' in *Giving Offense* (1996), Coetzee draws explicitly on Foucault's and Derrida's discussion of madness as both constitutive of and paradoxically internal to reason. As I elucidate below, by constructing a similar complicity between reason and madness, self and other, Coetzee's fictions forestall the possibility of an untarnished or self-sufficient sense of otherness as a source of ethical value external to reason. Indeed, such a possibility is integral to sovereign discourses that, by positing such an outside, exercise their authority or dominion over that which is demarcated as 'other'. In the following two chapters this interest in the complicity between reason and madness (a complicity which structures Coetzee's writings on apartheid, especially in *Giving Offense*) is seen to foreshadow a complicity between politics and religion, namely of a certain sacrificial logic that haunts secular modernity (especially in *Disgrace* and the two Jesus fictions).

Coetzee's early works thus attest to a literary thinking whose authority depends upon a lack of authority. Paradoxically, however, this is precisely how they generate a power of their own, as formulated in Coetzee's Erasmus essay: '[T]he power of the text [*The Praise of Folly*] lies in its weakness – its jocoserious abnegation of big-phallus status, its evasive (non)position' (103). By configuring literary authority as grounded in an absence of authority, Coetzee's writings follow Blanchot, in the 'Literature and the Right to Death' (1949), by refusing the mastery of life through the possibility of death that is implicitly presupposed by legal discourses of the self (specifically the discourse of rights). I discuss this below in the opening section before moving to a discussion of each novel in turn in the subsequent three sections. The early works, from *Dusklands* and *In the Heart of the Country* to *Life & Times of Michael K*, stage a postcolonial dialectic between civilisation and savagery that is later framed as one between reason and madness (explicitly in Erasmus essay and through the critique of reason undertaken in *Elizabeth Costello*). However, an

---

<sup>1</sup> When asked to interpret K's resistance to interpretation in *Life & Times of Michael K*, Coetzee responds: 'I am immensely uncomfortable with questions [...] my difficulty is precisely with the project of stating positions, taking positions' (*Doubling*, 205).

overarching opposition of life and death helps us to connect these earlier works with the later post-apartheid writings (the memoirs and the writings on animal life).

### **i. The Right to Life:**

By privileging a politics of embeddedness and positionality over an ethics of alterity this chapter seeks to bring into sharper focus Coetzee's relation to the critical discourse of biopower and biopolitics, as originally formulated by Michel Foucault in his lecture courses at the Collège de France in the mid-1970s. This theoretical focus is taken up by Giorgio Agamben's later work, which also provides an effective schema for analysing the intersection of politics and life in Coetzee's fictions. Foucault's argument in *The History of Sexuality Volume 1* establishes biopower, defined as the appropriation of life by mechanisms of sovereign forms of power, as a central feature of modern society. Sovereignty, for Foucault, is typified by the power of the prince to inflict death. In the dialectical history of sovereign power traced by Foucault, '[t]he sovereign exercised his right of life only by exercising his right to kill [...] he evidenced his power over life only through the death he was capable of requiring' (136). With the advent of capitalism and democracy the right to death exercised by the sovereign is sublimated into a form of life-enhancing or 'life-administering power' (136): '[T]his formidable power of death [...] now presents itself as the counterpart of a power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations' (137). The transfer of sovereignty, from God to King to the People, constitutes the modern form of political theology that is embodied in *Dusklands* by the racist ideologies of Jacobus and Dawn. This evolution for Foucault commits the right to exercise death as an act or service performed in the name of a greater 'life necessity'; modern societies wage war no longer on behalf of a 'sovereign who must be defended' but instead on behalf of entire national or ethnic populations: 'massacres have become vital' (137). As a consequence: '[M]odern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question' (143).

For Agamben, this subjugation of life under modern forms of biopower draws upon a fundamental distinction Aristotle makes between the Greek senses of life as *zoe* (natural life) and life as *bios* (the linguistic and political life of the human proper as *zoon politikon*). Extending Foucault's thesis, Agamben argues that biopower doesn't come to historically supplant sovereign power but rather constitutes it in the first instance. Utilising Aristotle's distinction, Agamben argues that Western politics is founded by the exclusion of natural



life from the political sphere. Man is a political animal because in language he ‘separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion’ (*Homo Sacer*, 12). Taking the concept of ‘bare life’ (*bloße Leben*) from Walter Benjamin’s critique of Carl Schmitt in ‘Critique of Violence’ (1921), and the latter’s formulation of the sovereign as the one who decides on the exception of the rule of law in each society, Agamben argues that the sovereign ‘state of exception’ in fact constitutes the norm of the law in modern democracy.<sup>2</sup> Like the sovereign prince who wields power over life by negating it, modern democracies are founded by an inclusive exclusion:

[T]ogether with the process by which the exception everywhere becomes the rule, the realm of bare life [...] gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoe*, right and fact enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction [...] modern democracy presents itself from the beginning as a vindication and liberation of *zoe* (*Homo Sacer*, 12-13).

Bare life is therefore neither *bios* or *zoe* but instead the politicised form of natural life that emerges as a limit-concept between the political and the natural. This logic of inclusive exclusion defines the character of Michael K in *Life & Times of Michael K* (discussed in section three, below). Living under the conditions of martial law, K is wholly exposed to the law (as he is imprisoned) whilst the law simultaneously leaves him bereft of the protection it might have afforded him in a different context (as an individual with certain fundamental *human* rights). Through the question of life, as both exposed and constituted through power, Coetzee’s early novels thus broach the problem of positionality. Indeed, K, like Erasmus’ fool, stands for a non-position precisely by refusing to enter the discourses of rivalry that surround him (thus founding a *rivalry* to rivalry; a meta-ethico-political position that I argue necessitates a co-implication of ethics and politics in Coetzee’s literary thinking).

Coetzee’s juxtaposition in the Erasmus essay – of madness and rivalry – indicates how the position-taking at stake in any political dynamic inscribes a sacrificial logic of discrimination or exclusion (i.e. the exclusion of other possible positions identified as rivalrous). Coetzee’s analysis of Erasmus’ attempt to discern ‘a position not already given, defined, limited and sanctioned by the game itself’ (84), leads to a discussion of Foucault’s *Madness and Civilisation* (1961), which takes up the paradoxical task of speaking on behalf

---

<sup>2</sup> Agamben’s translation of Benjamin’s term as *vita nuda*, or ‘bare life’, is contentious. A more accurate translation suggests the term ‘mere life’. Arthur Rose provides an extended account of the word ‘mere’ in Coetzee’s fictions in *Literary Cynics: Beckett, Borges, Coetzee* (2017).

of madness in a critique of ‘post-Cartesian Europe’ (85) and its supposed privileging of reason and self-knowledge. Foucault’s critique aims to unmask the voice of reason as merely another voice of power, much as the immanent critique of *Dusklands* teases out, in the form of psychopathology, the inherent contradiction that underpins the sovereign position of its two protagonists. Yet, Coetzee argues, Foucault’s account cannot speak on behalf of madness since madness ‘cannot be occupied knowingly, cannot be occupied by reason’ (88). Coetzee quotes from Derrida’s critique: ‘The misfortune of the mad [...] is that their best spokesmen are those who betray them best; which is to say that when one attempts to convey their silence *itself*, one has already passed over to the side of the enemy, the side of order’ (qtd. in *Giving Offense*, 87). This logic mirrors the inclusive exclusion of bare life as that which guarantees the sovereign power of modern states, since madness is posited not only as exterior to reason but constitutive of reason *as* exterior and as that through which reason defines and delimits itself.<sup>3</sup>

This contradictory logic, of inclusive exclusion, runs throughout Coetzee’s writings. In an illuminating short essay in the animal rights magazine *Reform*, entitled ‘The Right to Life’ (2007/08), Coetzee implicitly asserts the problematic relation between a judicial discourse of rights and the philosophical tradition of the rational subject; that is, the discourse of rights is founded on the very same distinctions through which power is exercised by appealing to a logic of self-sovereignty (i.e. that of a rational being able to perceive itself as such). In the context of animal reproductive rights, Coetzee asserts:

[A]ny putative right to life for animals has to be considered in conjunction with a right to multiply, which I take to mean a right to some kind of autonomous procreative life and therefore some kind of autonomous sexual life – the kind of right that animals in the wild still exercise, except of course that in their case it is not a right but a power (9).

Coetzee’s opposition between ‘right’ and ‘power’ highlights the incompatibility of a discourse of rights and the order of animal life. This is stated explicitly at the end of the piece: ‘In the hierarchy of rights, the right to life is at the top or close to the top. But when we move from speaking of a right to life for our own species [...] to a right to life for other species [...] it soon turns out that the right we are arguing for is so qualified and so attenuated that we might doubt that right is the best term for it’ (10). Coetzee’s argument subscribes to a non-position; that is, while nonetheless desiring to enshrine the

---

<sup>3</sup> Coetzee also quotes from Shoshana Felman: ‘Far from being a historical accident, the exclusion of madness is the general condition and the constitutive foundation of the very enterprise of speech’ (qtd. in *Giving Offense*, 87).

value of animal life there is a refusal to maintain a discourse of legal rights which are predicated on an idea of the rational subject, i.e. a subject who enters the domains of language and the law by precisely excluding the non-linguistic or animal order of life that cannot be made to answer before the law.<sup>4</sup> In Coetzee's fictions this logic of exclusion or sacrifice is dramatised through the processes of naming, subjectification, and linguistic address. The liminal and silent figures of Michael K and Friday (the latter in *Foe*) are key early representatives of the non-position that Coetzee stakes out between human and animal life, and between rational and affective modes of being.

To understand Coetzee's non-position regarding the intersection between life and language in the context of legal rights, it is worth turning to Blanchot's 'Literature and the Right to Death' (1949). Blanchot traces the notion of a right to death through the literary capacity to harness the negativity of the activity of naming while nonetheless forgoing the sacrificial negativity that is seen as inherent to the legal discourse of rights. As Derrida elucidates, literature 'is what would think this right of right', thereby unveiling how '[t]here is no law or right that would not be or imply a right to death' (*The Death Penalty*, 117). Recalling the linguistic negativity of *Watt*, Blanchot's account of the act of naming seems to capture precisely what so troubles Beckett's protagonist. Blanchot writes: 'The word gives me the being, but it gives it to me deprived of being' (322).<sup>5</sup> For Blanchot, this gap between word and world is precisely where the literary or imaginative writer operates through a 'creative negation' (308). This negativity, or nothingness, is pregnant with potential: 'literature begins at the moment literature becomes a question' (300). Rather than license a sovereign mastery over the negated world, through naming, literature is alternatively related to a sense of death that exceeds a logic of sacrifice. This 'right to death' of the literary, then, exceeds the realm of possibility and self-sufficiency inscribed in the very discourse of rights. Accordingly, the negativity of literary language, contrary to the positive abstraction of everyday language and naming, is profoundly ambiguous: 'Literature is language turning into ambiguity' (341). This ambiguity, which exceeds the referential function of everyday language, is related to a materiality: 'My hope lies in the

---

<sup>4</sup> As Derrida argues: 'The dignity of man, his sovereignty, the sign that he accedes to universal right and rises above animality is that he rises above biological life, puts his life in play in the law, risks his life and thus affirms his sovereignty as subject or consciousness' (*The Death Penalty*, 116).

<sup>5</sup> Blanchot draws on Hegel's theory of negation and quotes the German philosopher: 'Adam's first act, which made him master of the animals, was to give them names, that is, he annihilated them in their existence (as existing creatures)' (323). The idea of an Adamic language, as a deathly enterprise of symbolic abstraction, is thematised explicitly in Coetzee's recent Jesus fictions.

materiality of language, in the fact that words are things too, are a kind of nature [...] Everything physical takes precedence' (327).<sup>6</sup>

The opposition between everyday language and literary language in Coetzee's thesis on Beckett helps elucidate the link between Blanchot's emphasis on materiality and a phenomenological or affective account of style as a way of thinking. As opposed to everyday language, Blanchot's sense of ambiguity is, like Coetzee's 'higher truth', related to silence, to the 'reality of things, [in] their unknown, free and silent existence' (330). This ambiguity or silent truth not only emphasises the non-representational aspect of literature but relates literary meaning to a fundamental irresponsibility, since the author – as the one-who-names – is no longer in a position of mastery. In Coetzee's thesis, similarly, literary language is not simply defined in terms of a predictable deviation from everyday language, that could be programmed, quantified or mastered, but rather in terms of a dynamic relation between varying contexts that cannot be simply rendered in linear terms of cause and effect. This, as we have seen, influences the later comments on authorship and writing; on the event-like nature of creativity. For Blanchot, the constitutive ambiguity of literature is similarly related to the passivity of the author, who accedes to the negativity of language without seeking to master this negativity in the form of static or univocal meaning. This impersonality or passivity informs an approach to the materiality of language (the 'anarchic life' Coetzee identifies in Beckett's *Watt*) that refuses to turn the negativity of death into a form of possibility (i.e. the possibility of sacrifice upon which both the sovereignty of biopower and the legal subject depend).

By separating the negativity of the work from the author Blanchot separates the author-subject from his or her own possibility of death: 'The writer senses that he is in the grasp of an impersonal power that does not let him either live or die: the irresponsibility he cannot surmount becomes the expression of that death without death which awaits him at the edge of nothingness' (340). The ontological-existential impossibility of death in Blanchot, which also resonates across Beckett's oeuvre, helps illustrate the ethico-political import of Coetzee's early fictions.<sup>7</sup> Coetzee's literary non-position, which thus entangles

---

<sup>6</sup> The communicative function of everyday language negates the presence of the living thing through the abstraction of naming (this is what Blanchot terms the first 'slope' of literature): 'Everyday language calls a cat a cat, as if the living cat and its name were identical [...] the word excludes the existence of what it designates' (325).

<sup>7</sup> The impossibility of death, for Blanchot, is comparable to the dynamic state of living death of Beckett's narrator-protagonists. Blanchot: 'As long as I live, I am a mortal man, when I die, by ceasing to be a man I also cease to be mortal, I am no longer capable of dying, and my impending death horrifies me because I see it as it is: no longer death but the impossibility of dying' (337).

irresponsibility with responsibility, translates the ontological impossibility of death onto an ethico-political refusal of the death that is understood as an inherent risk to any discourse of absolute or fundamental rights.

## **ii. In the Heart of the Country**

Commentators are largely in agreement that Coetzee's second novel *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), is his most recognisably indebted to Beckett, as Attridge substantiates: 'The narrator in Coetzee's next work of fiction, Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* is his most Beckettian' ('Sex, Comedy and Influence: Coetzee's Beckett', 83). As another early commentator, Paul Cantor, notes: 'Beckett is arguably the single greatest literary influence on Coetzee, and, of all his novels, *In the Heart of the Country* comes closest to Beckett in style and substance' (85). In this section I explore the novel's relation to Beckett's *Unnamable* and seek to expose the way in which life – the predominant figure of alterity – is rallied to affect a literary critique of the binary, hierarchical, and oppressive structures of biopower.

The novel is made up of 266 numbered fragments containing the interior monologue of the female narrator, Magda, whose account and fantasies of sexual and racial violence – of miscegenation, parricide, and rape – inflect and colour the otherwise barren world of a South African farmstead. The narrative trajectory is paralleled by Magda's gradually increasing awareness of her own constructedness within a narrative fiction: 'Is it possible that I am a prisoner not of the lonely farmhouse and the stone desert but of my stony monologue?' (13). As with *Dusklands*, the use of narrative focalisation and metalepsis affects an estranging realism, and Magda's unreliable status as a narrator is further exacerbated by the montage-like narrative structure. For example, Magda's self-reflexivity includes an awareness of the truncating power of narrative ellipsis: '[A]ll at once it is morning. It seems to lie in my power to skip over whole days or nights as if they did not happen' (101-102). The spliced episodes disaggregate any sense of realist continuity by producing a non-linear narrative temporality, reflecting Magda's distorted psychological state.<sup>8</sup> This self-reflexivity, is key to the text's rendering of otherness, especially via the figure of the body. Ultimately it becomes impossible to disentangle a sense of inscrutable

---

<sup>8</sup> As such, the novel is self-consciously anti the genre of the farm novel (or *Plaasroman* in Afrikaans). In *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee's deviation from this tradition is described as an abandoning of the 'kind of scene-setting and connective tissue that the traditional novel used to find necessary – particularly the South African novel of rural life' (59).

corporeality from the textual body of the narrative whole and, as such, the embeddedness of the work situates embodied life in excess of both natural and supernatural readings.<sup>9</sup>

Life, as a form of excess that exceeds both the calculable (a binary thinking) and incalculable (a theological thinking), is initially broached in Magda's monologue by an appeal to a romanticised or vitalist order of life: '[T]he stones and bushes of the veld hum with life, with such happiness that happiness is not the word, because I am here to set them vibrating with their own variety of material awareness that I am forever not they, and they not I, that I can never be the rapture of pure self that they are' (53). Unable to connect with those around her – notably the colonial others on the farm, the farmhand Hendrik and his wife Klein Anna – Magda foreshadows Lady Chandos as she longs for a 'life unmediated by words' (147). The inadequacy, however, of Magda's transcendental appeal is dramatised through an irony that emerges from the allusions to Beckett.<sup>10</sup> The clause 'with such happiness that happiness is not the word' is a reference to Beckett's *Murphy*, and signals an intractable irony; without words there would be no silence, as Magda intermittently realises: 'Perhaps if I talked less and gave myself more to sensation I would know more of ecstasy. Perhaps, on the other hand, if I stopped talking I would fall into panic, losing my hold on the world I know best' (85).<sup>11</sup> On the one hand, therefore, Magda's linguistic self-consciousness enables a radical freedom to invent and create – to conjure a life of things: 'This is not going to be a dialogue, thanks God, I can stretch my wings and fly where I will' (100). On the other hand, however, this God-like freedom also renders her words meaningless since her exchanges become profoundly asymmetrical: 'I have never known words of true exchange, Anna. The words I give you you cannot give back. They are words without value' (101). The reversion of idealism to a *Watt*-like scepticism, where word and world remain fundamentally dislocated, is echoed at the beginning of the novel: 'Words are coin. Words alienate. Language is no medium for desire. [...] It is only by alienating the desired that language masters it' (28-29). As Magda's monologue becomes increasingly self-aware of its fictional status, the constituting forces of language and narrative, through which she structures herself, are staged as a part of the material world she can neither no longer master nor evade.

---

<sup>9</sup> The problem of allegory of extra-textual meaning is similarly integral to Blanchot writing on Kafka: Kafka's books 'send us back endlessly to a truth outside of literature, while we begin to betray that truth as soon as it draws us away from literature, with which, however, it cannot be confused' ('Reading Kafka', 2).

<sup>10</sup> With an allusion to the sucking-stones of Beckett's *Molloy*, Magda concludes: 'I need more than merely pebbles to permute, rooms to clean, furniture to push around: I need people to talk to [...] I need a history and a culture' (130).

<sup>11</sup> 'And life in his mind gave him pleasure, such pleasure that pleasure was not the word' (*Murphy*, 4).

Consequently, a sense of inscrutable life emerges not merely as that which is represented (in the form of the colonial others, or Magda's sense of vital life) but rather through the disruption of narrative representation itself. That is, life emerges not merely as a question of the body alone but of the processes of embodiment, including the intersection of the biological and discursive processes that constitute the machinations of biopower. Magda's self-reflexive linguistic consciousness thus situates otherness not merely outside the self (that which is thematised as vital life) but at the very heart of self-identity. The montage construction of Magda's Beckettian monologue is key to this dynamic apprehension of alterity. This entanglement of embodied life and the processes of narrative embeddedness, that figure and disfigure the body as the site of intersubjective encounters, is most palpable in the rape scenes featured across the numbered sections 205, 206, and 207. When Hendrik arrives back at the farmstead a violent altercation ensues in the kitchen. In section 205, an enraged Hendrik beats Magda to the floor: "Please, please!" I roll over on my back and lift my knees. This is how a bitch must look; but as for what happens next, I do not even know how it is done' (114). The next section (206) breaks the narrative sequence, however, reverting to the moment in the kitchen prior to Hendrik's attack. In this account Hendrik throws Magda against the wall and rapes her. Yet in the following section the action reverts to the moment Magda is thrown onto the floor but, rather than the rape, Magda pleads: 'What have I done to you? [...] Please not like this on the floor! Let me go, Hendrik!' (115). The following paragraphs recount alternative sexual encounters. In 208 the couple are in the bedroom and Magda's protestations are dimming: 'I have forgotten to take my shoes off! It is too late now, things will follow on from a beginning to an end' (116). This uncanny narrative repetition draws our attention to the flaunted artifice of the numbered sections.

The montage like assemblage of the narrative encourages the reader to view each section as self-enclosed and discontinuous iterations of the same event. The effect is that the action itself is distanced from the narration, and yet at the same time the fragments, as self-sufficient, appear as snapshots of immediacy. This mirrors the double death of Klaver in *Dusklands*; the vivid mimetic capacity of the scene swiftly overcomes a narrative impossibility, even as the fictional architecture is exposed. As with the multiple accounts of the murder of her father (between paragraphs 118 to 126), and of the novel's opening (where her father is repeatedly envisaged returning to the farm with a new bride), the rape scenes distort the narrative sequence and draws our attention to the authoredness or fabrication of the text.

For Hayes, these narrative ruptures engender potential new ways of recognising Hendrik that are ‘free of the old frameworks of racial domination’ (59).<sup>12</sup> However, rather than establishing new ways of communing with otherness, the textual disaggregation of Magda’s encounters establishes a literary thinking that both disrupts modes of identification – including those through which the body becomes embodied (in terms of race or gender) – but also, and as a direct consequence, adheres to a Beckettian negativity that refuses to endow life itself with a form of inviolable value. This sense of inviolable value, that would displace the old frameworks of racial domination, is of course figured explicitly as Magda’s romantic yearning for a vitalist world of hermetically sealed selfhood: ‘My talent is all for immanence, for the fire or ice of identity at the heart of things. Lyric is my medium, not chronicle’ (77). Juxtaposed, however, with the contrasting mediate immediacy of the rape scenes Magda’s romanticism appears tainted with a *Watt*-like irony.

Zimbler identifies the irony at work in the narrative through a stylistic contrast between Magda’s transcendental lexicon and the novel’s assertion of ‘elementary states’ (13) through the repetition of words such as ‘stone’ and ‘dust’ which, for Zimbler, foster a semantics of bare life: ‘One might say then that the novel knows something that Magda does not, which is that the stoniness of its own language has nothing to do with a longing for transcendence’ (81). This dramatic irony is not only evidenced at the level of the sentence, however. The drama of Magda’s embeddedness, established through a logic of repetition both at the levels of word and sentence but also with larger units of the narrative, affirms an implacable contradiction: that the immediacy of life that Magda yearns for is ironically contradicted by the contingent and finite embeddedness of her own monologue: ‘Why will no one speak to me in the true language of the heart? The medium, the median – that is what I wanted to be! Neither master nor slave, neither parent nor child, but the bridge between, so that in me the contraries should be reconciled!’ (145). The rape episodes emphatically disprove the possibility of this reconciliation; it is only through her embeddedness that communion with the immediacy of life (embodied and natural life) is possible, but to be embedded is also to have one’s self-sufficiency, one’s life, threatened.

---

<sup>12</sup> Cantor proposes that the novel’s metafictional framework constitutes an ‘effort to destabilize and deconstruct epistemological categories’ that ‘takes on a new and urgent meaning in a postcolonial context [...] In *In the Heart of the Country*, the floating, disembodied, decentered ego of Beckett’s *The Unnamable* becomes the displaced, alienated, and rootless self of the European Imperialist in the land he has conquered’ (102).



This structural irony testifies to the fact that it is not what these episodes say explicitly but rather through how they stage otherness that the work's ethico-political effects arise. As Attridge argues: 'The importance of *Dusklands* and *In the Heart of the Country* does not lie in their critique of colonialism and its various avatars; there needs no Coetzee to tell us that the white world's subjection of other races has been brutal and dehumanizing' (*J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 30). Alongside the internal economy of embeddedness that constitutes Magda's monologue, the text also figures an economy between self and other. This is staged through linguistic forms of address, or what Coetzee calls 'the deep semantics of person' (*Doubling*, 197). The paradox of Magda's discourse reflects the way in which she too remains ineluctably situated within the discursive paradigms of the farmstead. The more she asserts herself the more she appears as embedded, an irony that is exacerbated by the appeal to the first-person pronoun 'I'. As she later pleads with Hendrik: 'I am not simply one of the whites, I am *I!* I am I, not a people. Why have *I* to pay for other people's sins?' (128).

The problem of the subject-constituting personal pronoun, and its relation to the second-person 'You', is addressed by Coetzee in a contemporaneous essay of 1977 – included in *Doubling the Point* – on Gerrit Achterberg's *Ballad of the Gasfitter* (1953). Discussing Émile Benveniste's *Problems in General Linguistics* (1966), Coetzee notes how neither 'I' nor 'you' refers to an objective reality, but only indicate the subjects of and within an utterance: 'As elements of a system of reference, *I* and *you* are empty. But the emptiness of the *I* can also be a freedom, a pure potentiality, a readiness for the embodying word' (*Doubling*, 72).

The sense in which Magda's 'I' is both personal and impersonal help us relate the novel to Beckett's *The Unnamable*. *The Unnamable* begins: 'Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving. Questions, hypotheses, call them that. Keep going, going on, call that going, call that on' (1). As the apogee of a self-reflexive anti-illusionary consciousness for Coetzee, *The Unnamable* situates the nominal irony of *Watt* – the problem of the distance between the name and the thing that is named – at the heart of the narrating subject. In other words, the unnameable narrator is substantiated by the self-same discourse that renders him absent: 'Let us go on as if I were the only one in the world, whereas I'm the only one absent from it' (120). The personal pronoun substitutes

for the living subject of the enunciation: ‘I say I, knowing it’s not I’ (123-124).<sup>13</sup> Through this rhetorical epanorthosis – a dynamic stillness of simultaneous assertion and retraction (epitomised by the ‘I can’t go on, I’ll go on’ [134]) – a transmutation from an I-subject to an I-object occurs. In Agamben’s reading of Benveniste, this expropriation of the subject in language is the human being’s entrance into discourse and politics; the separation within the self that separates the proper being of the human, as a political animal, from the individual’s mere animal or bare life:

[T]he psychosomatic individual must fully abolish himself and desubjectify himself as a real individual to become the subject of enunciation and to identify himself with the pure shifter “I,” which is absolutely without any substantiality and content other than its mere reference to the event of discourse. (*Remnants of Auschwitz*, 116).

For Coetzee, similarly, questions of linguistic address and subjectification are of substantial ethico-political import. In the Achterberg essay Coetzee relates the discussion of the self-constituting personal-pronoun to Martin Buber’s *I and Thou* (1923). The mutually constitutive nature of the I and the You, for Buber, is endangered by dissipation of the ‘You’ in the form of an ‘It’. In the encounter of the *I-Thou* relation the I is prone to make the You merely ‘passively present’ and wholly ‘dependent on the *P* (*Doubling* 73), as Coetzee elucidates, and thereby subject to localisation as a third-person.

This failure of reciprocity is broached directly by Magda’s observation of her father’s affair with Hendrik’s new wife, Klein Anna:<sup>14</sup> ‘He believes that he and she can choose their words and make a private language, with an *I* and *you* and *here* and *now* of their own. But there can be no private language. Their intimate *you* is my *you* too’ (38).<sup>15</sup> The impossibility of the private ‘I’ in *The Unnamable* is a central issue in Blanchot’s review of the novel. For Blanchot, the novel revolves around ‘an empty center that the nameless “I” occupies’ that we are unable attribute by ‘a comfortable convention [to] Samuel Beckett’ (‘Where Now? Who Now?’, 212). This inability, however, does not breed mere

---

<sup>13</sup> As Jacob Lund argues: ‘In actualizing language, the subject of enunciation is expropriated by what becomes the subject of the utterance’ (Lund, 69).

<sup>14</sup> Coetzee himself suggests in an interview with Stephen Watson: ‘I think that the situation in both books [*Dusklands* and *In the Heart of the Country*] is the situation you describe – of living among people without reciprocity, so that there’s only an ‘I’ and the ‘You’ is not on the same basis, the ‘You’ is a debased ‘You’ (‘Speaking: J.M. Coetzee’, 23).

<sup>15</sup> Magda’s insight, that a private language is impossible, is ironic given her later plea to a language of the heart; a language that would facilitate a direct commingling with natural life. When confronted with heavenly voices towards the end of the novel, this insight is further compounded: ‘If they are gods and omniscient, this is not a conclusion pointed to by their monolingualism’ (140).

capitulation but rather necessitates why *The Unnamable* is condemned to exhaust infinity' (213).

It is thus through the Beckettian nothingness of the 'I' that Coetzee's literary thinking of life can be seen to evade both rationalism and theological idealism by appealing to the infinitely unmasterable status of the finite world itself. As Jacob Lund argues of Beckett: 'It is a matter of remaining within this double-movement of subjectification and desubjectification, in this no-man's-land between identity and non-identity, since this place is the site of resistance against biopower' (75). Such a no-mans-land is homologous with Coetzee's politics of the non-position, and his account of the South African poet Sydney Clouts, in *White Writing*, seems equally applicable to *In the Heart of the Country*: 'To the charge that the poet show what position must be taken in order to see Africa as it really is [...] Clouts responds by taking no position, or by taking all possible positions, thus denying the primacy [of] the prospect of position itself' (173). This denial of the prospect of position is staged through the interrelation between Magda's monologue and the novel's strategies of narrative embeddedness. Magda's attempt to overcome the gulf that separates abstract consciousness and material world, through a romantic appeal to a language of vital life, leads to the implicit textual insight that self and other remain ineluctably co-implicated, for better or worse.

For Magda this insight constitutes a terror, as Blanchot notes: 'Literature is that experience through which the consciousness discovers its being in its inability to lose consciousness' ('Literature and the Right to Death', 331). Magda's discovery of this inability occurs when she contemplates suicide: 'Of all adventures suicide is the most literary [...] I strike the bottom all too soon, as far from the mythic vortex as ever. The first willed draught of water through my nostrils sets off a cough and the blind panic of an organism that wants to live' (14). Further, and in a passage that echoes *Malone Dies*: 'I welcome death as a version of life in which I will not be myself. There is a fallacy here which I ought to see but will not. For when I wake on the ocean floor it will be the same old voice that drones out of me, drones or bubbles or whatever it is that words do in water. What tedium!' (58).<sup>16</sup> Magda cannot escape her finitude yet, comprised of what *The Unnamable* calls the 'words of others' (25), she can also never fully coincide with it:

---

<sup>16</sup> In *Malone Dies* the narrator is constantly bemoaning the '[m]ortal tedium' (44) of his own storytelling. The image of a muffled speech, underwater, also foreshadows the end of *Foe*.

‘Drowning, I drown into myself. A phantom, I am no phantom. I stoop. I touch this skin and it is warm. I pinch this flesh and it hurts. What more proof could I want? I am I’ (59).

### **iii. *Waiting for the Barbarians***

In *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) the possibility of transcending the solipsistic self of an anti-illusionary consciousness is staged at the level of history, which constitutes an imposing yet abstract force. The unlocatable setting and epochal timeframe of Coetzee’s third novel evoke an allegorical dimension that conjures a sense of universal history. The setting of an unidentified outpost of an unnamed Empire, under threat from seemingly imminent attack from a Barbarian horde, is emblematic of a universalised myth of civilisation versus barbarism. This allegorical framework makes the historical time of *Waiting for the Barbarians* seem paradoxically timeless, and this fundamental contradiction – a dynamic stillness – informs the work’s literary thinking of life. Coetzee’s third novel is not therefore concerned simply with historical otherness but rather history as a process of othering, as discussed in *Doubling the Point*: ‘History may be [...] a process of representation [...] but to me it feels more like a *force* of representation, and in that sense [...] it is unrepresentable’ (67). By seeking to represent the unrepresentable – not simply the victims of history but the processes of victimisation – Coetzee’s literary thinking moves beyond paradigms of natural and supernatural readings. *Waiting for the Barbarians* is a work that demands a reading that goes beyond conventional or rational sense, broaching a field of affective response that is irreducible to history, while nonetheless refusing to posit life as an extra-temporal truth outside of historical time.<sup>17</sup>

This thinking of life in relation to history, as both inside and outside, is conducted through a textual fabric which both evokes a rich narrative world and stages the processes of world-construction. Evidence from the early drafts of the novel indicate Coetzee’s struggle with this task of realist world-construction, as per an entry dated 17 October 1977 where Coetzee writes: ‘I have no interest in telling stories; it is the process of storytelling that interests me’ (HRC, MS Coetzee Papers, Box 33, Folder 3). Coetzee’s solution to this writer’s malady eventually manifests in the discovery of the first-person voice of the Magistrate, who focalises the narrative. The Magistrate, who is notably devoid of the paranoid or deranged tendencies of Coetzee’s earlier narrators, fosters the

---

<sup>17</sup> Echoing Adorno’s reading of Beckett, Sam Durrant argues: ‘Rather than providing a direct relation of the history of apartheid, Coetzee’s narratives [...] teach us that the true work of the novel consists not in the factual recovery *of* history, nor yet in the psychological recovery *from* history, but rather in the insistence on remaining inconsolable *before* history’ (*Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning*, 24)

construction of a realistic milieu. However, the Magistrate's lyrical but self-scrutinising voice permits both the telling of the story and the staging or interrogation of the process of storytelling to occur simultaneously. The abstraction from a verifiable time and place create an uncanniness that is therefore compounded by the narrator's incapacity to render his world meaningful. In other words, the world that we are presented with is constitutively filtered through the Magistrate's own attempt to read or decipher this world. The consequent allegorical ambiguity fosters a literary thinking that accords with the logic of the earlier novels and the repudiation of the intellectual collusion between novelistic realism and calculative rationality. Hence, the combined absence of any field of verifiable historical or geographical reference, and the simultaneous construction and disruption of an alternative narrative world, creates an estranged realism that orientates the reader towards an alternative phenomenological engagement with the work's meaning. Rather, then, than any extractable or summative truth, the work's meaning emerges at the juncture between knowing and feeling; as something to be *lived through* in the present.

The Magistrate, who becomes emblematic of a liberal conscience in crisis, is also an avatar or narrative conduit for this experience of *living-through* meaning or truth. This is heightened by the present-tense narration, which mediates for us the Magistrate's supposedly immediate embeddedness in the narrative world: 'My lips move, silently composing and recomposing the words. "Or perhaps it is the case that only that which has not been articulated has to be lived through." I stare at this last proposition without detecting any answering movement in myself toward assent or dissent' (70). This play of the mediate and immediate, as in *In the Heart of the Country*, is further conjured by the highly textualised model of the narrator's consciousness. Like many of Beckett's narrator-protagonists, the Magistrate is a writer, an amateur historian, and the narration reads in parts like a confession or diary. By dramatizing the process of storytelling, or world-construction, in relation to historical time, the novel tacitly highlights the problematic constructedness of historical truth. Echoing the refusal in 'The Novel Today' to subordinate the work of literature to history, on the grounds of its more authoritative truth status, Coetzee in an interview gestures towards an alternative thinking of historical truth *through* fiction insofar as the implications of fictional narrative entails 'no longer being an expert, no longer being master of your discourse' (Coetzee & Scott, 'Voice and Trajectory', 101). Such mastery – a key term in Coetzee's later writings – is precisely what evades the Magistrate as he tries to make sense of the world. The novel concludes: 'This

is not the scene I dreamed of. Like much else nowadays I leave it feeling stupid, like a man who lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere' (170).

The Magistrate's lack of mastery has often been linked in the criticism to the claims of an inscrutable alterity seen as an irruption of the ethical into the hegemonic realm of the political. This alterity is figured primarily as the Barbarian girl, who the Magistrate takes into his ambivalent care. For Marais, the novel asserts an 'anti-Cartesian thesis' (*Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980)', 66) that stages 'a form of ethical action that is *not* grounded in the perceptions, experiences, and understanding of a rational, autonomous individual' (72). Accordingly, Marais valorises a notion of ethical alterity predicated on the Magistrate's sincere attempt to apprehend or empathise with the Barbarian girl who, as wholly other, evades rational meaning. Other critics similarly align the Magistrate's ongoing attempts to know the girl beyond the epistemological framework of the Empire as an indication, as Sam Durrant argues, of an 'ethical change' (Durrant, 44).<sup>18</sup> However, by conflating the Magistrate's viewpoint with that of the novel, or by affirming his reading of the girl as our reading of the text, one risks missing how the Empire's ways of knowing are put to work in the Magistrate's willed construction of the girl as cryptic or other. Contrary, then, to what Marais terms a sense of 'infinite responsibility' (72), issued from the Magistrate's reading the girl's body as a symbol for an alterity that cannot be mastered by a propositional knowledge, we are presented with a sense of alterity that is always embedded, engendered, and embodied.<sup>19</sup>

The Magistrate first encounters the Barbarian girl at the beginning of the second chapter, after the arrival of police agents from the Capital and Colonel Joll's torture of a prisoner. As the Magistrate brings the girl from the street back to his apartment, we are made privy to the self-deceptions that lurk behind the purportedly well-intentioned liberal conscience of his narrative voice. He draws the curtains and insists:

"This is not what you think it is," I say. The words come reluctantly. Can I really be about to excuse myself? Her lips are clenched shut, her ears too no doubt, she wants nothing of old men and their bleating consciences. I prowls around her, talking about our vagrancy ordinances, sick at myself [...] The distance between myself and her torturers, I realize, is negligible; I shudder. (29).

---

<sup>18</sup> Dominic Head similarly argues that the Magistrate exemplifies a 'burgeoning ethical stance' (*J.M. Coetzee*, 73).

<sup>19</sup> The Magistrate's cultural embeddedness is epitomised by his perfunctory anonymity as simply 'the Magistrate'.

The coherence of the Magistrate's voice permits a greater readerly identification with him than with the unreliable narrators of the two previous novels. The palpable self-doubt even provokes our sympathy, despite the fact that the narrative insists that the desire of the Magistrate cannot be extrapolated from the fascination engendered by the body as an object of violence and torture. The novel makes this complicity – our embeddedness within the narrator's ethically dubious perspective – pivotal to its effects. The immediacy of the first-person present tense permits us access to the Magistrate's consciousness but also distorts our capacity to decisively read his intentions, just as he is similarly unable to decipher his own desire.

As with the highly mediated immediacy of the structural pacing of *In the Heart of the Country*, the Magistrate's obviating account emphasises his failure to read, to make emblematic, his encounters with the girl, a failure that we then are similarly made to repeat in the reading: 'It has been growing more and more clear to me that until the marks on this girl's body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her' (33). The passive syntax here, following Coetzee's writings on the middle voice, both dramatises the intersubjective encounter as an event in excess of positive moral agency but also places the Magistrate perilously beyond the realm of culpability.

The failure of the Magistrate's attempts to comprehend the girl, to demystify the symbolic or coded meaning that her body seems to bear, gives rise to a bizarre state of bodily intoxication that lulls him into sleep. This is induced on by the act of washing of her tortured feet: 'I lose myself in the rhythm of what I am doing. I lose awareness of the girl herself [...] These dreamless spells are like death to me, or enchantment, blank, outside time' (30-33). This failure to make the girl signify or bear meaning does not, however, mean that she transcends all forms of signification. There are numerous examples in the novel, blithely ignored by the Magistrate, where she appears completely normal to those around her. Her affability and ordinariness are also noted by Mai, the Magistrate's cook, near the end of the novel: 'She could not understand you. She did not know what you wanted from her [...] We talked to each other about what was on our minds. Sometimes she would cry and cry and cry. You made her very unhappy' (166).

The sense of her enigmatic otherness therefore needs to be qualified. If she appears as wholly other to the Magistrate, 'outside time', this is not because she transcends signification in general but rather the specific forms of meaning-making available to him. That these forms also constitute the very narrative itself is liable to lead readers astray.

For instance, the displacement of agency generated through passive sentences does, indeed, forestall a calculative or rational ethics but it is also precisely this that betrays the Magistrate's complicity with the Imperial regime. Both by evading the question of moral agency and self-responsibility, and by producing a discourse of cryptic otherness, the shift towards a mode of affective or embodied being, opposed to the calculative force of imperial biopower, nevertheless risks repeating the political theology of sacrifice that underpins the Empire.

A more careful reading of the Magistrate's failure to read the girl, therefore, should not equate to redoubling of this failure in our reading of the novel (by positing its othering or estranging narrative effects as equally absolute). Rather, the ambiguity of the novel, in Blanchot's sense, traces an alterity that cannot be pinned down not because it is infinite or absolute but rather *because* it is finite and embedded. Recalling the Beckettian double-bind of knowledge in *Dusklands*, this embeddedness structures the Magistrate's (un)knowing: his awareness of his culpability in the oppressive operations of the Empire comes at the price of an incapacity to extricate himself, since the very meaning-making processes that constitute the Magistrate's active engagement with his own compromised situation – and which he draws upon to attempt to read the girl's body – are precisely the same as that which renders her passive or other in the first place. In other words, alterity cannot be simply equated with a source of ethical value or resistance to biopower since such an alterity is rather produced by those very regimes as the unacknowledged or repressed madness upon which their reasoning is delineated.

The intensity of the problem of complicity in Coetzee's writings can be elucidated by recourse to the 1986 essay 'Into the Dark Chamber: The Novelist and South Africa' (reprinted in *Doubling the Point*) in which he describes the 'dark fascination' that torture has exerted on South African writers. Coetzee lists two reasons for this, firstly, that the 'relations of the torture room provide a metaphor, bare and extreme, for relations between authoritarianism and its victims. In the torture room, unlimited force is exerted upon the physical being of an individual in a twilight of legal illegality' (*Doubling*, 363). Coetzee's allusion to the paradoxical instantiation of the law through its complete suspension reflects Agamben's logic of inclusive exclusion, and the 'physical being' abandoned wholly to the law through its exclusion from any legal protection as that which constitutes the conditions of bare life. (This is thematised explicitly in the novel, through a juxtaposition between law and justice, in the Magistrate's conversation to a fellow prisoner following his arrest. He tells him: "But we live in a world of laws [...] All we can



do is uphold the laws, all of us, without allowing the memory of justice to fade.” [...] So I continued in my duties until one day events overtook me’ (152-153). The events that overtake the Magistrate constitute precisely such a totalization of the law, in a state of exception, established by the de facto martial law imposed on the camp by Joll’s imperial occupation).

The second reason for the dark fascination of the torture chamber emerges as a question of ‘how to establish one’s own authority, how to imagine torture and death on one’s own terms [without] *following* the state in this way, making its vile mysteries the occasions of fantasy’ (364). The paradox of having to represent, without betraying, that which remains behind the ‘closed door’ (346) is staged in *Waiting for the Barbarians* not simply by positing an apophatic or ethical other beyond signification (the girl’s body), but rather by representing the breakdown of narrative modes of representation and signification (modes that remain ineluctably complicit with those of the state). The body is neither a secret truth to be unveiled (through torture, or critical exegesis) nor sanctified (as something that transcends time and space), but marks instead the fundamental unmasterability of the finite realm of life.

The body consequently hypostasises the alternative and negative truth of a literary thinking, as Coetzee states: ‘The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt’ (*Doubling*, 248). The Magistrate’s sardonic comments at the beginning of the novel echo Coetzee’s later commentary: ‘Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt. That is what I bear away from my conversation with Colonel Joll’ (5). If pain cannot be doubted what is unveiled by the novel, therefore, is that the truth of pain is of a different order to that which can be mastered, rationalised and, finally, instrumentalised through torture. As the bearer of such a silence or negative knowledge, however, the body cannot be advanced as an insuperable truth, as Marais argues: ‘[T]he suffering body [...] ceaselessly asserts a commonality that overrides the Empire’s inscription of difference’ (70). This commonality, however, rather than challenging imperial sovereignty in fact substantiates the Empire’s inscription of difference. This inscribing is rendered literal in the scene in the public square where Colonel Joll transcribes the words ‘ENEMY... ENEMY... ENEMY’ (115) on the backs of his tortured prisoners. In other words, to make common, comprehensible, singular – to administer life, even at the point of excluding or negating it in the legal illegal space of the torture chamber – is key to the operation of biopower.

The Magistrate's journey then cannot be said to simply yield an ethical modality of infinite responsibility, since by apprehending the girl as wholly other he risks the danger of fantasy, of repeating the teleological thinking of means and ends inscribed in the torture chamber; the right to exercise death in the name of the glorified life of the nation or Empire. This sacrificial logic requires that the Barbarian other remain other; remain as the figure of death that threatens the empire. By disrupting the sacrificial logic of inclusive exclusion, Coetzee's literary thinking both undermines colonial regimes of biopower but also places into question the possibility of identifying an ethical commonality. In other words, the notion of an inviolable right to life (predicated on an inclusive or shared commonality of the body) is thus ineluctably linked to a binary logic of exclusion that constitutes the sovereign power to exercise a right to death. This is the quandary the Magistrate finds himself in: the desire to make the girl seem other to the way in which the Empire casts her as other is, on the one hand, an attempt to reject this imperial logic but, on the other hand, risks constantly betraying itself by figuring or capturing her.

A further example of the way in which the literary thinking, in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, resists reductive modes of ethical or hermeneutic exegesis lies in the way in which the Magistrate's intransitive desire for the girl maps onto a question of time. The frustrated teleology of his own desire informs the novel's immanent critique of the teleology of Empire: '[I]here were unsettling occasions when in the middle of the sexual act I felt myself losing my way like a storyteller losing the thread of a story [...] Desire seemed to bring with it a pathos of distance and separation which it was futile to deny' (48). In an engrossing passage later, the Magistrate attempts to fully account for this paradoxical pathos:

I am with her not for whatever raptures she may promise or yield but for other reasons, which remain as obscure to me as ever. Except that it has not escaped me that in bed in the dark the marks her torturers have left upon her, the twisted feet, the half-blind eyes, are easily forgotten [...] Too much or too little: is it she I want or the traces of a history her body bears? (70).

The Magistrate's half-awareness that the symbolic frameworks, through which he desires the girl, remain complicit with the meaning-making rationale of the Empire (where the inscription of difference is key to the demarcation of the Barbarian as 'other', as that which can be sacrificed), leads to an impasse that causes him to believe his experiences with the girl occur outside time. Rather, however, than an absolute or extra-temporal truth in excess of the finite realm of the instrumental rationality of the Empire, the Magistrate's intransitive desire instead stages the matter of different life-forms in terms

of the question of form as subject to time. The overlapping mediated immediacy of the narrative voice, and the unmasterability of the recalcitrant body, attest therefore not to a sublimation of life outside of time (as a source absolute value) but rather to the ungraspable status of temporal life itself.

The literary thinking of the work stages the impossibility of mastering the finite not by appealing to an unconditional or transcendental ground but rather by making infinite the very condition of finitude upon which the exercise of biopower is staked. This is conducted through an alternative sense of time as *living-through* which privileges the phenomenological site of the present, both the Magistrate's and the reader's, as inherently open to change, erosion, and ambiguity.<sup>20</sup> The Magistrate's experiences with the girl do not thus occur outside of time but rather outside of history. Later in the novel, after the Magistrate's own captivity at the hands of the Empire, this realisation becomes more explicit: 'What has made it impossible for us to live in time like fish in water, like birds in air, like children? It is the fault of the Empire! Empire has created the time of history' (146). At the end of the novel we read again (but in the form of reported thought): 'I think: "I wanted to live outside history, I wanted to live outside the history that Empire imposes on its subjects, even its lost subjects"' (169). This begins a series of assertions, rendered in inverted commas as if spoken by another, that further instantiate a fundamental ambiguity and self-division. This self-division embeds the Magistrate in the present, in the time of living-through, but thereby necessarily makes impossible a position of full or omniscient awareness that would extricate him from any complicity.

The alternative temporal sense of *living-through* is not therefore simply thematised – as a form of affective or bodily knowledge that somehow evades the very condition of life, time – but is rather performed through the Magistrate's voice as that which both constructs the story and stages the processes of storytelling. Against a model of binary thinking, this opens an interrogative site through which we engage with the text in an experience of *living-through* its staging of the processes of meaning-making and storytelling. As Coetzee argues: 'When the choice is no longer limited to *either* looking on in horrified fascination as the blows fall *or* turning one's eyes away, then the novel can once again take as its province the whole of life' (*Doubling*, 368).

---

<sup>20</sup> Wilm articulates a similar account of the present with regard to the Magistrate's changing consciousness as a reader and interpreter of himself and his world: 'By *present* I wish to invoke a phenomenological present, the feeling of the present as an event, a present that is omnitemporally present, as a moment in the here and now lived through in all its transience' (28-29).

The Magistrate's intransitive desire inscribes this sense of *living-through* as a time of waiting without end; a Beckettian time of waiting in opposition to an end-oriented waiting. Coetzee makes the link to Beckett explicit in a notebook; the novel is about 'waiting for desire which does not come because one is waiting for it. *Waiting for Godot* is about waiting for a subject' (HRC, MS Coetzee Papers, Box 33, Folder 3). Such a time of waiting without end – a waiting without waiting (*for anything*) – constitutes an ineluctable finitude which thereby foregrounds the embeddedness of the subject in a present that can be neither negated nor sublimated (whether via sacrificing life or via sublimating life as an inviolable value). In *Waiting for Godot*, the interminability of temporal life is both a source of horror and the key to a negative freedom, a freedom from determination (as Terry Eagleton argues: 'An indeterminable universe must logically leave room for hope', [74]).

Pozzo: I don't seem able ... [*Long hesitation*] ... to depart.

Estragon: Such is life' (*Dramatic Works*, 46).

#### **iv. *Life & Times of Michael K***

Coetzee's 1983 Booker prize winning *Life & Times of Michael K*, like its predecessor, also draws on an estranged realist mode, but rather than a utopic or unspecified narrative world the action is situated in an imagined revolutionary South Africa. This exactitude invites an even stronger allegorical reading than the earlier novel, yet Coetzee's literary thinking again resists the reduction of the work to a mere statement about the times. This resistance manifests via a proliferation of voices through the free indirect discourse built in to the third-person narration (a technique that will be used to great effect in *Disgrace*). An allegorical reading is similarly exacerbated by using the past tense, which evokes a sense of completion, finality and, therefore, of definitive meaning. This is echoed by the genre-title, *Life & Times of Michael K*, which promises to offer a full account of the significance of the life of the eponymous protagonist. The missing definite article 'The', however, issues an ambiguity – comparable to perplexing sense of history in *Waiting for the Barbarians* – that will remain palpable throughout the novel.

The enigmatic figure of Michael K, and the question of K's meaning and motivation, is at the centre of the narrative.<sup>21</sup> In the second half, as K is interned at a rehabilitation camp, the narration – as in the latter half of Beckett's *Watt*, set in the asylum – switches

---

<sup>21</sup> His enigmatic status is compounded by the fact that he is racially ambiguous. In the only indication provided in the narrative is when he is documented, incorrectly, on a charge sheet by officials as: 'Michael Visagie – CM – NFA – Unemployed' (70). 'CM' we can assume stands for 'Coloured Male'.

to the first-person account of another narrator, the medical officer. The imperilled liberal conscience of the medical officer fulfils the role of the Magistrate in the previous novel by staging our reading or approach to K, thereby pre-empting in advance the task of interpretation and highlighting the literariness of the work. Prior to this, however, the novel commences in Cape Town where K lives with his mother in a small room and works as a gardener for the city. When martial law is imposed they decide to escape to the farm of his mother's birthplace, but she dies in transit. The action that follows focuses on K's attempt to evade the authorities and the historical forces that are overwhelming his environment.

As with Coetzee's later Jesus fictions, the intertextuality of the novel – its relation to a late modernist trajectory of writers, especially Kafka and Beckett – further provokes the question of the work's status as literature by emphasising the self-reflexivity of the metafictional framework. The initial 'K' conjures Kafka's Josef K and his plight, in *The Trial*, as a figure similarly abandoned by and to the law.<sup>22</sup> The archive shows, however, that Heinrich von Kleist's *Michael Kohlhaas* (1810) provided the initial inspiration (Kleist is also a key intertextual figure in *The Schooldays of Jesus* and can be seen as a precursor to Kafka in a German literary tradition that, after Beckett, is one of Coetzee's greatest sources of influence).<sup>23</sup> Kleist's novel tells the story of a man subjected to the vicissitudes of the law and its corruption.<sup>24</sup> By operating outside the law he is ultimately condemned to its most punitive incarnation, the death sentence. K similarly seeks a life outside the law and, in doing so, is tied ever more closely to it as he is constantly incarcerated (firstly by the police that place him in a labour camp and then again in a rehabilitation camp where he stubbornly refuses to eat).

K's state of minimal living (the novel ends with a final assertion of K's ethic of reduced life after he escapes and returns to Cape Town), however, recalls the work's most important forebear, Beckett. As Gilbert Yeoh argues: '*Michael K* is, to a significant extent,

---

<sup>22</sup> Alternatively, Kafka's *The Hunger Artist* is a key reference point for K's nutritional abstinence. As Hayes argues, the focalisation deployed in the novel echoes that of Kafka's *The Hunger Artist*, since the dissociation of narrating and narrated consciousness begs the question of a literary consciousness of an implied narrator ('a fictionalised intelligence' in the terms of Coetzee's thesis) that stands above and behind K (see Hayes' *J.M. Coetzee and the Novel*, pp. 72-105). The medical officer, in the second part of the novel, adds a further narrative voice to the work.

<sup>23</sup> Kleist appears in the initial notebook entry, dated 17 October 1979, for *Life & Times of Michael K* (HRC, MS Coetzee Papers, Box 33, Folder 5).

<sup>24</sup> After the theft of his horses, Kohlhaas becomes an outlaw in search of justice. As Coetzee writes in an introductory essay: '[T]he whole story turns on this paradox. The inborn sense which tells Kohlhaas what is just and what is unjust *at the same time* fortifies him against self-doubt and thus makes him a ruthless avenger of the wrong that has been done to him' (*Late Essays*, 85).

a conscious re-writing of *Molloy*' (J.M. Coetzee and Samuel Beckett: Nothingness, Minimalism and Indeterminacy', 121). Yoshiki Tajiri similarly invokes a continuity with *Molloy*, listing thematic parallels such as: '[A]ttachment to mother, vagabondage in dispossession, aloofness from society and, most important, a critique of storytelling' ('Beckett's Legacy in the Work of J.M. Coetzee', 365). By transplanting the universal or ontological framework into, as Tajiri argues, the 'particular political context of South Africa' (366), the novel implicitly appeals to an allegorical reading.

Indeed, the simultaneous proximity and distance to events in South Africa positioned the novel at the fulcrum of debates regarding the ethical and political valency of Coetzee's early fictions. The appeal to allegory is most notable in Nadine Gordimer's 1984 review, 'The Idea of Gardening', which argued that the ascetic and abstemious figure of Michael K represented a failure by denying 'the energy of the will to resist evil' (Gordimer). Gordimer's position, informed by Georg Lukács' theory of the realist novel, thus hinges on an alignment between the notions of critique and allegory.<sup>25</sup> In other words, art should function as a vehicle for expressing what Lukács terms 'the extensive totality of life' (*Theory of Novel*, 46). Accordingly, the novel should foster particular representations that adhere to a concept of empirical totality, the universal ground of meaning as determined by social, political and economic forces. In a much later letter to Auster, Coetzee details this understanding of realism and his aversion to it: '[T]he generalizability of the particular is the essence of realism, is it not? I have in mind realism as a way of seeing the world and recording it in such a way that particulars, though captured in all their uniqueness, seem yet to have meaning, to belong to a coherent system' (*Here and Now*, 75-76). This makes the meaning of a realist work inherently allegorical; its particular forms always representative of larger social structures of meaning.

For Gordimer, K's enigmatic resistance to interpretation – as Attwell argues, his life is 'apophatic – which is to say, it is defined not by what it is, but by what it is not' (*J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing*, 141) – thus constitutes a resistance to meaningful social change. Instead I argue that this resistance to interpretative mastery is rather precisely what constitutes the ethico-political import of the novel.<sup>26</sup> By focusing on the intersection

---

<sup>25</sup> As Coetzee elucidates in *Doubling the Point*: 'the general position Lukács takes on what he calls realism as against modernist decadence carries a great deal of power, political and moral, in South Africa today: one's first duty as a writer is to represent social and historical processes; drawing the procedures of representation into question is time-wasting; and so forth' (202).

<sup>26</sup> Indeed, in doing so I follow a long-standing suspicion of allegorical interpretation in Coetzee criticism, as evidenced by Attwell's 1993 monograph, *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, which already

of life and politics, however, I seek to question a strand of Coetzee criticism which, as Elizabeth S. Anker outlines, ‘frequently explains [Coetzee’s resistance to interpretation] in terms of ethics’ (190). This is epitomised by Mike Marais who argues that, in *Life & Times of Michael K*, the breakdown of modes of representation and ‘[t]he failure of language therefore enables ethical responsibility’ (‘Literature and the Labour of Negation’, 119).<sup>27</sup> I argue, alternatively, that K’s seemingly apophatic resistance to meaning does not yield a universal or ahistorical truth (whereby the singularity or autonomy of the artwork is aligned with an ethical apprehension of alterity) but rather disarticulates the very ground of the political-historical as one of totality or objective truth. The literary thinking of *Life & Times of Michael K*, like its predecessor, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, presents the reader therefore not with an enigma that transcends time and space but rather the enigma *of* time and space.

My reading of the novel is principally indebted to Attridge’s account of ‘literal reading’ (*J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 39), which denotes an approach that takes the work ‘not as an object whose significance has to be divined [but] as something that comes into being only in the process of understanding and responding’ (39). For Attridge, a literal reading ‘is grounded in the experience of reading as an *event*’, and therefore prioritises a temporality of a phenomenological present in contradistinction to allegorical interpretation which, by necessity, translates ‘the temporal and the sequential in the schematic’ (46) in the search for parallels outside the work. This sense of literal reading, I argue, is foreshadowed by Coetzee’s own discussion of Beckett’s *Watt* and the isolation of a ‘mode of irony that says exactly what it means’ (*Doubling*, 42); that is, a mode of irony that is more about *doing* as opposed to showing or representing, and through a certain figurative failure returns us to the here and now of our response as readers, both intellectual and affective (this conception of irony will again be integral to how the later Jesus fictions – discussed in chapter five – both provoke and displace an allegorical reading). This compatibility of a readerly approach and the text’s own provocation to be read in such a way (especially insofar as Coetzee’s novel consistently troubles the distinction between literal and figurative meaning) does not involve an evasion of history,

---

demonstrates a prescient awareness of the risk in reading Coetzee’s fictions as theoretical allegories (for Attwell this is epitomised by Teresa Dovey’s 1988 *The Novels of J.M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories*).

<sup>27</sup> As Tamlyn Monson similarly argues: ‘The significance of the irreducible Other and of the ethical relation to otherness in *Life & Times of Michael K* is compelling. K moves toward an ethical relation to the Other in the first part of the novel, and in the second part represents the Other as encountered by the medical officer who, in turn, moves toward respect for the other and rejection of the power of representation.’ (‘An Infinite Question: The Paradox of Representation in *Life & Times of Michael K*’, 91).

but rather a staging of the meaning-making processes through which historical narratives emerge by precisely refusing to extract time – and by extension the question of temporal life – from the notion of historical truth.

Contrary to an objective realm of truth to fact, in correspondence with a linear conception of time, and to an extra-temporal account of historical truth (central to teleological or essentialist discourses of colonialism), the novel positions a sense of finitude that evades the very possibility of position-taking. This can be initially witnessed in the switch to third-person past tense narration, which marks a move away from the Beckettian solipsistic mode of the earlier fictions. K's insulation (his evasion of all societal, political, and ethical engagements), is fostered through the third-person narration which creates a separation of narrating and narrated consciousnesses. However, the novel refuses the opportunity, as per the conventions of realism, to utilise this distance as provision for an omniscient or critical perspective.<sup>28</sup> The narrative voice is instead given access to K's inner thoughts and feelings via a free indirect discourse that begets a simultaneous proximity and distance.

This distinctive use of free indirect discourse engenders the ambiguity of K's character as not simply posited in the story but rather staged, or embedded, in the process of the storytelling. Like Beckett's *Watt*, a central theme – the dissociation of language and thought – thus operates at the levels of both form *and* content:

[I]t seemed more like Robert than like him, as he knew himself, to think like that. Would he have to say that the thought was Robert's and had merely found a home in him, or could he say that though the seed had come from Robert, the thought, having grown up inside him, was now his own? He did not know (95).

The estranged realism consequently established by the narration – defined by Attwell as one 'defamiliarized by means of textual mirrors: paradox, indeterminacy and self-conscious fictionality' (*J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing*, 136) – hence forestalls and displaces a clear allegorical reading of K's resistance to meaning. K's doubled embeddedness, both in narrative world and in the storytelling processes that construct that world, can thereby be seen to substitute the linguistic embeddedness of the subject in Beckett's *The Unnamable* for a socio-historical embeddedness which stages the very

---

<sup>28</sup> During the writing, Coetzee continued to maintain a dissatisfaction with the emerging realist plot: 'What I need is a liberation from verisimilitude!' (HRC, MS Coetzee Papers, Box 33, Folder 5). This perceived problem is dispatched through the formal manipulation of focalisation. In the archived notebooks for *Foe* Coetzee expands on a 'great sense of literature when you lose yourself from realism and let language take over (the best of my own writing comes from that – parts of ITH, smaller parts of WFB, MK)' (HRC, MS Coetzee Papers, Box 33, Folder 6).



processes of narrative history and of storytelling: 'Always, when he tried to explain himself to himself, there remained a gap, a hole, a darkness before which his understanding balked, into which it was useless to pour words. The words were eaten up, the gap remained. His was always a story with a hole in it' (110). The metafictional framework, by disrupting the processes of identification and representation fostered by conventional modes of narrative storytelling, thus establishes the site of a non-position.

As with Coetzee's preceding novels, the displacement of Beckettian economy of the nothing into a form of cultural, historical, and ethical embeddedness occurs through a dramatisation of temporal embodiment. K's creaturely existence enacts a diminished or minimal form of life, epitomised by his forgoing of nutritional sustenance. On the road to the farm K discovers that 'He had not eaten for two days; however, there seemed no limit to his endurance' (35). Alongside the focalisation the process of naming in the novel further exacerbates K's diminished existence. His single letter surname and a sense of anonymity is compounded in the narrative of the medical officer who erroneously knows K simply as 'Michaels' (130). A descriptive lexicon of terms such as, 'a stone, a pebble' (135), 'an insect' (135), 'a speck' (97), 'an earthworm' or 'a mole' (182), also figure K's diminutive aspect across the novel. This renders K object-like; not fully alive. For Marais, this inversion of a metaphoric system of mastery and heroism helps K to achieve an ethical sense of 'depersonalized consciousness' (113) that undermines a political realm where 'the struggle for recognition [of] the self is dependent on its negation of the other' ('Literature and the Labour of Negation', 117). This is epitomised by his humble practice as a gardener: 'A man must live so that he leaves no trace of his living. That is what it has come to' (99).

I argue, however, that the novel complicates this reading of an ethicised or vitalist conception of otherness as outside of history. This complication can be witnessed by focusing explicitly on the question of life, notably the instance where K is physically exposed to the exterior forces of history (guerrilla fighters; policers officers; camps). The Jakkalsdriff labour camp, where K is initially interned, is, as Head argues, 'obviously Foucauldian, an anti-nomadic device to harness the unity of a homeless multiplicity' (103). The Kenilworth camp, where K is cared for by the medical officer, Head similarly describes as 'serv[ing] the nation's disciplinary needs quite transparently' (103). The veiled sense of the camp's public good as a 'rehabilitation' camp is indeed revealed to be a mere euphemism for the state's calculative harnessing of the human being as human labour. As

the medical officer despondingly records: '[T]he distinction between rehabilitation camps and internment camps is to be abolished [...] Rehabilitation, it would seem, is an ideal that has failed to prove itself' (153-154). The camps in *Life & Times of Michael K* thematically substantiate the sovereign authority of state biopower; the sequestration and regulation of human life. For Head: 'The camp motif is here revealed as the basis of the novel's allegorical intervention' (104). For Catherine Mills, likewise, K stands for the archetypal figure of biopower as subject to the inclusive exclusion of the law: '[T]hose people interred in the camps are simultaneously turned over to the law and left bereft by it' (184). In these conditions, K becomes 'a figure of "bare life", of a life exposed fundamentally to violence in the ban of the law' (184).

These markers of K's bare life have thus often been taken as signifying the novel's ethical assertion of alterity as irreducible to the sovereign discourse of biopower. Closer attention to the text, however, disturbs any such positive or ethical evaluation of K's condition since – as with the problem of complicity in *Waiting for the Barbarians* – such a reading risks precisely replicating the very configuration of K as other that such a discourse espouses.<sup>29</sup>

These markers of K's otherness are constituted with relation to language and the body, specifically K's refusal and inability to enter language – as that which for Aristotle defines the human being as *zōon logon echon* – and his rejection of nutritive sustenance. For Mills, following Agamben, this figures K as existing 'in the fracture opened between the living being and the speaking being, between the inhuman and the human' (186). K is related to an 'impersonal life' (184) rather than to a singular human being. This is hypostasised by the missing definite article of the title and K's 'hare lip' (3), the latter a metaphor for the disfigurement of K's own entrance into language as that which is proper to the human. Thus, not only is K outside the parameters of civil society, he remains outside the ordinary (and legal) language that constitutes it. K's indeterminacy, asceticism and resistance to language result in an evasion of the political and legal discourses through which his captors inscribe him as a subject of an inclusive exclusion. As the medical officer puts it, foreshadowing later themes of quantification in the Jesus fictions:

---

<sup>29</sup> As Anker warns: '[T]he premise that Otherness inherently resists incorporation is worrisome: it can smuggle in assumptions reminiscent of other colonialist and paternalistic prejudices and stereotypes. A hermeneutic preoccupation with unknowability and difference can consequently inculcate not only a fetishization of those traits but also the perception that cultural difference and exclusion are innate and insurmountable' ('Why We Love Coetzee,' 198).

You will be a digit in the units column at the end of the war when they do the big subtraction sum to calculate the difference, nothing more. You don't want to be simply one of the perished, do you? You want to live, don't you? Well then, *talk*, make your voice hear, tell your story! (140).

K's partial circumvention of the subjectifying and desubjectifying processes of language is also aligned with a way of minimal living that the novel seems to elusively advance as the key to its mystery. Interned in the second camp, K refuses to eat since the offerings are not his 'kind of food' (145) – that being the morsels of sustenance cultivated by his own hand, principally pumpkins (which are not enough to sustain him). K's resistance substantiates a rejection of the biopolitical imperative that, as Mills argues, makes the 'nutritive maintenance of life' essential 'for the purposes of building the nation' (188).

However, this positive evaluation of K's resistance, as the irruption of the ethical into the political, is also profoundly tempered: 'He looked like someone out of Dachau' (146), recalls the administrator, Noel, on K's arrival. K's seemingly romantic attempt to unify man and nature is here related to a history of camps, and the allusive proper name 'Dachau' violently situates the novel in the much the same way the proper name 'Goering' (149) in *Molloy* irrupts into the narrative. K's resistance is therefore intrinsically problematic: his failure to survive on his own terms, to devise a way of living that would sustain him, situates K as caught between a natural and an historical world, equally incapable of inhabiting either. Although K's indeterminacy provokes a profound indecision between different orders of life, human and animal, the novel distinctly highlights how such an indeterminacy cannot offer a site of resistance since this very indistinction is what opens the way for the determining forces of biopower to oppress the living.

Rather, insofar as the novel's referential ambiguity prevents an allegorical reading of K's resistance, we might interrogate further how the 'camp motif' informs a specifically *literary* critique of biopower. K's resistance to meaning can be read as an immanent critique of what Coetzee, in 'Blood, Flaw, Taint, Degeneration: The Case of Sarah Gertrude Millin' (1980), terms 'biological thinking' (57). Coetzee's discussion of the South African novelist Sarah Gertrude Millin (1889-1968) – included in the volume *White Writing* – detects an overt 'poetics of blood' (42) in Millin's work, derived from the ethnic and racial typologies and hierarchies of nineteenth century Social Darwinism. The 'biologized history' (42) of natural selection finds a form Millin's adaptation of 'Europeans forms' – notably naturalism – 'in such a way that the field of conflict they exploit is a mixed field of race,

caste and class rather than the difficult field of class alone' (57). Coetzee here implicitly aligns the representative strategies of naturalism with the binary logic of biopolitical ideologies, where the 'characterological oppositions' (57) of the realist novel are mapped onto conflictual racial and ethnic oppositions.

Building upon Coetzee's commentary, it is possible to witness the estranged realism of *Michael K* as constituted by a disruption of the implicit hierarchies fostered by the representative strategies of social realism (that is, a mode that remains complicit with an erasure of difference through conventional taxonomies and typologies of identity). Consequently, the camps are thematic not simply of the violent machinations of biopower, but can be seen to stage any attempt to capture or figure K. In accordance with the Beckettian imperative of representing the resistance of the object of representation to representation, the novel proceeds by making overt the seeming allegorical significance of K only to withdraw from the logic that would allow K to fit within an oppositional schema. Rather than gesture towards a metaphoric or allegorical escape, then, to a mode of life outside the discourses of history, what is revealed instead is how the opposition between civilisation and barbarism is underpinned by a metaphoric operation that splits life from itself and generates hierarchies that remain complicit with the representational logic of the novel.

This complicity follows the original separation of *bios* and *zoe* that allows Aristotle to purge the animal from within the human. Discussing Aristotle's ordering of life in *De Anima*, George Lakoff and Mark Turner suggest that Aristotle's privileging of human life establishes what they term the 'Great Chain of Being' (*More Than Cool Reason*, 166-7).<sup>30</sup> The effect of this prioritising of human life on the mimetic conventions in the arts results in the 'biological thinking' that relies on a linear conception of metaphor that remains complicit with the ordering and hierarchising of life. The inventive and unusual tropes of *Life & Times of Michael K* – that render K creaturely or object-like – subvert these normative systems of figurative meaning.<sup>31</sup> As Zimmler argues: '[T]he most inventive mappings require that certain of the boundaries between modes of being are blurred [...]' As such, the metaphors of *Life & Times of Michael K*, and, indeed, all Coetzee's novels,

---

<sup>30</sup> This is defined as 'a cultural model that concerns kinds of beings and their properties and places them on a vertical scale with "higher" beings and properties above "lower" beings and properties' (166). Accordingly, they add: 'We speak of higher and lower forms of life [which constitute] a cultural model indispensable to our understanding of ourselves, our world, and our language' (*More Than Cool Reason*, 167).

<sup>31</sup> As the medical officer states: 'He is like a stone, a pebble, having lain around quietly minding its own business since the dawn of time, is now suddenly picked up and tossed randomly from hand to hand' (135).

both relies on and reconfigures the model of the Great Chain of Being' (149). These 'inventive mappings' correspond to Coetzee's wider thinking of metaphor, discussed in the previous chapters (as in 'Surreal Metaphors and Random Processes' where Coetzee posits metaphor as a 'central function in language', 27). The originality of the metaphors in *Life & Times of Michael K*, understood in light of Coetzee's dynamic account of the literary work, thus emphasises the impossibility of interpreting K's idealised ecological life in allegorical terms.<sup>32</sup>

The ambiguity of K's allegorical or figurative status is given explicit voice by the medical officer: 'Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory, if you know that word. It was an allegory – speaking at the highest level – of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it' (166). Crucially, however, rather than follow the medical officer's provocation to interpret K's resistance to positive allegorical meaning as yet another allegory (an allegory of the breakdown of allegory), by staging processes of allegorical and figurative meaning, Coetzee's novel does not annul the difference between orders of life (in the name of some vitalist or impersonal unity of human and animal modes of being) but multiplies the differences beyond the domain of mastery.

This entanglement of life form and literary form is best illustrated through K's non-linear sense of time. Whilst ruminating on the farm we are told: 'He had kept no tally of the days nor recorded the changes of the moon. He was not a prisoner or a castaway, his life by the dam was not a sentence that he had to serve out' (115). By rejecting the sense of life as a sentence K's resistance implicitly challenges the sovereign power of the death penalty as the act *par excellence* of biopower: mastery over human finitude. However, the challenge posed by K's idleness – further substantiated via his relation to speech and food – by inverting the terms (life sentence rather than death sentence) also fails to deliver an equally inviolable right to life. This problematises ethical or recuperative readings of his resistance, even those that in turn move beyond the simple allegorical level of meaning. For Mills, by turning away from a calculable future K offers a sense of 'contingency in futurity' (189) that would be the condition of a future ethics. For Attridge, similarly, K's time-sense embodies an 'openness to the future' (57) that is 'alien to the dominant

---

<sup>32</sup> Attridge's notion of a literal reading similarly draws up Donald Davidson's 'What Metaphors Mean?' (1978), to argue 'what is important about metaphors, is not what they *mean* but what they *do*' (*J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 37).

modern mentality' that forecloses the possibility of an ethical alterity through 'fixed moral judgements' (54).

However, rather than seeking a form of ethical redemption from K's evasion to meaning, the literary thinking of the work stages the impossibility of any recuperative gesture that would seek to transcend the finite present. By the end of the novel K, in a passage that seems to give way entirely to his consciousness, envisages an ecological idyll, where there is 'time enough for everything' (183). However, this open and undetermined futurity, which seems to transcend the historical present, is held in abeyance by a parenthetical 'thought' which qualifies this time-sense, relating K's mysterious resistance to the act of reading: 'Is that the moral of it all, he thought, the moral of the whole story: that there is time enough for everything? Is that how morals come, unbidden, in the course of events, when you least expect them?' (183). K's ironic reflexivity belies the true voice of the fictionalised intelligence of the textual whole that casts into doubt even this most meagre of solutions. It is impossible to thus read K's otherness outside of the non-position of the narrative voice and metafictional apparatus that frames it. At the very least, then, the novel's literary thinking troubles the future-oriented recuperative gesture by refusing to posit a position outside of an economy of embeddedness (both ontological and cultural) that ceaselessly situates, but therefore also divides, any position, political or ethical.<sup>33</sup>

\*

Contrary to a purported sense of otherness emerging in Coetzee's works as 'outside of history' ('Little Enough, Less than Little: Nothing', 160), as Mike Marais argues, Coetzee's literary thinking poses not a transcendence out of time but *of time*; rather than annul the differences upon which biopower exercises a control over life, by somehow exceeding the rational via an order of absolute alterity, the novel proliferates difference, constituting the finite here and now – including that of our reading – as ineluctably divided.<sup>34</sup> K's otherness is not emblematic of a vitalist or wholly other order of life, therefore, but rather marks the contingency of the human itself. As the medical officer observes, K marks a Beckettian 'state of life in death or death in life' (159). By situating otherness at the heart

---

<sup>33</sup> Anker highlights the risks of such a future-oriented approach: 'The futuristic, deferred temporality of a deconstructive ethics strategically short-circuits any attempt to enlist Otherness to mete out concrete, instrumental, or pragmatic goals or effects [...] Ethics can thus appear to reside within a strikingly privileged, rarefied sphere, antiseptically cut off from the messiness of real world action and decision-making' (196-197).

<sup>34</sup> The constitutive rather than absolute foundation of alterity is attested by Coetzee in *Giving Offense*: 'The black in the mirror is not Other but other/self, "brother I"' (228).

of the self, by opening up a position of what Blanchot terms ambiguity, *Life & Times of Michael K* immanently critiques the foundations of binary thinking and sovereign biopower (which sacrifices life in the present for an idealised life of the nation) but also inscribes the ineluctability of a present as always open to violent determinations and, as such, the impossibility of living without a trace. K's negative freedom cannot thus be pigeonholed or universalised; like the Barbarian girl and other figures of alterity in Coetzee's works, K informs the incarnation of a negative freedom, like the negative freedom of Beckett's protagonists and narrators, that refuses to be recuperated as a positive value or identity. The Beckettian textual economies that run throughout *In the Heart of the Country*, *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life & Times of Michael K*, thus complicate the principally ethical apprehension of alterity by denying the possibility of an extractable truth.

By returning briefly to Coetzee's concurrent critical writings it becomes further possible to witness how such an evasion of extractable truth in fact defines the literary work as such, thereby revealing how Coetzee's writings both anticipate and help to illuminate contemporary critical debates. An episode in *Life & Times of Michael K*, which metafictionally stages allegorical meaning through a dichotomy between host and parasite, further reveals the proximity of Coetzee's critical writing to the fictions. K is referred to as a parasite by the police, but K himself, we are told, isn't convinced by such a neat opposition: 'Parasites too had flesh and substance; parasites too could be preyed upon. Perhaps in truth whether the camp was declared a parasite on the town or the town a parasite on the camp depended on no more than on who made his voice heard loudest [sic]' (116). The archive notebooks reveal the origin of the idea: 'I seem to have found something interesting to say, as a manifesto. The host-parasite idea comes from the essay by J. Hillis Miller in *Deconstruction + Criticism*' (HRC, MS Coetzee Papers, Box 33, Folder 5).<sup>35</sup> In 'The Writer and Theory', Coetzee had already adumbrated a paradigm of parasitism in reference to the literary work, understood as neither transcendent of critical discourses (understood as parasitical by a liberal humanist account of artistic autonomy) nor merely reducible to history (as is the case for the materialist critic). (In the later 'The

---

<sup>35</sup> Miller's essay 'The Critic as Host' (1977), which can be viewed as a response to M.H. Abrams 'The Deconstructive Angel', argues that the critic stands in relation to the work much as any text stands in relation to a literary history that it both feeds on and, by doing so, nurtures and supports; as Miller argues, 'the new poem needs the old texts and must destroy them. It is both parasitical on them, feeding ungraciously on their substance, and at the same time it is the sinister host which unmans them by inviting them into its home' (447).

Novel Today' these two positions inform the opposition between rivalry and supplementarity, respectively).

As opposed to the 'vulgêrmarxisme [vulgar Marxism]' (161) that, in 'The Writer and Theory', is associated explicitly with Lukács, Coetzee – foreshadowing the current debates about symptomatic and surface reading discussed in my introduction – does not simply advocate for a formalist approach but rather interprets the dichotomy between surface and depth as mutually reinforcing.<sup>36</sup> For Coetzee, the advocates of realism, by maintaining 'dat taal deursigtig is, dat dit geen rol speel in die *skepping* van werklikheid maar slegs *vertolk*, *bemiddel* tussen leser en wereld, [...] hulle nie histories genoeg is nie [that language is transparent, that it plays no role in the *creation* of reality, only *depicting*, *mediating* between reader and world, [...] they are not historical enough]' (161).<sup>37</sup> In other words, by ignoring the anarchic life of language – or the relative autonomy of the work from other non-literary discourses – critics that privilege deeper or underlying structures of meaning repeat the fallacy of formalist or surface-focused approaches (such as New Criticism) by appealing to an equivalent sense of self-sufficiency. Just as the word remains necessarily bound to the world, thereby limiting any account of aesthetic autonomy or self-sufficiency, for Coetzee the world is also impossibly bound to the word and, as such, no text can be merely or only a symptom or effect of some uncontaminated or pure exterior cause. Such a logic of embeddedness, that builds upon a Beckettian combination of necessity and impossibility, opens the possibility of a literary thinking that refuses both natural and supernatural readings.

Rather, to treat a literary work as 'a structure in which form has become meaning' (*Doubling*, 88), as Coetzee writes in the Achterberg essay, opens the possibility of reading Coetzee's early novels as irreducible to exterior discourses yet as nonetheless bound to

---

<sup>36</sup> In *White Writing* Coetzee broaches the problem of the surface/depth binarism in a discussion of the pitfalls of theoretical readings which privilege a text's covert or repressed meaning over its stated or explicit content. Using a musical metaphor, Coetzee suggests that the theoretical critic hears 'silence between sounds' whereas the positivist (historical or formalist) hears 'sound upon silence' (81). Opting for neither one nor the other, Coetzee simply issues a warning that by 'subverting the dominant [theoretical approaches are] in peril, like all triumphant subversion, of becoming dominant in turn' (81).

<sup>37</sup> In other words, one might argue that for Coetzee Lukács' concept of totality is arguably marked by the same problem of positivism that is elsewhere identified with structuralism (that is, the assumption of an equivalence between appearance – that which can be quantified or directly represented – and essence). As Coetzee writes in 'The Novel Today': 'There is a game going on between the covers of the book, but it is not always the game you think it is. No matter what it may appear to be doing, the story is not really playing the game you call Class Conflict or the game called Male Domination or any of the other games in the games handbook' (3-4).



the real socio-historical world of ethics and politics.<sup>38</sup> In ‘The Novel Today’ this is why stories are said to ‘resemble cockroaches’ (4): they can be mastered, pinned down and made to conform, yet they take on an anarchic and proliferating life of their own that is also irreducible. By neither wholly conforming (the idea of supplementarity) nor transcending (the idea of rivalry) the rules of other discourses, storytelling instead emerges as an alternative mode of thinking. The truth-content of literature thus emerges between reason and affect, between the rational and finite realm of knowing and the irrational and potentially infinite realm of feeling.

In the next chapter I explore further how Coetzee’s literary thinking operates between these two poles, situating life between the natural and supernatural and thereby issuing a sense of embeddedness that profoundly complicates questions of both critical response and ethical responsibility. By focusing on *Elizabeth Costello* and *Disgrace*, I argue that Coetzee’s later works, through a literary thinking of life, ethicise politics and politicise ethics. These works continue the Beckettian task of probing at the boundaries that separate different orders of life and, thereby, set about dethroning the anthropocentric biases of a rational thinking (which, from *Dusklands* to *Life & Times of Michael K*, is seen as explicit with colonial oppression). They also take up the question of how to live, a question emphatically posed in the archival notebooks for *Age of Iron*: ‘28 Sept, 1987: The question: how is one to live? The only answer must be: with decency. The complication: that decency implies living as the ancestors lived, and in this case the ancestors did not live well. So one must invent decency’ (HRC, MS Coetzee Papers, Box 33, Folder 6). The inventive or *literary* solution Coetzee’s works offer is the truth they tell, a truth that can neither be extracted nor possessed and, precisely as a result, nor can it be denied, repressed or overcome; a truth both as palpable and evasive as K’s final rumination:

He would clear the rubble from the mouth of the shaft, he would bend the handle of the teaspoon in a loop and tie the string to it, he would lower it down the shaft deep into the earth, and when he brought it up there would be water in the bowl of the spoon; and in that way, he would say, one can live (184).

---

<sup>38</sup> In ‘The Writer, the Critic, and the Censor: J.M. Coetzee and the Question of Literature’, Peter D. McDonald discusses Coetzee’s indebtedness, in the ‘Novel Today’, to Stanley Fish’s 1973 essay ‘How Ordinary is Ordinary Language?’. Echoing Coetzee’s own writings in the thesis on Beckett, Fish provides a central antagonism between a ‘message-minus’ model of the literary work (in which literature can be separated from ‘the normative center of ordinary language’) and a ‘message-plus’ (46) model (adopted by Gordimer insofar as to be perceived as too literary was to be judged as insufficiently harmful).

#### **4: Sacrificing sacrifice in *Elizabeth Costello* and *Disgrace***

‘This is life. Everyone else comes to terms with it, why can’t you? *Why can’t you?*’  
— J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 115.

##### **Introduction:**

In Paola Cavalieri’s collaborative 2009, *The Death of an Animal: A Dialogue*, Coetzee again addresses the problem of rights in the context of animal life. Mirroring the thesis put forward in the *Reform* essay, Coetzee argues that ‘The paramount right is the right to life’ (120). The right to life is what underpins all other rights; the right to freedom, the right to self-determination, the right to equal treatment before the law. This right, however, is complicated. Its status as paramount is in effect tautologous. One already needs to be alive to access, or to be the subject of, a right to life. This renders the so-called right to life rather impotent: ‘It is the nature of life to live’ (120). Coetzee senses this problematic tautology in the case of livestock whose existence, because it depends entirely on human administration, means that a right to life would have the effect of producing ‘a moratorium on births as livestock owners cut back no longer profitable herds’ (120). The right to life is thus framed as an essentially negative right – the prohibition of the deprivation of one’s life – rather than the positive guarantee of access to life, to the sources of life. This would require extending the right to life to a right to multiply, the right of both a species or of an individual animal to determine its future as well as its present. Coetzee’s example unearths a fundamental exclusion (an exclusion of those beings not-yet-alive) at the heart of the attempt to universalise the right to life.

There are two points to note from Coetzee’s argument, in both the *Reform* essay and here. Firstly, Coetzee’s sense of a prospective duty to futural beings is entwined with a rejection of the universalising and liberal humanist discourse that surrounds rights. Indeed, Coetzee makes this point explicit by advancing a belief in the primacy of ‘prerational’ (121) ethical impulses that serve as the original impetus for codified moral behaviour. The use of a religious register to emphasise this point – Coetzee attributes the desire to treat nonhuman animals ethically as deriving from ‘something like a conversion experience’ (89) – recalls the appeal to a sense of inscrutable otherness or alterity that features across Coetzee’s fictions. Indeed, Coetzee’s critical position echoes that outlined by Elizabeth Costello in lessons 2 & 3 of the eponymous novel *Elizabeth Costello*, discussed in part one of this chapter below, and parallels Costello’s staunch defence of her vegetarianism as

arising from ‘a desire to save my soul’ (89).<sup>1</sup> As noted, Costello’s critique of reason hinges on a disavowal of the fallacy of human self-sufficiency: ‘Both reason and seven decades of life experience tell me that reason is neither the being of the universe nor the being of God. On the contrary, reason looks to me suspiciously like the being of human thought’ (67).

To assert the contingency of human reasoning is thus to assert the contingency of the human *per se*, thereby both disturbing the border between human and animal modes of being and dispossessing the human of the possibility of transcending the finite and material realm of life. Rationality, therefore, cannot simply be taken as a sign of superior moral worth (a position known as moral perfectionism). Echoing Coetzee’s argument in another critical piece, a public address entitled ‘Voiceless: I feel therefore I am’ (2007), Costello asserts: ‘They have no consciousness *therefore*. Therefore what? Therefore we are free to use them for our own ends?’ (90). Rather, for Costello, a common substrate of ‘embodiedness, the sensation of [...] being alive to the world’ (78) engenders what she terms a ‘sympathetic imagination’ (80), the worldly extension of a prerational ethics that corresponds to a sense of fundamental otherness of life.

Secondly, however, by using reason to debunk reason Coetzee’s writings do not, as it may appear, simply attest to an inscrutable outside or pure alterity beyond cogitation (as that which is used to license a privileging of ethics over politics in the criticism). As one of Costello’s interlocutors observes: ‘Yet the very fact that you can be arguing against this reasoning, exposing its falsity, means that you put a certain faith in the power of reason, of true reason as opposed to false reason’ (100). Inscribed into the very fabric of the novel itself, this additional awareness of the problem of Costello’s position (namely that of performative contradiction) attests, I argue, to the very complicity of reason itself with notions of the irrational or prerational, with modalities of otherness as precisely that through which reason asserts its sovereignty.<sup>2</sup>

In the Voiceless address Coetzee frames this contradiction, between the prerational or inscrutability of life and the necessity of a certain kind of reasoning, by discussing the

---

<sup>1</sup> These lessons, which were originally the material of Coetzee’s Tanner Lectures at Princeton University in 1997 and were previously published as *The Lives of Animals* (1999), which also featured responses from Peter Singer, Marjorie Garber, Wendy Doniger and Barbara Smuts.

<sup>2</sup> The three representatives of reason, for Costello, are Thomas Aquinas, Wolfgang Koehler, and Thomas Nagel (representing theology, science, and philosophy respectively). Costello’s all-encompassing account of human reason is revealing of how Coetzee’s works construe a proximity, rather than contrast, between reason and religion, thereby disturbing, I argue, the appeal to an absolute account of alterity supposedly outside of reason.

difficulty of mapping abstract values onto animals: ‘The enterprise is a curious one in one respect: that the fellow beings on whose behalf we are acting are unaware of what we are up to and, if we succeed, are unlikely to thank us. There is even a sense in which they do not know what is wrong’ (‘Voiceless: I feel therefore I am’). The pragmatic expediency of rights and judicial frameworks (necessary concessions in any socio-political context) is essential to the task at hand: freeing non-human animals from their status as inferior to human animals. These opposing positions present a logical impasse. To advance the intrinsic equality of human and non-human animals – and assert an equal right to life – Coetzee implies we must nevertheless rely on the fundamental *difference* between them. (That is, the Aristotelian distinction – taken up by Descartes – between non-human animals and the human animal based on the latter’s possession of speech).<sup>3</sup> Yet, to speak on behalf of the voiceless, to give voice to that which is beyond reasoned speech, is already to betray the animal other.<sup>4</sup> This paradox, which similarly afflicts Elizabeth Chandos in the postscript to *Elizabeth Costello*, sets up an inherently Beckettian dynamic; we are perpetually committed to making yet another stain on silence.

This impasse or contradiction, which stifles a critical or univocal discourse, is precisely what animates the literary thinking substantiated by Coetzee’s later fictions (explored in this chapter and the next). Contrary to Costello’s sublimated account of life Coetzee’s literary thinking both attests to the fundamental otherness of life, and consequently to the complicity of rationality in perpetuating violence in efforts to master life, but also to the ineluctability of a rational discourse of rights since to give way wholly to the prerational is precisely to risk the selfsame sacrificial paradigm of instrumental rationality. This paradigm reaches an apotheosis in the forms of political theology explored in Coetzee’s works, including the ‘thanatophany’ (29) or reign of death that inculcates the child-soldiers in *Age of Iron*.<sup>5</sup> I trace the dissimulation of political theology below in the post-apartheid novel *Disgrace*. Building upon the dissociation of word and world in

---

<sup>3</sup> For Descartes speech constitutes ‘the difference between man and beast’: ‘For it is quite remarkable that there are no men so dull-witted or stupid – and this includes even madmen – that they are incapable of arranging various words together and forming an utterance from them in order to make their thoughts understood; whereas there is no other animal, however perfect and well-endowed it may be, that can do the like [...] This shows not merely that beasts have less reason than men, but that they have no reason at all’ (*Discourse on Method*, 45).

<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, as Rose argues in his account of literary cynicism in Beckett, Borges and Coetzee, although seemingly committed to a normative ethical position in support of animal rights, Coetzee’s piece is ‘double-edged’ (Rose, 21) and entangles both ‘commitment with zealous disbelief’ (22).

<sup>5</sup> The same generational struggle is cast in *The Master of Petersburg* through the bitter contest Dostoevsky faces with his son’s corrupter and *confidant*, Nechaev. For the latter: ‘Everything is permitted for the sake of the future’ (200). I discuss both novels in the next chapter.

relation to the ethics and politics of representation in the earlier fictions, alterity is thus not absolute (in excess of reason) but rather marks the impossibility of *any* absolute. Following the philosophical turn inaugurated by the 1985 confession essay (discussed in the next chapter), the ‘heart-speech’ of both *Elizabeth Costello* and *Disgrace* provides a lexicon for a literary thinking of life that thus corresponds neither to a positivist or calculable truth nor to an apophatic or absolute sense of truth beyond all calculation. My notion of ‘heart-speech’ seeks to designate the affective rather than theological deployment of religious concepts (such as grace), corresponding thereby to a kind of ‘true reason’ that, rather than transcending the embedded world, refuses to reduce truth to the level of a rational knowledge precisely by marking the ultimately unmasterable or unredeemable finitude of mortal life. The religious impulse of these later works (including the recent Jesus fictions) thus dissimulates an affective state (marked by the heart-speech of Coetzee’s characters but also entwined with our reading) that unveils the complicity of reason and religion.

In part one of this chapter I explore the unmasterability of life as it is dissimulated through a dynamic tension between the two concepts of embedding and embodying in Coetzee’s arguably most philosophical work, *Elizabeth Costello* (focusing on the two animal chapters that represent the core of the novel’s philosophical engagement). In part two I utilise this framework to explore how the structural and narrative embeddedness of *Disgrace* precludes a reading that privileges ethics over politics (insofar as a post-secular ethics of alterity is premised on a privileging of emotion over reason, or the body over the mind).<sup>6</sup> By staging the complicity between reason and religion (how the link between sacredness and sacrifice remains irreducible to a liberal humanist or rights-based discourse), *Disgrace* anticipates the sense of unredeemable finitude that is given a more philosophical articulation in the later *Elizabeth Costello*.<sup>7</sup> As such, life emerges as a site of contestation

---

<sup>6</sup> A number of recent studies have turned to a notion of the post-secular to explicate the religious leaning of Coetzee’s later works. In a recent essay entitled ‘Beyond Realism: Coetzee’s Post-Secular Imagination’, Martin Woessner aligns Coetzee’s questioning of the conventions of novelistic realism to a ‘growing interest in what might best be described as post-secular themes [which include] notions of redemption, salvation, and grace’ (144). For a further discussion of Coetzee in this context, see: Vincent Pecora’s *Secularization Without End: Beckett, Mann, Coetzee* (2015); Jack Dudley’s “‘along a road that may lead nowhere’: J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* and the Postsecular Novel’ (2017); Alyda Faber’s ‘The Post-Secular Poetics and Ethics of Exposure in J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*’ (2009). Zimble, who provides a compelling account of the development of Coetzee’s religious register and use of a ‘theological lexicon’ (Zimble, 169), limits his focus to the middle novels.

<sup>7</sup> As Agamben argues: ‘[T]he sacredness of life, which is invoked today as an absolutely fundamental right in opposition to sovereign power, in fact originally expresses precisely both life’s subjection to a power over death and life’s irreparable exposure’ (*Homo Sacer*, 83).

between the ethical and political.<sup>8</sup> Unable to be mastered by either political generalisations (the strategy of allegorical reading) or by an ethical transcendence or sublimation of alterity, the question of life thereby prompts a consideration of the relation between the literariness of the work and an alternative ethico-political modality of thought. In part three I discuss in further detail the relation between the political and the ethical by turning to an instructive recent debate between Derek Attridge and Martin Hägglund, focusing on the notions of hospitality and responsibility.

**i: Elizabeth Costello.**

Following the discussion of the first lesson of *Elizabeth Costello*, in chapter one above, the dynamic between the two notions of embodying and embedding is key to the work's literary thinking of life. By staging the very notion of embodying within the work itself, *Elizabeth Costello* sets about not only undermining the procedural thinking of the realist novel but attests to the necessary embeddedness of any particular embodiment (both in the epistemological sense of an idea embodied in a work and the biological sense of life). This staging, which produces an ironic awareness, is nowhere more apparent than in two animal lectures, lessons three and four (entitled 'The Philosophers and the Animals' and 'The Poets and the Animals', respectively), where Costello outlines her belief in the sympathetic imagination and the embodying power of poetry.

Drawing again on Kafka's story *A Report to an Academy* (1917), as used in the first lesson on realism, Kafka's challenge to the distinction between human and animal life is seen as integral to the possibility of another realism, a truer realism.<sup>9</sup> This complicity between the stratification of life and the representational arts, discussed in chapter two in relation to Beckett's late modernism, is further attested to by Coetzee's research materials for *The Lives of Animals*. Coetzee's appeals to Beckett as another writer who challenges the Cartesian ordering of life by insisting on a critique of language that undermines notions of representational or direct truth: 'Beckett is the other writer to think about. If an animal is a machine that cannot talk, a human being is a machine that can' (HRS, MS Coetzee Papers, Box 34, Folder 4).<sup>10</sup> A highlighted section (underlined) of Donald R. Griffin's

---

<sup>8</sup> As Coetzee says in *Doubling the Point*: 'I think you will find the contest of interpretations I have sketched here – the political versus the ethical – played out again and again in my novels' (338).

<sup>9</sup> 'We don't know. We don't know and will never know, with certainty, what is really going on in this story: whether it is about a man speaking to men or an ape speaking to apes or an ape speaking to men or a man speaking to apes' (*Elizabeth Costello*, 19).

<sup>10</sup> In the archived notes for *The Lives of Animals* Coetzee relates computer technology, and the relative ease of encoding of linguistic forms ('Reasoning, in particular'), as further evidence for casting into doubt the hierarchical predominance of the human being as the speaking/thinking animal: 'For having to ponder

*Animal Minds* (1992), in Coetzee's research materials, further reveals the extent of his continued engagement with issues that emerge already in the doctoral thesis on Beckett, namely the relation of language to life.

Without adhering to his dualistic philosophical view that animals are incapable of any sort of rational thinking, one can agree with Descartes, as paraphrased by Chomsky (1966), that "the word is the sole sign and certain mark of the presence of thought". Descartes and Chomsky claim that nonhuman animals are incapable of using anything equivalent to words, so that the key question is whether the signs used by signing apes have the essential properties of words (HRS, MS Coetzee Papers, Box 34, Folder 1).

In the lectures on realism and animals, Costello deploys Kafka's signing ape – Red Peter – (the narrator and subject of *Report to an Academy*) as a direct challenge to both the Cartesian alignment of speech and thought (reflecting Coetzee's thesis on *Watt*) and to the corollary understanding of thought as inherently rational. Thus, in the first lecture the indistinction in Kafka's text between different modes of being opens onto a sense of inscrutable life; of life as that which exceeds any particular abstract or discursive embodiment, including the representative stratagems of the realist novel: 'That ape is followed through to the end, to the bitter unsayable end, whether or not there are traces left on the page. Kafka stays awake during the gaps when we are sleeping' (32). In the third lecture, however, Costello highlights the 'deep personal cost' (72) of Red Peter's transformation into a quasi-human talking ape, as he tells his audience at the academy: 'I can only describe in human words and so I do [...] I am unable to reach the precision of the old ape truth' (*A Report to an Academy*, 228). On the one hand, then, the breakdown of realism attested to by Kafka's modernism is aligned with a critique of reason that opens on to a plenitude of animal being.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, however, there emerges an ironic awareness of the fact that 'the old ape truth' remains tied to the process of becoming-human; that reason is required to critique reason and thus self and other remain mutually embedded.

This ironic awareness subtly undermines the link Costello makes between a critique of reason and an ethics of embodiment, and manifests through a narrative embeddedness that not only threatens the absolute claims of an alterity that purportedly exceeds all orders of discourse, but also suggests that precisely such a notion runs the risk of being

---

whether animals are mere machines (Descartes) we now have to ponder whether, in respect of language, human beings are any better than machines' (HRS, MS Coetzee Papers, Box 34, Folder 4).

<sup>11</sup> As JC asks in *Diary of a Bad Year*: 'Human reason, we say, is universal reason. But what if there are equally powerful modes of "thinking"?' (70-71).

mistaken for a malevolent God.<sup>12</sup> In part this is performed through Costello's own scruples and doubts, her awareness of the inconsistency of her own life practices: 'I'm wearing leather shoes [...] I'm carrying a leather purse. I wouldn't have overmuch respect if I were you' (89). More fundamentally, however, a reading at the level of form, attentive to what Mulhall terms 'Coetzeean realism' ('Health and Deviance, Irony and Incarnation', 19), dictates that we relate the ideas embodied in the work, and voiced by various characters, to the embedded contexts in which they appear. In particular, the two lectures on the lives of animals occur after, and are therefore embedded by, the opening 'lesson' on realism. In this first chapter it is the narrator who prefers the term embodiment (when discussing how ideas are conveyed through the opinions of characters) and Costello who, via Kafka, appeals to the notion of embeddedness: 'Kafka's ape is embedded in life. It is the embeddedness that is important, not the life itself' (32). To be embedded, to be bound by context, means that any idea, including that of embodied life, cannot be contained in itself. Likewise, if no idea can be contained in itself, but depends on context, then no singular context, or embodiment, will suffice to capture the entirety of the idea since this repeats the sovereign logic of reason as a self-affirming or tautologous enterprise. By staging the processes of embeddedness, in language and discourse, Coetzee's literary thinking – recalling Thacker's account of Aristotle's *De Anima* – situates life at the juncture of a non-position between a concept of life in general (as that which exceeds any particular embodiment) and life in particular (life as embedded in the finite and material realm and thereby open to mastery). In other words, by attending to the specifically literary framework of the text – rather than to the isolated ideas espoused therein – life emerges not merely as a positive object of thought but rather as an absent signifier that (recalling the estranged realism of *Life & Times of Michael K*) names the work's mode of resistance to the recuperative strategies of both rational *and* prerational attempts to account for life. Embodying and embedding thus subtly inflect one another, creating

---

<sup>12</sup> Published the same year as Kafka's story, Wolfgang Koehler's 1917 *The Mentality of Apes* – which documents his psychological experiments on signing apes – is also a key intertextual reference for Beckett's play *Act Without Words I* (1957). In *Act Without Words I*, Koehler's attempts to determine the intelligence of chimpanzees is figured as a mode of violent torture wholly inexplicable to the victimised 'player' on the stage. The play powerfully depicts the same incommensurability that lies at the heart of Costello's account of Kafka's tale, between the realm of 'practical reason' (74) (the sphere of Red Peter's humanizing education) and deeper metaphysical speculations about the very nature of life. This opposition surfaces explicitly in Coetzee's 'Eight Ways': 'It, the creature, is doing its best to understand how the universe works, the universe of nuts and how you lay your hands (your paws) on them. That is what is going on, before our eyes. [...] But is that truly what is going on?' (27). To the ape these tricks make the oppressor seem divine but this God, 'or Godot, the little God' (28), can 'never know what it is to be me' (28).



a vertiginous effect that, as Mulhall argues, ‘complicate[s] evaluation to the point of putting definitive conclusions beyond our reach’ (*The Wounded Animal*, 183).

The complicity between a prerational ethics and a theological account of life can be elucidated by turning to the episode in Beckett’s *Molloy* where Moran discusses his bees. Confronting the inscrutable life of the bees he keeps Moran anthropomorphises their movements, imagining their dance as a means of speech:

But the outgoing bees danced too. It was no doubt their way of saying, I understand, or, Don’t worry about me. But away from the hive, and busily at work, the bees did not dance. Here their watchword seemed to be, Every man for himself, assuming bees to be capable of such notions (176-177).

Unable to commingle with the bees, it is their otherness that provokes Moran’s sense of deprivation: their dance ‘would always be a noble thing to contemplate, too noble ever to be sullied by the cogitations of a man like me, exiled in his manhood’ (178).<sup>13</sup> The idea of the Edenic or prelapsarian language of the bees is comparable to the Adamic language that Coetzee associates with attempts by English language poets seeking to represent the natural world of Africa: ‘the language being sought after is a natural or Adamic language, one in which Africa will naturally express itself, that is to say, a language in which there is no split between signifier and signified, and things are their names’ (*White Writing*, 8-9). In *In the Heart of the Country*, Magda too, like Moran, seeks to embody an ontology of immanence and attain ‘the fire or ice of identity at the heart of things’ (77). However, such an idea of language, where things and their names coincide in harmony, is nothing but a private language, and therefore incomprehensible and unreadable. The fallacy of Magda’s own prerational sympathetic imagination, unveiled to us through her psychic implosion, is elucidated by Coetzee in *White Writing*: ‘What response do rocks and stones make to the poet who urges them to utter their true names? As we might expect, it is silence’ (9).

*Molloy* ends with Moran having returned home after his failed mission to apprehend Molloy. The final words of the novel resemble those of Kafka’s ape, Red Peter, who closes his narrative by stating: ‘I seek no man’s approval, all I want is to spread understanding, all I do is report back, and what I’ve done this evening, my learned friends

---

<sup>13</sup> The bees are of a different order of being to Moran, wholly unassimilable to what Jean-Michel Rabaté terms ‘the jumble of already-thought thoughts that philosophy, theology and the other ‘-ologies’ hand down to us’ (‘Think, pig!’: Beckett’s animal philosophies’, 123).

and academicians, has been simply to report' (*A Report to an Academy*, 235). Moran, too, confesses to reporting, as simply and literally as possible, what the 'voice' tells him:

I have spoken of a voice telling me things. [...] It told me to write the report. Does this mean I am freer now than I was? I do not know. I shall learn. Then I went back into house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining (*Molloy*, 184).

Just as Red Peter's becoming-human is left ethically ambiguous in Kafka's short story, Moran's closing voice, switching between tenses, reveals him as poised ambiguously between creator and creature; the literary framework – the staging of authorship which, as in *Elizabeth Costello* and numerous other works from Coetzee's late period (including *Slow Man* and the Nobel speech 'He and His Man') – is ineluctably linked with a questioning of human identity.

*Elizabeth Costello* thus inherits from Beckett and Kafka this tendency to disassemble ontological fixity by propagating an epistemological uncertainty that is inherent to the literary work *qua* literary work.<sup>14</sup> Importantly, however, as the relation to Beckett and Kafka reveals, the effects of this disassembling – the way in which Coetzee's literary thinking broaches the alterity inherent to life – cannot be understood as primarily ethical without forgoing the irony generated by the vertiginous texture of a narrative embeddedness that constantly withholds summative meaning. Through what Currie terms the 'abysmal logic of the self-referential' (156-157), the literary thinking of *Elizabeth Costello* stages the inherent divisibility of reading contexts which Coetzee identifies in the thesis on Beckett. By performing, rather than simply stating, the central issues (the embeddedness and embodiment of ideas; the question of belief in literature) *Elizabeth Costello* attests to the insight of the thesis: that a binary logic and linear temporality fail to capture the dynamic proliferation of meaning through which the literary text comes to life.

Coetzee's discussion of Kafka's short story 'The Burrow' (the story of another indeterminate creature) further hints at the problem of conflating Costello's ethics with those of the novel. Coetzee writes:

---

<sup>14</sup> As Mulhall asks: 'If human embodiment exceeds the grasp and the (un)certainly of all human sense-making systems, it must exceed that of literature; how, then, can literature properly represent this excess, if not by enacting it — by exceeding its own limits?' (*Wounded Animal*, 202). It is precisely this sense of literature as always in excess of itself (of any absolute definition) that I have traced to Coetzee's writings on Beckett and to an indebtedness to post-structuralism. As Blanchot states in 'Literature and the Right to Death': 'literature begins at the moment when literature becomes a question' (300).

Kafka at least hints that it is possible, for snatches, however brief, to think outside one's own language, perhaps to report back on what it is like to be outside language itself. Why should one want to think outside language? Would there be anything worth thinking there? Ignore the question: what is interesting is the liberating possibility Kafka opens up (*Doubling*, 198-199).

In light of Coetzee's suspicion towards an 'outside' of language, one can read Costello's appeal to the sympathetic imagination, which promises to return the 'living, electric being to language' (111), as integral to the work's irony. Picking up from her first lecture on realism, Costello makes a direct comparison between her own address and Red Peter's report. Significantly, Costello asserts that this comparison is meant literally and not as a metaphor: 'I am an old woman. I do not have the time any longer to say things I do not mean' (62). The analogy with Kafka's ape is not figurative since, she argues, the story of Red Peter is not figurative; it is not about 'Kafka the Jew performing for Gentiles' (62), it is not an allegory of the dehumanizing tendency of rational thought which, she later argues, ultimately leads to the holocaust: 'Each day a fresh holocaust, yet, as far as I can see, our moral being is untouched. We do not feel tainted' (80). Rather, Red Peter's report recounts a singular experience that cannot be instrumentalised. The ape's evident intelligence and erudition are not to be misunderstood as the necessary pre-requisites of a right to life (the moral perfectionist argument): 'Whatever else it may have been, his report to the academy was not a plea to be treated as a mentally defective human being, a simpleton' (70). The literality of her affinity with Red Peter is thus a plea, to her own audience, to understand her argument as she understands Kafka's text: that is, not as a realist representation of animal life according to the conventions of a tradition that gives material form to abstract ideas (the process of embodying). Rather, her idea of an alternative realist project – of which Kafka's fable is exemplary – relies on *literalizing* this idea of embodiment: '[L]ike most writers, I have a literal cast of mind [...] When Kafka writes about an ape, I take him to be talking in the first place about an ape' (76). Animal and material life cannot be made abstract, as attested by the pain endured by Red Peter's metamorphic process of becoming human (a pain Costello claims to share).

Indeed, it is precisely pain or the possibility of suffering that lies at the heart of Costello's appeal to a shared sense of embodiment that marks the ethical disposition behind her sympathetic aesthetics. In response to Thomas Nagel's denial that is impossible to know what it is like to be a bat, Costello posits the experience of death:

I know what it is like to be a corpse. The knowledge repels me [...] All of us have such moments, particularly as we grow older. The knowledge we have is not

abstract – “All human beings are mortal, I am a human being, therefore I am mortal” - but embodied. For a moment we *are* that knowledge. We live the impossible: we live beyond our death (76-77).

It is such a capacity to think our way into the lifeworld of another animal that is attributed to a tradition of other writers who challenge conventional realism, including Ted Hughes ‘in a line of poets who celebrate the primitive and repudiate the Western bias towards abstract thought. The line of Blake and Lawrence, of Gary Snyder in the United States, of Robinson Jeffers’ (97).<sup>15</sup> However, the negativity of this embodied and shared knowledge – which founds an appeal to an alterity beyond the realm of mere calculable life – reveals that we ought to be wary of how the sympathetic imagination risks repeating the same fallacy inherent to the reasoning imagination; that is, the danger of sublimating, and thereby negating or sacrificing, the material ground of life even at the moment one claims to defend it.

This risk is aptly epitomised in Deleuze and Guattari’s vitalist notion of becoming-animal. Such a process involves a liberation from hierarchised orders of life to a ‘world of pure intensities where all forms come undone [...] to the benefit of the unformed matter of deterritorialized flux’ (*Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, 13). This sublimation of affective or material life (the old ape truth) risks appropriating the other by negating the embedded context of any relation, thereby cancelling the very possibility of ethical action. By seeking to surpass the affectless and deathly realm of abstract thought, Costello’s sympathetic imagination is thus liable to risk an alternative apophatic or theological abstraction – as illustrated in reference to the notion of private languages – that is equally problematic.

*Elizabeth Costello* inscribes this awareness into its own processes of narrative embeddedness. Costello’s comparison between Red Peter and his creator, Kafka, invites us to further consider *her* status as both creator (a novelist) and creature (a character in a novel), and therefore to account for the additional context of the author, or fictionalised intelligence, in the work. This establishes an ironic or performative displacement that seems to exceed any stated meaning or truth and opens onto an alternative way of reading Costello’s literal appeal to Kafka. This can be witnessed by turning to Adorno’s reading

---

<sup>15</sup> Costello’s line of poets overlaps with Margot Norris’ notion of the ‘biocentric’ tradition. Inaugurated by Darwin and Nietzsche, Norris singles out an early modernist strain of ‘biocentrism’ in the works of writers and artists, notably D.H. Lawrence, who sought to instil a new relation to animality no longer based on the priority of human consciousness. This involves, she argues: ‘a subversive interrogation of the anthropomorphic premises of Western philosophy and art, and the invention of artistic and philosophical strategies that would allow the animal, the unconscious, the instincts, the body, to speak again’ (*Beast of the Modern Imagination*, 5).

of Kafka's animal aesthetic as a form of literalizing metaphor. According to Adorno, 'These travelling salesmen are like bugs' is a common expression that Kafka 'must have picked up, speared up like an insect. Bugs – not *like* bugs' ('Notes on Kafka', 255). Rather than reading Adorno's claim that Kafka literalises metaphor to denote a passage to an actual or literal other mode of being, what emerges instead is a form of indeterminacy between the metaphoric and literal that corresponds to an uncanny sense of life between form and formlessness (famously epitomised by Kafka's untranslatable '*Ungeziefer*' in *Metamorphosis*).

In *Elizabeth Costello* this indeterminacy is proper to a narrative embeddedness that refuses the reduction of life to mere concrete reality or to abstract ideality; Coetzee's literary thinking situates life as neither simply a means nor an end. Accordingly, Costello's appeal to the truth of Red Peter's report is presented via a Beckettian literal irony (as Coetzee attributes to *Watt*); a mode appropriate to what Weller describes as the inherently doubled account of life in Beckett's works:

[T]he human/animal distinction [...] is subjected to a double pressure in Beckett's works. On the one hand, this distinction is radically expanded, to the point at which it becomes absolute: the animal becomes the absolute other [...] an unreadable eye. On the other hand, however, this distinction is collapsed, such that the very essence of the human is resituated in the animal ('Not Rightly Human', 219).

This doubledness situates animal life as fundamentally other to the human, foregrounding the ineluctability of our embeddedness in discursive forms of reasoning, but also as that which is proper to the human insofar as the human only comes into being through a relation to that which is not human. Otherness (figured for Costello as mortal finitude or death) is not therefore situated outside but rather at the heart of the human being itself. Coetzee's literary thinking is indebted to a similarly doubled position or non-position; a logic of embeddedness that situates identity at the very juncture of a seemingly unassailable difference.<sup>16</sup>

By propagating a mode of indeterminate being, Coetzee inherits from Beckett and Kafka a mode of irony or doubledness that troubles the separation of human and animal life. This linkage of literary form and life form thus emerges through an indistinction between metaphorical and literal sense which, on the one hand, contaminates the real (any appeal

---

<sup>16</sup> This sense of doubledness, of identity emerging only at the very point of difference, is integral to Eric Santner's theoretical formulation of creaturely life which I discuss in the next chapter.

to literal or *natural* life) with an irreducible figurative sense and, on the other hand, marks the truth or seriousness of the figurative itself; the *truth* of fiction that marks the ethico-political import of Coetzee's literary thinking.

Insofar as Coetzee's literary thinking is wedded to a project of re-envisaging life in terms proper to neither reason nor religion, then Costello's alternative realism names this operation via the concept of embeddedness: 'It is the embeddedness that is important, not the life itself. His ape is embedded as we are embedded, you in me, I in you' (32). Such a notion of embeddedness, which exceeds any particular instance of life while nonetheless also refusing any ideal ground for an abstract concept of life, is grasped through a sense of *finitude*. It is the contingency or finitude of the human being that facilitates our access to the fullness of embodied life. This contradictory thinking lies at the heart of Costello's case but also threatens her appeal to an ethical modality of experience. If our access to the common 'substrate of life' (*Elizabeth Costello* 80) is only guaranteed by the common substrate of death, any appeal to animal or embodied life will necessarily involve the risk of sacrifice, as Chris Danta argues: 'each becoming-animal of the human is also a becoming-corpse' ('Like a Dog... Like a Lamb', 731).

By situating Costello's own thinking in light of the narrative embeddedness of the textual whole, it becomes clear that although mortality divides every living being, and consequently opens a path to otherness, such an account of internal division – the wound of mortal finitude – also prevents 'the other' from being wholly other, that is self-contained and not subject to any such division or embeddedness.<sup>17</sup> Costello's embeddedness therefore comes at a cost; she is doubly wounded: Firstly, in figurative sense the cost of her embeddedness means she is unable to be a philosopher, to *own* or master her argument; the logic behind her own account of life contradicts the ethical claims she ascribes to the sympathetic imagination, since any appeal to an ultimate ground or value for life (as sacred) necessarily risks sacrificing the embedded conditions of mortal life that the ethical relation depends upon: 'I am not a philosopher of mind but an animal exhibiting, yet not exhibiting, to a gathering of scholars, a wound, which I cover up under

---

<sup>17</sup> This *structuring*, rather than merely structural, account of alterity is precisely what links questions of self (of the human subject) to questions of self-truth (of narrative); of life-form to literary form (I discuss this in greater detail in relation to Coetzee's own life-writing in the next chapter). As can be witnessed in the archived teaching notes for 'Literature and Confinement', a course taught at Harvard in the early 1990s, Coetzee's reading of Kafka's *A Report to an Academy*, through the lens of Heidegger's notion of *Geworfenheit* (thrownness), is exemplary of an impulse to locate otherness not outside of life but at its very centre: 'One doesn't ask to be born. The starting point is always finding oneself in a certain place and not knowing where you came from or how to get back (Kafka's ape in the cage)' (HRC, MS Coetzee Papers, Box 114, Folder 10).

my clothes but touch on in every word I speak' (70-71). The narrative embeddedness of the novel stages this inherent risk as the 'lesson' format embeds her lectures in a series of interpersonal and family dramas that give flesh to the contradictions inherent to taking a position of mastery with regards to disavowing all mastery.

Secondly, in a literal sense, her embeddedness is her own mortal finitude. This is thematised in the novel, and these two senses dovetail in the scenes with John, her son and the rational foil to her arguments. Costello's mortal finitude is represented through the refracted discourse of her son, whose voice intermittently blends with the third-person narrator's (another example of the work's embeddedness):

He can see up her nostrils, into her mouth, down the back of her throat. And what he cannot see he can imagine: the gullet, pink and ugly, contracting as it swallows, like a python, drawing things down to the pear shaped belly-sac [...] No he tells himself, that is not where I come from, that is not it (34).

Far from constituting an opening to intersubjective empathy, Costello's bodily existence reinforces the gulf that separates mother and son.<sup>18</sup> John's alienation from his mother is not abated but rather compounded by his imaginative capacity to conceive of her as an embodied being. The very bonds of empathy and sympathy – the familial ties that cast Costello as creator and John as creature – that encourage ethical responsibility are thus precisely those that also threaten the autonomy and agency of the individual. The embedded family narrative thus plays out at a personal level the consequences of the logic of identification that lies behind Costello's sympathetic imagination; to identify or approach alterity is to risk appropriating and mastering the other.<sup>19</sup>

The contradiction that lies at the heart of Costello's discourse, and that undermines her authority in the 'lessons', is precisely what constitutes the very authority of the novel itself. Coetzee's literary thinking, and the prospect of a truth that would be inimical to both reason and religion, gains an authority by precisely lacking in the authority that would guarantee a certain or absolute position. This ties the work's authority to its internal displacement of the concept of authorship, a displacement I discuss in greater detail in the next chapter. The irony of *Elizabeth Costello*, dissimulated through the multiple perspectives that constitute the work's narrative embeddedness, embraces the

---

<sup>18</sup> This family drama is played out further in the short stories *As a Woman Grows Older* (2004) and *The Old Woman and the Cats* (2013).

<sup>19</sup> As Durrant argues regarding *Disgrace*: 'As soon as the sympathetic imagination acquires a content, it forgets the difference of the other. To remember the other is to place the imagination in abeyance' ('Limits of the Sympathetic Imagination', 130).

doubledness of a truth of life that is both finite or embedded and infinitely ungraspable. Coetzee's literary thinking attains a truth of life that is, to borrow Costello's words, 'alive inside that contradiction, dead and alive at the same time' (77).

As I've argued, however, such a contradictory thinking of life cannot be *primarily* ethical; any sublimated concept of the other (the body or animal life) necessarily sacrifices the present here and now of any encounter, the actual site of embodied life. Instead we are left with what Danta terms 'unredeemed finitude' ('Like a Dog... Like a Lamb', 735); a sense of life that can be neither saved nor sacrificed. Costello's and Kafka's ape thus bear a wound, a wound which both relates and distances the human and animal: the wound of finitude. As the second and final chapter on animal life closes the embedded family drama underscores the fraught consequences of such a finitude beyond mastery. Costello speaks frankly to John to describe the personal and prerational affront she feels regarding what her son calls 'the animal business' (114). She appeals to her son's sympathy by staging a dialogue with herself: '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?*' (115). John's reply, both caring and distant, expresses the fundamental or literal irony of the work and the only truth about life we can be certain of: 'There, there', he tells her, 'It will soon be over' (115).

## **ii: Disgrace**

If *Elizabeth Costello* suggests that the human mode of being is defined by sacrificing animal life, as in Kafka's story, then this sacrifice of animal life is also emphatically a sacrifice of mortal life. The way out of being human, by seeking to sympathetically imagine, identify with, and ultimately embody the animal other, thereby involves not a recuperation of life itself but rather a hazardous approach to death. Such a paradoxical thinking – an approach to life through death – is inscribed at the core of Coetzee's earlier *Disgrace* and is epitomised by David Lurie's ritualistic disposal of dead dogs. *Disgrace* brings to a head a confluence of features that characterise Coetzee's later works and together constitute the hallmark of the philosophical turn: the problem of an endless scepticism (what Costello terms the tautology of reason), the question of linguistic determinism (defined in terms of the Chandos paradox and the notion of private languages), and the relation between different orders of life. In later works, notably *Elizabeth Costello* but also the recent Jesus fictions, these features are discussed in more universal terms but, as Clarkson argues, 'these philosophical concerns [...] gain a particular urgency in *Disgrace*, where questions



of conceptual systems, modes of representation, of the characters' ethical obligations, are inextricably meshed within a specific historical time and place' (*Countervoices*, 128). Accordingly, the sense of unredeemable finitude, that characterises the ontological questioning of *Elizabeth Costello*, emerges in *Disgrace* as pivotal to the novel's entanglement of ethics and politics. Below I explore how the work's structural irony and production of ambiguity leave the reader suspended between the two impulses of the rational and religious. Lurie's ambivalent act of care for the dead dogs encapsulates the ethical complexity and questioning of the work as a whole: how does one approach otherness (both historical and biological) without repeating the risk of sacrifice inherent to both the rational impulse to calculate and name – to identify the other – or the religious impulse to make absolute or ineffable the claims of an otherness that is thereby condemned to remain silent.

The second novel to be set in the time and place of its composition (after *Age of Iron*), *Disgrace* stages the tumultuous milieu of post-apartheid South Africa. Upon publication the novel caused a heated debate, with its troubling depiction of racial relations and sexual violence (most explicitly the rape of Lurie's daughter, Lucy, by a gang of black youths), and its disgraced white middle-class protagonist (following an affair with a student, Melanie Isaacs) seeming far from representative of a new era of transition after the cessation of the apartheid regime in 1994. Lurie, as one of his colleagues regards him, 'is a hangover from the past, the sooner cleared away the better' (*Disgrace*, 40). Much has been written on the reception and polemic that surrounded *Disgrace*, both in South Africa and internationally.<sup>20</sup> Recent commentary, however, has moved on to exploring precisely how the abstract elements of the narrative, criticised for avoiding a direct confrontation with the times, in fact constitute the primary ethical and political locus of the novel.

These elements centre around a conception of life that situates the novel within a wider 'ethical turn'.<sup>21</sup> Attwell's appeal to an 'ontology shorn of system, and therefore inimical to philosophy' ('Race in Disgrace', 340) typifies this ethical approach. By aligning a prerational apprehension of life itself with an ethics of life, Lurie's experience with the dogs at Bev Shaw's animal clinic seems to hypostasise Costello's account of the sympathetic imagination. Lurie can thus be seen to exemplify the 'conversion experience'

---

<sup>20</sup> See the special issue of the journal *Interventions* published in 2002 on *Disgrace* and the articles therein by Attwell ('Race in Disgrace') and Peter D. McDonald ('Disgrace Effects'). See also Chapter 3 of Andrew van der Vlies' introductory volume *J.M. Coetzee's Disgrace* (2010).

<sup>21</sup> I take the phrase 'ethical turn' from a volume entitled *Mapping the Ethical Turn* (2001), in which James Meffan's and Kim L. Worthington's essay, 'Ethics Before Politics: J.M. Coetzee's Disgrace', is published.

Coetzee outlines in *The Death of the Animal*. Furthermore, despite the third-person present tense narration, since the narrative voice is inextricably bound to Lurie's consciousness, this 'ethical horizon' ('Race in Disgrace', 339) is linked to the novel's own production of ambiguity. The inexplicable nature of such an ethics is thus described without explanation in the narrative, thereby mirroring how events have come to overwhelm Lurie's own powers of explanation:

He had thought he would get used to it. But that is not what happens. The more killings he assists in, the more jittery he gets. One Sunday evening, driving home in Lucy's kombi, he actually has to stop at the roadside and recover himself. Tears flow down his face that he cannot stop; his hands shake (142-143).

Other critics have similarly sought to prioritise ethics, especially as opposed to politics (as the title of James Meffan and Kim Worthington's essay makes clear: 'Ethics Before Politics: J.M. Coetzee's Disgrace'). Indeed, such is the interest in Coetzee's works that this response has fostered a kind of meta-commentary. As Simone Drichel's introductory essay confirms: 'The ethical is undoubtedly the single most significant theoretical framework critics invoke in relation to *Disgrace*' ('Disgrace (1999)', 168). Keith Leslie Johnson goes so far as to suggest that 'ethics' is 'in fact the central hermeneutic term in the criticism' (160). This is epitomised by Mike Marais, who in the essay "'Little Enough, Less than Little: Nothing": Ethics, Engagement, and Change in the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee' (2000), draws on the philosophy of Levinas (discussed in the third section below) to argue that 'Coetzee's refusal to treat history as an a priori system is directly related to the strong concern with an otherness outside history' (160). This suppression of history is designed to 'create the conditions that are necessary for the ethical to mediate the political' (173). Attridge, similarly, suggests that 'it is evident that it is the political that is be corrected by the ethical, and not vice versa' (*J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 104).

Contrary to this prioritisation of ethics over politics I argue that Coetzee's literary thinking necessitates an entanglement of both. Hayes' reading of the novel, which attempts to rebalance the critical focus from the side of politics, sets up an oppositional framework – between a politics of equal dignity and a politics of difference – that helps us to approach the fundamental ambiguity of Lurie's conversion with a greater attention to the irony of the work. The politics of equal dignity, Hayes argues, appeals to a 'universalist ideal that all humans are equally worthy of respect' (12), and broadly informs the liberal humanist position that Lurie adopts as a defence against the disciplinary committee to which he is subjected after Melanie's parents have reported the affair. The politics of difference,

conversely, appeals to a ‘particularist impulse’ (11) that is attentive to the contingency of normative values and the historical embeddedness of ethico-political subjects. Consequently, Lurie refuses to consider his embeddedness in the fragile arrangement and stratification of social life, as a member of the committee assessing his case reports: he makes ‘no mention of the long history of exploitation of which this is part’ (*Disgrace*, 53). Instead, Lurie perceives his sexual relations in a wholly private context; they do not constitute sites through which intersecting power relations converge. By suggesting an ironic overlap between these two modalities, insofar as the logic of exclusion or discrimination explicit in the latter is found to operate implicitly in the former, the novel suggests a more complex interplay between private life and the public sphere, between ethics and politics, than is often assumed.

Lurie’s implicit conception of the liberal subject corresponds with a notion of law that, as Jill Stauffer argues in *Ethical Loneliness* (2015), is coterminous with ‘the sovereignty of self assumed by [...] liberal political theory’ (4). The sovereignty of self is enshrined in the form of institutional legality that arises from our ‘liberal story about culpability – that we are responsible only for acts we author and intend’ (7). Hence although he pleads guilty he refuses to provide a statement or confession of apology that would come ‘from his heart’ (*Disgrace*, 54), as the committee phrases it.<sup>22</sup> His sardonic reply is characteristic of a caustic attitude that pervades his voice: ‘And you trust yourself to divine that, from the words I use – to divine whether it comes from my heart?’ (54). In the embedded context of the narrative whole, Lurie’s Enlightenment and secular values sit uneasily with an indebtedness to European romanticism and a rejection of the economic rationality of modernity. While acknowledging how Lurie’s romanticism can be seen as symptomatic of his Euro-centrism, most critics interpret the novel’s allusions – notably to Byron and Wordsworth – as integral to the novel’s efforts to recuperate an ethical alterity within a socio-political context where the ethical has been drastically diminished.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> The ambiguity of the committee is key to the undermining of Lurie’s dogmatic liberal or universalist position. The disciplinary proceedings initiated by the university are referred to variously as an ‘inquest’, an ‘inquiry’ (188), and as a ‘hearing’ (55). Lurie is repeatedly corrected for mistakenly adopting the position of a defendant in a law court. This ambiguity parallels the real-life structure of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), established in 1995 and chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. For a full discussion of the novel in relation to the TRC see Rebecca Saunders’ ‘*Disgrace* in the Time of a Truth Commission’ (2005).

<sup>23</sup> The question of romanticism in *Disgrace* helps frame Coetzee’s relation to the two distinct strands of post-romantic and late modernism. In his introduction to *The Meaning of “Life” In Romantic Poetry and Poetics*, Ross Wilson outlines how Romanticism has often been accused of recoiling from life. Carl Schmitt’s *Political Romanticism* (1919) is exemplary of this critique of romantic ‘eternal becoming’ (3). This sense of vitalism, a privileging of what Lurie terms ‘sense experience[s]’ (22) in regard to Wordsworth, can be traced through

Accordingly, Attwell aligns this recovery of the ethical as an opening to a ‘realm of the secular sublime’ which he relates to the ‘imperatives of simple ontology’ (‘Coetzee and Post-Apartheid South Africa’, 867). Lurie’s chamber opera, *Byron in Italy* (which he begins composing on Lucy’s farmstead after leaving Cape Town in disgrace), and care of the dogs at the clinic, mark the two poles of an emerging ‘[o]ntological consciousness [that] takes the place of historical consciousness’ (867). Formerly a ‘professor of modern languages’, he harnesses a heart-speech – a language of emotion or affect that appeals to a religious register that exceeds any rational explanation – to transcend ‘the great rationalization’ (3) that has infiltrated the university and the wider arena of public life. As Marais argues, the novel appeals to an eighteenth-century discourse of ‘sensibility, sympathy, and compassion’ which structures how ‘Coetzee tasks his protagonist with the ethical obligation of developing a sympathetic imagination’ (‘Disgrace and Task of Imagination’, 75-76). However, if the novel tasks Lurie with the obligation to develop a more capacious ethical sensibility it also tasks the reader to interpret this transformation with suspicion. Although he senses in the committee a tacit censorious religious discourse of sanctimony, *Disgrace* invites us to see a complicity between Lurie’s liberal sense of rational selfhood and a universalising or quasi-theological appeal to otherness.<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, if alterity lies not outside of reason or rationality but at its very centre, any ethical appeal to life as absolute or wholly other risks the same logic of sacrifice endemic to a calculative politics of position-taking. In other words, Lurie’s status as an ethical agent – the subject of a tentative ‘conversion’ experience – is not constitutively different to the passive position he adopts in defence of his affair with Melanie: ‘I was not myself. I became a servant of Eros’ (52).

As a consequence, any *positive* reclamation of alterity is distinctly problematised given the fact that Lurie appeals to this logic in order not only to seduce Melanie but also to avoid the logic of justice instantiated by the disciplinary committee (a logic not so much of

---

the post-romantic modernists that inform Coetzee’s inheritance (Nabokov, Stevens, Rilke and Eliot). Juxtaposed to the ephemeral world of the senses Lurie poses the extratemporal realm of ‘pure ideas’ (22), setting up an opposition between life as it is lived and an idea of life in general. Coetzee’s prevailing indebtedness to late modernism (associated with Beckett and Kafka), can be seen as an attempt to think *through* this contradiction or opposition. The way in which *Disgrace* can therefore be said to constitute a modernist staging of romantic yearning is the principal characteristic of its status as the key antecedent of the later Jesus fictions, which in turn use romantic yearning to produce bathos and irony.

<sup>24</sup> A sense of the complicity between an ego-centric rationality and a quasi-religious sense of otherness is integral to Coetzee’s description of Apartheid in *Giving Offense*: ‘Apartheid will remain a mystery as long as it is not approached in the lair of the heart. If we want to understand it, we cannot ignore those passages of its testament that reach us in the heart-speech of autobiography and confession’ (164).

individual culpability but of intersubjective responsibility).<sup>25</sup> This comes into sharper focus when Lurie attempts to persuade Lucy to report her rape to the police. Ironically, he is wholly unable to see her silence as comparable to his own appeal to privacy, to quite literally what he terms the right to a '[f]reedom to remain silent' (188). Lucy's exercise in a negative appeal to silence, as opposed to a positive right to remain silent, is opposed to the logic of sovereign selfhood that Lurie presupposes as he implores her to seek justice for the wrong committed against her as an individual. Lucy, however, is attentive to her historical embeddedness as a white woman in post-apartheid South Africa. He further pleads to her on the basis of her personal salvation, but she retorts: 'Guilt and salvation are abstractions. I don't act in terms of abstractions' (112). Lurie's language is out of place, she insists: 'In another place it might be held to be a public matter, but in this place, at this time, it is not' (112).

Not only does Lucy's experience resist appropriation, Lurie's attempt at representative mastery – harnessing the conceptual languages of the law and morality – perpetuate a violation that seizes her otherness and mirrors the mastery of the rapists. Lucy's attentiveness to the intimate intersubjective network of relations that constitute her historical present – her attentiveness to the demands of a politics of difference – thus refuses both the self-possessive logic of Lurie's liberal subject but also an attendant logic of representation. This is dramatised explicitly as the narrative sequence of the attack and rape is focalised entirely through Lurie's perspective as he is trapped in the toilet. Later Lucy insists on her father's distance from the event: 'To begin with, you don't understand what happened to me that day' (157). This insistence is not simply derived from the sheer fact of his physical absence as a direct witness, but from acknowledging a kind of experience that challenges the very premise of legal testimony, of the sovereign or self-possessed subject of testimony able to attest or certify the truth of something. Echoing the treatment of torture in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the very language available to the protagonists evades the representational logic that underpins Lurie's sense of justice. The language of mastery, of law and of the liberal subject, now appears like the material of an apophatic or non-signifying private language: '*War, atrocity*: every word with which one tries to wrap up this day, the day swallows down its black throat' (102).<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Explaining his love of Wordsworth to an unconvinced Melanie at the beginning of the affair, he states that in his experience 'poetry speaks to you either at first sight or not at all. A flash of revelation and a flash of response. Like lightning. Like falling in love' (13).

<sup>26</sup> This breakdown in communication is similarly perceived in relation to Petrus: 'He would not mind hearing Petrus' story one day. But preferably not reduced to English. More and more he is convinced that

The complicity of Lurie's liberal humanist understanding of the sovereign self with a logic of mastery is further established by the malign consequences of his own self-legitimising doctrine of desire. In this light, Lurie's appeal to a romantic or transcendent conception of life is ironically doubled when he later attempts to justify to Lucy his actions by drawing an analogy with the bathetic image of a neutered dog: '[D]esire is another story. No animal will accept the justice of being punished for following its instincts' (90). Lurie's case for the 'rights of desire' (89), that nature justifies nature, misses the crucial distinction that Coetzee outlines in the 'Voiceless' piece between 'right' and 'power'. The tautologous nature of the 'right to life' – that one needs to already be alive to access the right to life – reveals a fundamental logic of exclusion, or sacrifice, that structures any rights-based discourse; the right to life must cede a right to multiply which, in nature, is not a right but a *power*. The attempt to legislate the self-sufficient domain of nature, therefore, estranges natural life from itself; there can be no right to life that does not also entail the spectre of a right to death. Crucially, however, if nature exceeds a judicial (or moral) discourse of rights, such a sovereign conception of life is as much a threat to existence (a threat that is configured as rape in the novel) as a possibility of ethical redemption.

The problem of simply equating life itself with ethics is signalled by the intertextual allusion to Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895): 'The dogs are brought to the clinic because they are unwanted: *because we are too menny*' (146). The reference, 'because we are too menny', is the character Little Father Time's suicide note, left after he hangs himself and his two infant siblings. By implicitly inviting us to equate the killing of dogs with the killing of children, the novel here seems to gesture to a mode of ethical response at a prerational level; at the level of what Attwell terms 'the fact of biological existence' ('Race in Disgrace', 339). However, the Schopenhauerian inflection of this line – as Coetzee writes in an essay on Hardy: 'Schopenhauer's brand of pessimistic determinism was clearly congenial to him' (*Stranger Shores*, 152) – challenges a recuperative reading of the allusion. If we are not necessarily to dismiss a prerational ethical response then nor, the novel suggests, can we simply take such a response at face value, thereby privileging the one form over the other. Again, Lurie's attempt to make a *positive* assertion of rights, with regard to natural life, not only betrays the fundamental alterity of an order of life that

---

English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa. Stretches of English code whole sentences long have thickened, lost their articulations, their articulateness, their articulatedness' (117). In an archived manuscript note, dated 21 November 1996, Coetzee toys with the idea of inserting into the narrative the voice of Pollux (Lucy's accused rapist): 'We do not have words. Therefore we must have this violence' (HRC, MS Coetzee Papers, Box 37, Folder 3).

remains unknowable but also risks erecting an inverted sovereignty; from arguing for a right for nature one ends up insisting on a form of natural (i.e. self-sufficient or sovereign) right, and thus Lurie's complicit liberal-humanism and his escapist romanticism remain perilously entangled.

Through Lucy's attempt to seek a new accommodation with life in the country, even to the extent of marrying Petrus, *Disgrace* stages how Lurie's universalist appeal to a sovereign notion of individual liberty ignores its complicity with formations of sexual and colonial violence. However, that any such universal position is always already embedded in contingent historical structures opens onto a structural doubledness that precludes any equally absolute readings of the novel's ethico-political effects in positive terms.<sup>27</sup> On the one hand, Lurie's quasi-religious and romantic impulse rails against the tyranny of an economic rationality that seeks to destroy the foundation for any absolute moral values that transcend any given time or space. On the other hand, once Lurie's position is revealed as merely one amongst others, as ineluctably embedded, then by holding steadfast to a self-assertive position of individual autonomy his actions merely mirror those of the rapists. As Attwell argues: 'the novel's title surrounds Lurie's and the rapist's sexuality with synecdochic implications which extend to an entire history of wrong being re-enacted in reprisal and vengeance' ('Race in Disgrace', 338). By adopting a position outside of the domain of antagonistic position-taking – the discourse of *ressentiment* Lurie objects to at the hearing – Lurie's sense of individual liberty and justice, divorced from the vicissitudes of history, in fact resembles a tyranny in its own right; the tyranny of an authoritarian justice that, by obliging Lucy to report the crime, violates her right to remain silent, her right *not* to be counted.

Thus, not only does the novel's staging of historical embeddedness question the very possibility of an absolute other or conception of alterity, outside of time and space, it subtly hints at the fact that the ground of any absolute otherness is the self-same foundation of a sovereign selfhood. Consequently, the two frameworks, of a politics of equal dignity and a politics of difference, come to subtly inflect or *double* one another. Lurie's idea of privacy and selfhood (through which he evades the committee) is doubled by the violent self-assertion of the rapists whose actions, much like the Eurocentric ideals behind colonial regimes of power, cannot simply be separated from the historical context

---

<sup>27</sup> This structural doubledness is ironically foreshadowed in the opening scenes of Lurie's seduction of Melanie in his kitchen: 'Reversals: the stuff of bourgeois comedy' (14).

in which they occur, as Lucy observes: ‘What if . . . what if *that* is the price one has to pay for staying on? Perhaps that is how they look at it; perhaps that is how I should look at it too’ (158). Alternatively – and in a more complicated way – the discourse of a politics of difference risks negating the very intersubjective and embedded contexts from whence it originates by sublimating notions of race or gender, reproducing an identitarian thinking that risks legitimising violence.<sup>28</sup> Lurie’s fears – of which we are invited to both empathise with and to question – are related precisely to the question of what happens to a notion of justice in a society in which there are no disinterested parties and no common ground of value.

By connecting Hayes’ ethico-political framework to the concept of life it becomes possible to better explicate the connection between the disparate elements of the work. That is, between how a universalist conception of life (whether in the terms of a simple ontology or as the autonomous liberal self) always depends upon embodied lives, yet the realm of embodied life cannot be reduced to any catch-all context (the body; gender; race). By operating between both the universalist and particularist positions, Coetzee’s literary thinking builds a bridge between the demands of ethics and politics, of responsibility and freedom. To read *Disgrace* accordingly requires being attentive to the movement of embeddedness that constitutes Coetzee’s literary thinking. This embeddedness structures how the tautology of reason is in fact refracted through Lurie’s quasi-religious heart-speech, just as the sovereign or absolute logic of religion is refracted through a politics of difference as the attempt to recuperate a notion of alterity or otherness.

The structural embeddedness in *Disgrace* is not merely thematised, however, but is integral to *how* these positions are embedded in the narrative. Hayes’ political opposition, between the universal and particular, thus has the advantage of broaching the question of allegorical meaning *vis-à-vis* the question of the literariness of the work. Rather, therefore, than reading Lurie’s opera or care for the dogs as post-secular allegories of redemption, Coetzee’s literary thinking invites us to become critically aware of the problem of complicity by focalising our reading of *Disgrace* by embedding Lurie’s perspective into the third-person narrative voice. The dramatic irony of the text – the paralleled rapes – is

---

<sup>28</sup> Hence Lucy’s acute awareness of the gender difference that separates her from her father - ‘When it comes to men and sex, David, nothing surprises me any more’ (158) - re-inscribes the problem of Enlightenment universalism, as Meffan and Worthington describe: ‘The essentialism claimed in such gender identification seems precisely what must be contested if one is to argue for the ethical possibilities of relational difference’ (‘Ethics Before Politics’, 144).



therefore doubled by the irony of the embeddedness of Lurie's romantic imagination in the narrative voice through the use of free indirect discourse.

The irony of this strategy of narrative embeddedness is established through a contrast between the two registers of the sublime and bathetic. Consequently, Lurie's aesthetic enterprise, the opera, is saturated in bathos as he sets about composing with the aid of an 'odd little seven-stringed banjo' (184). For Attridge, the opera comes to mirror the 'other-directed toil' (*J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 182) of his caring for the animals at the clinic. However, what he discovers, tellingly, is that it is 'not the erotic that is calling to him after all, nor the elegiac, but the comic' (184). If Lurie's romantic consciousness helps to both ostracise him from the new historical epoch of post-apartheid South Africa, and thereby portend his half-aware metamorphosis into a 'dog-man: a dog undertaker; a dog psychopomp; a *harijan*' (146), then the bathos that surrounds his character suggests that any such attempt to evade history is not merely to be treated with suspicion but also to be considered potentially dangerous. By the end, Lurie's transformation is far from certain.<sup>29</sup> He remains unapologetic and unrepentant. In his relations to Lucy (who continues to refuse his pleas to give up her rural existence), Bev (with whom he has a brief and bathetic love affair), and his continued desire for Melanie, he remains stubbornly fixed.

Furthermore, a complicitous movement of self-questioning compounds this breakdown of allegorical meaning. Like the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, an undercutting or conscience-stricken movement of reflection afflicts Lurie's thinking.<sup>30</sup> After having sex with Melanie, near the beginning, we are told: 'Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core' (25). This is neither direct speech nor reported thought. Instead, the narrative embeddedness permits Lurie's equivocations to enter the diegetic frame of the novel, to permeate not only what we are shown but how. This makes his own ambiguity central to the literary thinking of *Disgrace* itself, thereby blurring the distinction between literal and figurative approaches to alterity. In the bathetic

---

<sup>29</sup> It is interesting to note how the work's caustic irony and bathetic self-undermining is further inscribed at the level of the novel's composition. In a note to a late draft of the novel, dated 2 June 1996, Coetzee writes to himself: 'Do not forget that dogs produce dog shit' (HRC MS Coetzee Papers, Box 37, Folder 3).

<sup>30</sup> Lurie's complicity mirrors that of the Magistrate, which Coetzee outlines in a 1982 interview: '[H]ypothetically the choice would be in fact between the police and the empire and what they stand for, and the barbarian way of life. He cannot choose the barbarian way of life although he makes vague gestures in that direction' (J.M. Coetzee: Interview', 6). The Magistrate's inability to choose the barbarian side results from the complicity between his belief in the dignity of man – through which his sympathy with the novel's victims is framed – and how this same belief is integral to the denunciation of barbarians as 'other', as legitimate victims of the Empire.

atmosphere of the campus novel trappings, Lurie's second-guessing not only helps to undercut his elevated discourse of 'Eros' but also challenges the idea of a movement from self to other as the supposed ground of a replenished ethics. This reaches an apotheosis with Lurie's preoccupation with the perfective form of the verb, which stages a conjunction of narrative temporality and material finitude. As Mark Sanders indicates, the perfective has a 'transcendent aspect' which 'secures the narrative present' (Sanders, 364). For example, the novel's first sentence runs: 'For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well' (1). In this instance the perfective 'has solved' answers the sense of expectation fostered by the opening preposition 'For'. The perfective is thus demonstrative of Lurie's attempt to assert a rational mastery over his life. However, Lurie's double thoughts continually disrupt this mastery, as is signalled by the 'to his mind'. As the comma splices interrupt this thought and betray Lurie's attempts to solve the problem of the body with 'his mind', the perfective thus also represents an ultimately frustrated urge to determine the present.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the perfective comes to exemplify Lurie's second-guessing of himself, his corruptibility, and ultimately his sense of self: 'Two weeks ago he was in a classroom explaining to the bored youth of the country the distinction between drink and drink up, burned and burnt up [...] How far away it all seems! I live, I have lived, I lived' (71).

By staging a sense of alterity never isolable to either a wholly figurative (a post-secular sense of life as grace) or literal dimension of meaning, the narrative embeddedness of *Disgrace*, like *Elizabeth Costello*, attests to the ineluctable embeddedness of embodied life; of life as constitutively subject to an otherness that both grounds it and threatens it. The embeddedness of Lurie's heart-speech discloses the impossibility of any ontological consciousness that is not already embedded in history, just as the novel critiques any form of historical consciousness that seeks to disregard, and thereby sacrifice, the conditions of finite life. The novel's heart-speech therefore ironically mirrors the flight from history that is internal to a historical society that has itself sublimated the material ground of life. Indeed, the theological allusions and religious register in the novel invite us to draw a direct link between the teleology of secular reason and the sovereign logic of the divine. In both instances mortal or finite life is understood as a means to an end. Just prior to the attack, Lucy compares her father to the scapegoat in Leviticus 16. Lurie responds:

---

<sup>31</sup> Jan Wilm discusses the opening sentence of *Disgrace* at length in chapter four of *The Slow Philosophy of J.M. Coetzee*, suggesting that the first sentence embodies 'a microcosm of the novel' by evoking 'an interactive dualism of mind and body on the syntactic level' (93).

I don't think scapegoating is the best description [...] Scapegoating worked in practice while it still had religious power behind it. You loaded the sins of the city on the goat's back and drove it out, and the city was cleansed [...] Then the gods died, and all of a sudden you had to cleanse the city without divine help [...] Purgation was replaced by the purge (91).

Lurie's embeddedness prevents him from drawing the logical conclusion: when the gods have died the act of purgation requires man to become god-like, and therefore in the absence of the gods democracy risks paradoxically resembling a theocracy (this is explored further in the two Jesus novels which depict a society governed by a benign form of democratic totalitarianism).<sup>32</sup> If *Disgrace* treats ambiguously its own lexicon of the 'soul', 'heart' and, most notably, 'grace' – suspending Lurie between the sublime and bathetic – then this is because the novel's heart-speech – an attempt, as Attridge writes, to escape 'the terminology of the administered society' (180) – mirrors the theological taint of a world whereby politics has become totalised at the expense of the ethical.<sup>33</sup> As a consequence, Coetzee's literary thinking in *Disgrace*, constructed through a strategy of narrative embeddedness, suggests that to attribute any inherent value to life, whether by claiming a positive right to life in secular terms or proclaiming the inherent sanctity of life in religious terms, is also to open onto the possibility of sacrifice.

### **iii. Sacrificing sacrifice.**

The notion of a prerational ethics, as Attridge argues in a recent essay, 'is one that is particularly associated with the thought of Emmanuel Levinas' ('A Yes Without a No', 91). Levinas is indeed a key figure in the ethical turn in the humanities more generally, notably in the reception of Derrida and deconstruction in the field of literary studies. Coetzee's proximity to post-structuralism and deconstruction has been noted in previous chapters, and the archive attests to a knowledge of Levinas' thought. In the preparatory notebook for *The Lives of Animals* project, written contemporaneously alongside *Disgrace*

---

<sup>32</sup> Lurie's rendition of scapegoating recalls René Girard's famous theory of the scapegoat mechanism as foundational to human societies. For Girard, the mimetic nature of desire leads to a profound rivalry: 'Two desires converging on the same object are bound to clash. Thus mimesis coupled with desire leads automatically to conflict' (*Violence and the Sacred*, 155). To curtail the effects of this damaging rivalry, 'reciprocal violence' must be replaced by a 'ritual violence' afflicted upon a sacrificial scapegoat or 'surrogate victim' (154). Coetzee draws upon Girard's mimetic theory of desire in the essay 'Triangular Structures of Desire in Advertising' (1980).

<sup>33</sup> Although the archive discloses sparse evidence of an engagement with the Frankfurt school, to build upon Attridge's allusion to Adorno (the notion of an 'administered society') we might turn to the opening of Adorno and Horkheimer's seminal *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) and to the discussion therein of the mutually reinforcing relation between reason and religion (or myth) that they argue undermines the Enlightenment appeal to progress: '[T]he sacrificial animal is slain in place of the god. The substitution which takes place in sacrifice marks a step toward discursive logic' (6). Just as sacrifice is seen to anticipate reason, reason, for Adorno and Horkheimer, anticipates sacrifice.

and *Boyhood*, a note dated 29 April 1996 states: ‘Reread Levinas on the face in the context of animals’ (HRC, MS Coetzee Papers, Box 35, Folder 2). For Levinas, the face is revelatory of a primordial ethical command.<sup>34</sup> Coetzee discusses this directly in his contribution to *The Death of an Animal*: ‘[What] Levinas calls the look [makes] the existential autonomy of the Other [...] irrefutable by any means, including rational argument’ (89). The asymmetry of the face-to-face relation for Levinas is premised on the trace of the divine that issues an ethical demand that exceeds (or rather precedes) all forms of rational decision-making and conventional moral reasoning. Following Levinas, Marais argues for a conception of the Other (*Autrui*) as wholly other; the Other subordinates the self, as he argues of *Disgrace*: ‘Lurie undergoes a [...] development from monadic subjectivity to self-substituting responsibility in the course of this novel [...] he learns to love’ (‘The possibility of ethical action’, 62). By locating alterity – like Attwell’s sense of ontological existence or life itself – outside of the embeddedness of history, Marais thus argues for an ‘irruption of the ethical into the political’ (‘Little Enough, Less than Little: Nothing’, 177).

Whereas for Marais the other is not reducible to the embedded conditions of the encounter (between ethical agents, or reader and text), Attridge appeals to a sense of alterity derived not from a text’s thematization of otherness but rather by attending to the specificity of the literary work as a literary work.<sup>35</sup> Insofar as literary meaning evades systematic or propositional explication, the ethical effects of a literary work are linked directly to the affecting, estranging, and disruptive effects of stylistic and formal choices and features. This involves, to use a Levinasian distinction that Attridge draws upon in *The Singularity of Literature*, embracing the ‘Saying’ of a work of literature over its ‘Said’ (141), the stated or thematic content. Where I differ, however, is by refusing to conflate the formal openness or alterity of a literary work (the subversion of abstract or rational norms) as itself linked to a prerational ethics of response that centres on affirming or assenting to that which is other, as Attridge argues in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*: ‘Reading a work of literature entails opening oneself to the unpredictable, the future, the

---

<sup>34</sup> For Levinas, ethics as ‘first philosophy’ means that the subject is subordinated to the Other and that this subordination answers to the ethical good: ‘To be for the Other is to be good’ (*Totality and Infinity*, 261).

<sup>35</sup> In their critique of Marais, Meffan and Worthington seek to draw a useful distinction between alterity and the other that they take Marais to be eliding: ‘Alterity does not ever equate with a singular embodied Other: the black, Third World, colonized Other’ (135); ‘In the slide from radical alterity to specific, embodied Otherness, Marais’s (mis)appropriation of the conception of “responsibility for the other” is in danger of becoming the paternalistic gesture implicit in the relational preposition “for”’ (‘Ethics Before Politics’, 138).

other, and thereby accepting the responsibility laid upon one by the work's singularity and difference' (111). This crucial leap stakes an equivalence between a *responsive* reading of a work of literature and a form of ethical *responsibility*, thereby risking a conflation of alterity with ethics itself (i.e. thereby again privileging the sheer fact of life, or biological existence, rather than observing how life constitutes the ground upon which ethical and political decisions operate).

The disparity between alterity and ethics, in my reading of *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello*, is brought into sharper focus by turning to an exchange between Attridge and the philosopher Martin Hägglund. Their debate, originally published in the journal *Derrida Today*, focused on Hägglund's alternative reading of Derrida's ethics in *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (2008). Therein, Hägglund critiques the Levinasian understanding of the primacy of ethics by emphasising Derrida's account of the fundamentally temporal nature of the ethical relation. As Hägglund argues, the essentially reversible nature of alterity – I am the other for the other and vice versa – contradicts Levinas' theological account of absolute Otherness. The essential reversibility of alterity, as that which configures both the self and other as terms in a relation, is predicated on the inherently divisible nature of time; this constitutive temporal alterity means that 'what makes it *possible* for anything to be at the same time makes it *impossible* for anything to be in itself' (*Radical Atheism*, 81). In other words, if alterity is relational and therefore produced it is hard to see how it can be then predetermined, as primarily ethical, prior to the specific perspectival and productive context of the relation. By situating alterity both at the heart of the ontological present, and in logical terms of everything that is thought on the basis of presence or self-presence, Hägglund instead gestures towards an inherently undecidable future. Such an undecidable or indeterminate future does not, however, issue unconditional demands but is rather the unconditional and immanent condition of our finite lives; we cannot escape the condition of temporal succession but without this possibility, the possibility of cessation and death, there would be no possibility of an ethical response.<sup>36</sup>

Attridge responds directly to Hägglund via a reading of Derrida's notion of hospitality, focusing on the distinction between conditional and unconditional hospitality. For

---

<sup>36</sup> Thus Hägglund argues that the condition of a primordial or pure state of peaceful hospitality – of absolute or immortal life - which is seen as only later threatened by potential hostility, in fact resembles the state of death, since both eradicate the possibility of change or revision and therefore forgo the very possibility of an ethical encounter. (For Derrida, this co-implication of an absolute peace and an absolute violence is expressed by the neologism 'Hostipitality'. See the 2000 article published in Angelaki called 'Hostipitality').

Derrida, these two notions are both (paradoxically) heterogeneous and indissociable: '[C]onditional laws would cease to be laws of hospitality if they were not guided [...] by the law of unconditional hospitality' (*Of Hospitality*, 79). Attridge accuses Hägglund of favouring a conditional hospitality, a hospitality of calculation, over its unconditional counterpart. For Attridge, rather, the Levinasian position underlies Derrida's unconditional hospitality, since a calculated hospitality 'would not be hospitality at all; the decision to be hospitable must, like any decision, pass through the undecidable and hence take place beyond calculation' (*Reading and Responsibility*, 147). Yet, as Hägglund argues, this opposition is misleading since it only recognises the heterogeneous but not indissociable nature of the relation between the two; it is the opening of an undecidable future that necessitates the decision in the present. As Hägglund argues, we make laws, decisions and calculations precisely *because* we are unconditionally exposed to an undecidable alterity, to innumerable and incalculable others. Hägglund's reading of Derrida, therefore, understands unconditional hospitality not in terms of an ethical ideal but rather as 'another name for the exposure to temporal alterity, which opens me both to what I desire and what I fear' ('The Non-Ethical Opening of Ethics', 299). This follows Derrida's own earlier comments on what is termed the 'the non-ethical opening of ethics' (*Of Grammatology*, 140). Accordingly, Hägglund distinguishes between Levinas' and Derrida's notions of unconditional or 'infinite' responsibility: 'Responsibility, then, is always more or less discriminating, and infinite responsibility is but another name for the necessity of discrimination' (*Radical Atheism*, 94-95).

Marais' comparably unconditional stance, termed an 'ethical imperative of responsibility for the other' (*Secretary of the Invisible*, 44), thus risks short-circuiting the very concept of ethics itself, as Meffan and Worthington argue: 'paradoxically, to hold such an understanding [of responsibility] up as an imperative is to enact the same kind of epistemological violence that the imperative proscribes' ('Ethics Before Politics', 134). To deny the inevitable risk of finding oneself open to the other, as constitutively exposed to the succession of time, is to deny what makes responsibility possible in the first place; one's embeddedness in a specific time and place, both as a reader and as an ethical subject. The encounter with otherness is not therefore in itself ethical but the opening or chance of ethics, since if the other was already pre-inscribed as such it would short-circuit ethics as a mode of *responding* or responsibility. Lucy Graham makes a similar point with regards to Marais: "The "state of passivity" that Marais proposes as the ultimate ethical encounter

is not commensurate with ethical responsiveness or political agency, and it is not clear how this “passivity” differs from apathy’ (11).<sup>37</sup>

The ontological character of this debate can be translated into a more straightforwardly logical extrapolation of Coetzee’s literary thinking. The imaginative exploration of post-apartheid South Africa in *Disgrace* presents us, at the both the thematic and formal levels of the text, with life as a problem, to paraphrase Lurie. Insofar as the liberal humanist values of an historical society, that overly determine life and thus threaten to cede the temporal and material ground of the living, remain complicit with the sacrificial tendencies of a religious impulse that seeks to evade history, then any appeal to a undetermined or unconditional form of life itself, an ‘ontology short of system’, risks repeating a logic of over-determination that is sparsely different from sovereign domination. Contrary to a notion of absolute alterity or otherness, Coetzee’s literary thinking – following the paradoxical economy of self and other in Beckett – embeds otherness at the heart of the self, a self that is no longer self-sufficient but divisible: mortally, historically, and linguistically. To make the other absolute is to repeat the fallacy of the Romantic or sublime imagination that fuels Lurie’s seduction of Melanie. Just as the sensory image ‘usurp[s] upon’ (21) the pure idea of Wordsworth’s view of Mont Blanc, Lurie suggests the need to throw a ‘veil over the gaze’ of one’s beloved, ‘so to keep her alive in her archetypal goddess-like form’ (22). By obscuring the other as a living or finite other, that only emerges as such by being embedded in relation to oneself, Lurie’s seduction of Melanie is also a usurping upon her. As Graham argues: ‘responsibility to a transcendent other can lead one to sacrifice responsibility for another body’ (7). Such a logic also lies behind the character of Dmitri in *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016) as he appeals to a prerational or transcendental calling of the heart to justify his sacrificial murder of Ana Magdalena.

Accordingly, any ontology shorn of system, any unconditional notion of otherness, must also be shorn of value. As Clarkson writes: ‘[B]iological facts *in themselves* are meaningless. They may gain a certain ethical resonance if we accord a value to them, and the accordance of these values is dependent upon a contingent philosophical and cultural system’ (*Countervoices*, 126). On the one hand, only upon entering an embedded public realm can

---

<sup>37</sup> Graham further suggests that: ‘Lurie’s work in the service of dead dogs is not redemptive in itself, and [...] the sentimentality of his gesture should be mistrusted. His care for dead dogs is ineffectual, even self-indulgent [...] In other words, one could read Lurie’s care as further evidence of the selfish nature of a human being’ (11).

one attribute or grant value upon alterity; can one measure the worth of life. On the other hand, by entering a public and discursive space one sacrifices what is *other* about the other; Lurie's sense of the right to a private life that remains uncoun­ted. *Disgrace*, and I would argue Coetzee's literary thinking in general, is inscribed in the fault line between these two poles. There can be no possibility of an ethical relation without the self, without guidelines or laws or sovereignty over oneself as a rational agent, even if these are precisely those structures which risk reproducing the very conditions of harm that are to be overcome. This of course follows the logic of Coetzee's writings on the right to life: that the task of protecting animals from harm involves taking a position, and not only does this position-taking evade an animal mode of comprehension, it also risks repeating the very logic of sacrifice that threatens them. This is framed by Coetzee's account of an additional right to multiply, a right to futural and non-existent beings that challenges the conceptual understanding of the very subject that underpins a discourse of rights.<sup>38</sup> In *Disgrace* this right to multiply is termed 'the problem of sex'. As with Lurie's accounts of the rights of desire, the problem of sex dissimulates a larger problem, that of life; of how to conceptualise and master life as that which constantly evades mastery in the terms of any given discourse.

By addressing the ethical reception of Coetzee's work, I hope to have highlighted the central importance of the concept of life. Life is central not only to the ethico-political import of Coetzee's literary thinking but, more fundamentally, to how this import stems from an entanglement of ethics and politics.<sup>39</sup> Rather than proffering a conception of life as indivisible or absolute, or alternatively reducing life to domain of countable or specific instances of the living, *Disgrace* suggests that what is irreducible, that which is truly infinite, is the finitude and contingency of life itself.

If at the beginning the perfective marks Lurie's attempt to master his present, then by the end of the novel the perfective conversely signals the necessarily embedded and finite nature of the present; that otherness or alterity, far from providing the basis of a post-secular form of ethical salvation, in fact relates life constitutively to death. As the dogs are placed into the flames to be 'burnt, burnt up' (219-220), the novel's ending challenges

---

<sup>38</sup> The sense of hyperbolic responsibility, to non-existent or futural beings, is further explored in 'The Old Woman and the Cats'. Costello tells her son, with regard to the 'small souls, cat souls [...] pleading to be let in', that 'who am I to deny them their chance of incarnation?' (23).

<sup>39</sup> As such, my position echoes that proposed by Richard Barney: 'I propose that in Coetzee's storytelling the ethical may come first *sequentially* – as the necessary inaugurating complication of existing political conditions in order to produce other effects – but it may not necessarily do so *logically*, as the term of greater importance' ('On (not) giving up', 522)



any evaluative or redemptive interpretation of the act: 'It will be little enough, less than little: nothing' (220). To the same extent that Lurie's liberal-humanist discourse – the discourse that leads him to believe he can rationally solve with the mind a 'problem' of the body – fails to recuperate this final sacrifice in terms of rights, the novel's alternative heart-speech, split between seriousness and bathos, also entails that we forgo the possibility of recuperating this failure through a quasi-religious discourse of grace. This is a sacrifice that can never be redeemed. Instead of a changing Lurie who taken to be in a state of becoming – a becoming-animal or a becoming-other – we have instead a protagonist who is ever pressingly exposed to his own contingency, to indeterminacy, and to the non-being of death.<sup>40</sup>

Lurie's subjection to the vicissitudes of his own embodiment is linked directly to the contingency of his cultural values, of the values and assumptions that comprise his worldview and are fundamentally centred around life, the organisation of social and sexual life after apartheid, and human life in relation to animal life. However, if self-transcendence is not possible this doesn't mean that we are stuck in an atomised and selfish realm of calculated necessity. The alternative vision of the novel is one in which our embedded selfhood, our situatedness in the here and now, is precisely what constitutes the possibility of ethical or political action. After all, if such values were absolute then no ethical modality whatsoever could emerge, since without the possibility of contestation – the possibility of the political irrupting into the ethical – no action or response could properly be called responsible. As Clarkson suggests: '[I]t is precisely the recognition of the *contingency* of one's cultural belief, rather than an unswerving conviction that it represents the ultimate truth, that can provide the basis for an ethical response' (*Countervoices*, 162).

This necessitates that an act or logic of discrimination is essential to the demarcation of any public sphere but is *not* an end in itself. As Derrida argues in *The Gift of Death*, one 'cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another without sacrificing the other other, the other others' (*The Gift of Death*, 68). The impossibility of an ethical response that would ever be adequate to this demand – issued not from an Other beyond the finite realm or mortal life but from the infinite realm of finite life, of other others – is played out in *Disgrace* in the argument that ensues between

---

<sup>40</sup> By contrast, Paul Patton, in a Deleuzian register, claims that *Disgrace* 'present[s] a conception of pure life as immanent in the everyday existence of human and animals alike' (103), and Lurie is exemplary of a movement of 'becoming-animal' ('Becoming-Animal and Pure Life in Coetzee's *Disgrace*', 107).

Lurie and Lucy after the rape. Lurie's entreaty to report the crime, for Lucy to be counted, short-circuits the ethical ground upon which Lucy seeks to establish a new accommodation. Lucy's response seems to suggest that in the new South Africa acknowledgement of the fact of other others and, therefore, that justice can never be fully served, will be essential to founding a community that goes beyond the cycle of revenge and retributive violence.

'Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity'

'Like a dog'

'Yes, like a dog' (205).

The echo of Josef K's execution ('Like a dog') at the end of Kafka's *The Trial* returns us to *Elizabeth Costello*. Attwell links Kafka's 'dignifying presence' – 'the pared down, ontological emphasis, and the analogy with animals' (340) – to a freedom or escape from history through life. Yet, as in Costello's lecture, such a freedom does not open onto a plenitude or affirmation of life but is rather negative, grounded in death. Stripped of transcendence, death becomes, as Graham argues 'an animalistic and even brutal event that could happen to any moment' (10); death becomes integral to life as that which compromises it from taking on any inherent value but also therefore shields it from a logic of sacrifice.<sup>41</sup>

This negative freedom is further emphasised through the Beckettian play on 'nothing' in Lucy's distinction between 'Not with nothing but. With nothing' (205). Rather than seeking a positive freedom, defined by the presence of certain conditions (such as the right to life), Lucy's 'With nothing' suggest the paradoxically significant gesture of configuring negativity itself not simply as a privation but as key to a freedom defined as *absence* of certain conditions. Lurie's explanation, to himself, as to why he engages in the disposal of the dog corpses, is the most direct statement in the novel with regard to an idea of negative freedom: 'Why has he taken on this job? [...] For himself, then. For his idea of the world, a world in which men do *not* use shovels to beat corpses into a more

---

<sup>41</sup> As Danta argues, the dog does not mark a line of escape to an animal mode of being but rather signals the human and animal intersection through the impossibility of redeeming death: 'In contrast to Kafka's metaphysical shame, which continues to leave man isolated, the "disgrace of dying" truly merges human and animal suffering' ('Like a Dog... Like a Lamb', 734).

convenient shape for processing [emphasis added]' (146). Rather than appealing to a prerational ethics, outside of reason, Coetzee's negative freedom does not deny rational calculation per se but rather any calculation, or *reading*, deemed final or absolute; any sovereign conception of reason.<sup>42</sup> Such a freedom does not promise a state of grace, then, but perhaps at most the absence of a state of disgrace.

*Disgrace* goes further than the non-fiction since, through a strategy of embeddedness that would evade capture in any propositional discourse, Coetzee's novel discloses the infinite nature of calculation, of the finite and contingent ground upon which decisions are made. This negative freedom, a hallmark of Beckett's works, thereby relates the prerational to the rational; otherness does not arise from outside of reason but rather surfaces from an immanent dismantling, or unwording, of reason from within. As opposed to a passive conception of the event, of a conversion experience that one undergoes, ethical responsibility emerges instead at the horizon of political action. By removing the ground of a right to life, the critical force of Coetzee's literary thinking guarantees the impossibility of a right to death, of a right to end life. The final scene in *Disgrace* captures this sacrificing of sacrifice. Lurie, situated in the impossible position of Abraham who was tasked to sacrifice precisely that which he loved the most, his son Isaac, prepares his dog – Driepoot – for the sacrifice, for what Derrida calls the gift of death: 'Bearing him in his arms like a lamb, he re-enters the surgery. "I thought you would save him for another week," says Bev Shaw. "Are you giving him up?" "Yes, I am giving him up"' (220).<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> This argument is related to Alice Crary's essay 'J.M. Coetzee, Moral Thinker' in the volume *J.M. Coetzee and Ethics* (249-268), especially her opposition between a narrow and wide form of rationality (which in turn might be seen as echoing the distinction between false and true reasoning in *Elizabeth Costello*). The latter is seen to be more sensitive to the non-rational basis of moral impulses that she reads in Coetzee's fictions.

<sup>43</sup> Dominick LaCapra draws upon the Abraham story, in Genesis 22, to illustrate precisely how a 'postsecular' (LaCapra, 84) ethics of grace risks perpetuating sacrifice (a perpetuation that is integral to political theology). By ceding to the divine or absolute otherness of God Abraham's sacrifice is not ethical but 'supra-ethical' (86). By privileging a literary ethics of singularity and excess, therefore, LaCapra suggests that Attridge risks conflating the ethical and religious: 'The [...] question, especially for the nonbeliever, is whether what is taken to be the religious relation should pre-empt or be conflated with the ethical one (for example, in terms of grace or gratuitous generosity)' (LaCapra, 86). The radical openness or receptivity to otherness thus resembles an 'originary' trauma, such as the original sin that marks the fallen state of man as fundamentally imperfectible and consequently closed to change. Hayes' account of Attridge's ethical approach, however, seems to me a more balanced assessment: 'Attridge's reading in fact tends to emphasize the ways in which Coetzee's text [specifically *Waiting for the Barbarians*] surpasses rather than "complicates" the act of political judgement' (63).

## **5: The Writing of Life: Life Forms and Literary Truths.**

“You are an artist, a master,” she says. “It is for you, not for me, to bring him back to life.” *Master*. It is a word he associates with metal – with the tempering of swords, the casting of bells [...] *Master of life: strange term?* — J.M. Coetzee, *Master of Petersburg*, 140-141

### **Introduction:**

The previous two chapters posed a link between the paradox of position-taking and the writing of life (both human and animal). The postcolonial context of Coetzee’s works (especially up to *Disgrace*) makes the ethico-political import of the novels’ thematising of complicity particularly prescient (I have addressed this in terms of alterity or otherness). However, by addressing how the works *stage* this issue it becomes possible to witness an often underestimated continuity across the oeuvre. Building upon the insights of earlier critics, I account for the indirect, but nonetheless integral, ethico-political significance of Coetzee’s self-reflexivity and use of literary form.

As Attwell’s recent study of Coetzee’s archive has revealed, Coetzee’s formal reflexivity is grounded in an interrogation of the conditions of writing and authorship.<sup>1</sup> Rather than seek to divulge the specific biographical context of this metafictional interrogation, in this chapter I aim to account for how the figure of the implied author or authority (what the doctoral thesis calls a text’s ‘fictionalized intelligence’) is vital to the self-directed, precarious, and politically inflected character the works’ ethics (two particular authorities that Coetzee’s later works draw upon, both in the fiction and non-fiction, are J.S. Bach and Fyodor Dostoevsky). By focusing, therefore, not only on the passive or event-like, but also the active nature of literary works, I elucidate how Coetzee’s earlier critiques of mastery increasingly turn inwards towards the mastery behind those very critiques; the mastery of the writer himself.

This dissembling of the writer’s authority is marked by a privileging of the concept of truth which, rather than simply forgoing reason in the name of a prerational apprehension of life, seeks to both counter moral relativism *and* account for our fundamental contingency in the here and now. Coetzee’s appeal, in the 2015 exchange with psychoanalyst Arabella Kurtz, *The Good Story: Exchanges on Truth, Fiction and Psychotherapy*, to ‘the ethical dimension of truth versus fiction’ (77) is thus inextricable from the

---

<sup>1</sup> In *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing* (2015), Attwell re-frames his former account of Coetzee’s metafiction as ‘autobiographical’ metafiction, whereby ‘the self [is] always present, but as a narrative rather than as raw truth’ (32).

immanent critique of reason effected by the earlier works, including the trilogy of fictionalised memoirs. Consequently, the metafictional or self-reflexive tendency of Coetzee's writing does not demarcate a flight from truth or reason but rather constitutes a profound interrogation of the contingency of both our normative values and our finite selves. This profundity is marked in the later works, following my chapter on *Elizabeth Costello* and *Disgrace*, by an appeal to a heart-speech that seeks to harness a conjunction of affective sublimity and religious transcendence to oppose the simplistic notion of truth to fact. This appeal is formalised in the pivotal 1985 essay 'Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky' (reprinted in *Doubling the Point*). As Coetzee states: 'the essay on confession [...] marks the beginning of a more broadly philosophical engagement with a situation in the world' (*Doubling*, 394).

This philosophical turn can be witnessed in light of the earlier works as Coetzee's later fictions continue to encroach upon a crisis in Enlightenment or post-religious subjectivity that is rooted in Coetzee's relation to Beckett's late modernism. This crisis is signalled by two devastating propositions: the idea of confession without end, and of sacrifice without redemption. In the first of three sections below, I explore both Coetzee's life writing and the confessional context of the novels *Master of Petersburg* and *Age of Iron*, focusing on the concepts of grace and shame. Insofar as Coetzee shares with Beckett an appeal to religion and belief since the latter demarcates a form of knowing that can be neither verified nor falsified, shame indicates a bodily excess that rejects the divine but nonetheless retains an incalculable or infinite sense of life.<sup>2</sup> In the second section I explore how Coetzee stages questions of authority and authorship across other later works in relation to death (taking my cue from Coetzee's third fictionalised memoir, *Summertime*, in which the autobiographical subject, John Coetzee, is already deceased).

By aligning the authority of the literary work with a sense of death or the absence of author(ity), the later writings establish an ironic framework that pins the unmasterability of the literary work to the unmasterability of finite life. The incalculability of life is a key thematic feature of the two most recent Jesus fictions, *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus*, explored in the third section. I situate these works in relation to *Disgrace*, notably the provocation of the earlier work to think beyond normative tropes of political and ethical discourses of life (including those of rights and subjecthood). By building

---

<sup>2</sup> As Weller argues: 'Beckett takes his distance from modernity in such a way as to disrupt any clear alignment of Enlightenment and secularization: in short the Beckettian "on" discloses a religious impulse at the heart of the Enlightenment project' ('Beckett and Late Modernism', 100).

upon a heart-speech that stages the complicity between reason and religion, I continue to trace the link between the failure of modern liberal humanism and Coetzee's pushing at the limits of the novel form. Through a textual irony (which relies heavily on allusion), Coetzee's Jesus fictions stage processes of allegorical meaning, thereby exposing a fundamental flaw in symptomatic or summative modes of reading as such modes, by seeking divine extractable truths, are implicitly related to an irrational or religious logic of sacrifice.<sup>3</sup> Instead, by pinning salvation to a recovery of truth at the level of an affectively engaged or *impassioned* (the concept of passion is key) reading, responsive to the dynamic of embeddedness that relates life and literature, the works open onto a literary thinking inassimilable to both reason and religion.

### **i. *Autre-Biography and Confession:***

In the 1985 confession essay Coetzee traces the attempts of modern writers – namely Rousseau, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky – to attain ‘the secular equivalent of absolution’ (*Doubling*, 252) in a post-religious age of reason. Juxtaposed to Rousseau's faith in realisable self-knowledge, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky (the latter especially) highlight, for Coetzee, the tyranny of self-deception in an age of reason. As Coetzee illustrates, without the original religious context confessional writings are exposed to a Watt-like condition of ‘regression to infinity of self-awareness and self-doubt’ (274). This Beckettian problem of ‘endlessness’ (249) is, in Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* (1872), resolved by the notion of grace which, as Coetzee outlines in *Doubling the Point*, emerges as the ‘condition in which the truth can be told clearly’ (392). Grace, the position represented by the monk Tikhon as opposed the unrepentant Stavrogin, short circuits the ‘bad infinity’ (290) of secular confession and self-consciousness and enables the possibility of a true confession; the possibility of speaking ‘from the heart’ (261). Although Coetzee withholds personally from adopting the position of faith – ‘As for grace, no, regrettably no: I am not a Christian, or not yet’ (*Doubling*, 250) – the volume *Doubling the Point*, which opens with a discussion of autobiography and ends shortly after the essay on confession, is indicative of a shift in Coetzee's literary thinking that continues to structure the most recent writings

---

<sup>3</sup> There is a danger, however, in aligning the breakdown of narrative or allegorical conventions with the epistemo-ontological procedures of negative theology, as illustrated by Ileana Dimitriu who articulates a parallel between ‘the postmodern ontology of indeterminacy’ and ‘contemporary religious sensibilities’ (“Attachment with Detachment”: A Post-Secular Reading of J.M. Coetzee's Recent Fictions’, 136). Indeed, Beckett's negative aesthetics, and prioritisation of silence, have been often discussed in light of apophysis and negative theology, see Marius Buning's ‘Samuel Beckett's Negative Way: Intimations of the Via Negativa in His Late Plays’ (1990) and Hélène Baldwin's *Samuel Beckett's Real Silence* (1981).

(the Jesus fictions are both saturated with the problem of bad infinities, as discussed below).

In *The Good Story*, for example, Coetzee returns to this theme by framing the discourse of psychoanalysis as a ‘post-religious form of therapeutic dialogue’ (vii). However, he is suspicious of the implicit New Testament injunction he reads in Freud: ‘You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free’ (7). Coetzee asks: ‘Is it possible – philosophically but also neurologically – to speak of a memory that is pristine, uncoloured by interpretation?’ (12). If not, then are the functional truths of psychotherapy merely fictions? His interlocutor Kurtz cannot agree: ‘my experience is that more often than not the truth IS what works’ (9). Coetzee continues throughout, however, to uphold a distinction between an absolute truth, and the convenient or functional truth sought by psychotherapy, that mirrors the earlier confrontation set out in the confession essay between grace and cynicism.<sup>4</sup>

A clue as to what grace stands for in Coetzee’s atheistic literary thinking can be extrapolated from a discussion in *Doubling the Point* where Coetzee posits ‘[n]ot grace, then, but [...] the body’ and the ‘authority of suffering’ (248) as a counter to the endless trials of doubt. This account of embodied life tempers the later declaration of an idealist ‘transcendental imperative’ (*Doubling*, 340) that is linked to the view that ‘community has its basis in an awareness and acceptance of a common justice [...] awareness of an idea of justice, somewhere, that transcends laws and lawmaking’ (340). The body can be seen to intervene here, marking the space of the ‘tiny demurral’ (340) Coetzee posits between the transcendental notions of community and the more discrete question of one’s individual conscience. In other words, the body – notably the suffering body, life ineluctably as subject to death – neither corresponds to a transcendental idea of justice, that would legitimise the foundation of an ethico-political community, nor does it remain merely a private affair, inscrutable to others. Grace, therefore, marks a literary thinking of life as the intersection between the public and private and as the ground upon which ethics and politics become ineluctably entangled.

As Coetzee argues in *The Good Story*, such a literary thinking, derived from the authority of the suffering body, is thus linked to an absence of authority:

---

<sup>4</sup> Coetzee’s idealistic position mirrors that set forth in the earlier *Doubling the Point*: ‘Why should I be interested in the truth about myself when the truth may not be in my interest? [...] I continue to give a Platonic answer: because we are born with the idea of the truth’ (395).

What ties one to the real world is, finally, death. One can make up stories about oneself to one's heart's content, but one is not free to make up the ending. The ending has to be death: it is the only ending one can seriously believe in. What an irony then that to anchor oneself in a sea of fictions one should have to rely on death! (69).

If Coetzee's transcendental imperative of the writer thus corresponds to a sense of ethical truth, by building upon the adjacent commentary on life we can attend to the more complex demands the novels place on the reader by not simply advancing a post-secular or idealist form of alterity (seen as the bearer of an ethical modality of responsibility) but rather as linked to a sense of life, constitutively exposed to death, that is fundamentally unmasterable in terms of both reason *and* religion. The heart-speech of Coetzee's later works does not therefore appeal to a religious or ethical modality of truth beyond the realm of self-consciousness and reason, but rather to a transcendence or excess *internal* to any account of the self; the non-authoritative but palpable truth of fiction thereby corresponds to the death, or potential for suffering, that defines life.

The context of confession helps to indicate how Coetzee's works, including the life writing trilogy, situate otherness at the heart of the self. Following the logic sketched out in previous chapters – a logic that relates the Chandos paradox, the problem of linguistic embeddedness, to Coetzee's political writings on the non-position and the problem of political embeddedness – Coetzee's writings stage the insight that to be embedded is to be divided. Yet this fundamental complicity between self and other, between the self and what Coetzee calls in a letter the 'inbuilt templates of how one thinks, how one feels' (*Here and Now*, 73), is also seen as the very chance of the self to emerge *as* a self. Such a double-bind has been traced through the strategies of narrative embeddedness that mark Coetzee's indebtedness to the textual economy of Beckett's practice of unwording. In relation to the topic of life-writing, this logic is evidenced in a review of Deirdre Bair's 1979 biography of Beckett. For Coetzee, Bair's biography produces merely 'the life of a man who wrote the books, not *the life of the books and the man in each other* [my emphasis]' ('Review: Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett?*', 87). This double bind, between word and world, self and other, is integral to Coetzee's own life-writing as it seeks a truth beyond mere verifiability – what we might term a truth to life. Consequently, Coetzee's confessional practice of '*autre*-biography' (*Doubling*, 394) – a mode of life-writing that underscores the co-implication of self and other – can be seen as epitomising a wider literary thinking whose ethico-political import resides in a disavowal of absolute claims to alterity and to life as an absolute value.



Rather, then, than appealing to a romantic or divine other, Coetzee's life-writing helps illustrate how the wider oeuvre situates the other at the very centre of the self.<sup>5</sup> Alongside the three fictionalised memoirs, Coetzee's life-writing also includes the earlier short pieces, 'Remembering Texas' (1984), and 'Meat Country' (1995), both written in the first-person. Most significantly, however, *Doubling the Point* includes the first instance of Coetzee's practice of *autre*-biography, the writing of autobiography in the third-person (which is explicitly aligned with a sense of writing 'without authority', 392). The publication of *Doubling the Point* in 1992 preceded by five years the appearance of Coetzee's first fictionalised memoir, *Boyhood* (in 1997). However, the archive reveals that the earliest drafts of *Boyhood* date from 1987 and that the work was written concurrently alongside Coetzee's other projects at the time, including *Age of Iron* and latterly *Disgrace* and *The Lives of Animals* (these works also share the same notebooks). The confluence of these projects, and their shared textual genealogy, is elucidated through the dual framework of Coetzee's philosophical turn: the overlap between the epistemology and ontology that links the formal complexity of the literary work to a thinking of life as constitutively other and therefore inaccessible to positive knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

A notebook entry dated 13 December 1994 situates the origin of *Disgrace* in precisely this matrix: 'A man at the prime of his career, a respected writer, is invited on to a Truth Commission' (HRC, MS Coetzee Papers, Box 35, Folder 2). Later in the notebook, when plot details begin to materialise, the theme of confession remains paramount. An entry dated 6 May 1995 introduces his daughter, eventually Lucy, as a confessor to whom her father gives her a book, an 'allegorical confession': 'What exists between the two of them is therefore a tacit understanding that he is confessing to her in a circuitous way' (HRC, MS Coetzee Papers, Box 35, Folder 2). *Disgrace* thus stages, from its inception, the liability of confession to translate and mistranslate the private truths of the self. This anticipates Lurie's suspicion, in the published novel, that the committee are incapable of deciphering the difference between a direct (i.e. *heart-felt*) and an indirect confession. Of course, this incapability has ramifications not only for the self before the law but also before itself.

---

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in a later interview Coetzee states: 'all autobiography is *autre*-biography' ('All Autobiography is *Autre*-biography', 216).

<sup>6</sup> This duality of ontology and autobiography is essential to Derrida's discussion of animals in *The Animal That Therefore I am* (2002). As discussed, the division of the human from the animal – the animal within the human – is seen as complicit with the entrance into language and the possibility of the 'I', the autobiographical subject. Accordingly, philosophical knowledge, grounded in this split of making abstract of the human mode of being, is deprived of access to the animal. Echoing Elizabeth Costello, Derrida suggests instead an alternative alignment between animal life and 'poetic thinking' (377).

His belief that what is really being demanded is in fact a performance, a performance of interiority as exteriority, parallels the ironic impersonal strategies of Coetzee's fictionalised memoirs which are inscribed with the same (self-aware) observation: any autobiography is a performance, an act of translation which necessarily risks eliding truth in the transposition of life to writing.

The debate that is staged in the *Disgrace* notebook entries, between direct and indirect confession, is re-inscribed as a tension between the memorial and fictional aspects in the notebook entries relating specifically to the autobiographical works. An entry on *Boyhood* dated 13 June 1995, reads: 'As a memoir the thing may be OK, but as fiction it is too myopic, self-absorbed, closed. It leads nowhere. There must be a moment – refused if necessary – when he sees that he is blind to the reality of his father and mother' (HRC, MS Coetzee Papers, Box 35, Folder 2). That is, a moment where the self can step outside itself, to split itself from itself so as to perceive others. That Coetzee perceives this latter step to be related to literature is hugely significant, and reinforced by an archived email correspondence, dating from the year 2000, with a creative writing MA student:

[B]uilding on the basis you have here, you are not going to create a viable work of fiction that would satisfy the MA regulations. It is too personal, by which I mean NOT that it utters things which are rarely uttered but that it is tied so closely to your personal life that you will very likely not be able to betray the truth of that life for the alternative truth of the work of fiction. To put it more baldly: other people's lives are not interesting in themselves (HRC, MS Coetzee Papers, Box 113, Folder 4).

The collusion of Coetzee's strategy of impersonality and an impulse towards fictionality is thus not to be considered as evasive, but rather as key to elaborating the alternative 'truth' of fiction. We might further note how such a contradictory notion of fictional truth inflects the irony of Coetzee's fictionalised memoirs; an irony that pins mastery – the writer's role as a master of life – to evasion or exclusion, to a lack of mastery. This logic reflects the ironic awareness of Coetzee's earlier postcolonial fictions, including *Disgrace*, which expose the fact that any absolute or sovereign truth in fact depends upon what cannot be mastered; the fullness of life as that which transcends any given discourse of mastery.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> As Hillis Miller writes in 'The Critic as Host', there is a greater ethico-political urgency in refusing finality in our acts of reading than in seeking to shore up certain truths: 'I should agree that "the impossibility of reading should not be taken too lightly." It has consequences, for life and death, since it is inscribed, incorporated, in the bodies of individual human beings and in the body politic of our cultural life and death together' (440). JC, in *Diary of a Bad Year*, hints similarly at the riskiness of refusing finality in a discussion of the United States' war on terror: '[W]here Al Qaida is concerned, nothing is what it seems to be. Where

In *Youth* this ironizing of the autobiographical subject is rendered as a fundamental naivety that bedevils the young John; a failure to belong that parallels a failure of self-knowledge: ‘What is truth anyway? If he is a mystery to himself, how can he be anything but a mystery to others?’ (*Youth*, 132). This thematic strand inflects the literary thinking of all three fictionalised memoirs; the failure of the self informs the failure of the authority of the author, the failure to master the truth of the self. The fact that John is both simultaneously inside and outside his own linguistic, cultural, and historical present is thus compounded by the third-person present tense which separates the narrating and narrated consciousnesses.<sup>8</sup> As with the use of free indirect discourse and third-person present tense narration in *Disgrace*, moments of self-reflexivity on behalf of the narrative voice raise the spectre of an implied author or fictionalised intelligence; the figure that epitomises Coetzee’s literary thinking by refusing the neat identification of either self or other. The autobiographical truth-content of *Boyhood* is similarly split, neither belonging wholly to the self nor to another: ‘Whoever he truly is, whoever the true “I” is that ought to be rising out of the ashes of his childhood, is not being allowed to be born, is being kept puny and stunted’ (140). This textual ambiguity, generated via a Beckettian anti-grammar of perspective, thus effects an indirect challenge to a notion of truth as mastery through our experience of reading, our ineluctable repetition of the failure to pin down the truth.

This displacement of pronominal and focal perspective also recalls Beckett’s *Unnamable*: ‘I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me’ (1). Beckett’s rhythm of doubt thus helps to elucidate the double-bind of confession that underlines Coetzee’s forays in autobiography. In *Company*, Beckett’s most explicitly autobiographical short-text, the opposing pair of self/other is never reconciled nor conflated, but rather perpetually poised in a conjunction Chris Ackerley describes as a ‘fugue between one imagining himself into existence and an external voice, recounting memories ill-seen and ill-heard, conjured out of memory and imagination’ (Ackerley, 33). *Boyhood* also deploys a series of devised images, rather than a coherent confessional memoir or narrative spoke in the first-person, and leaves absent the reflective or possessive moment of absolution

---

did the prosecutors learn to think in such a way? The answer: in literature classes in the United States of the 1980s and 1990s, where they were taught that in criticism suspiciousness is the chief virtue, that the critic must accept whatsoever at face value’ (33).

<sup>8</sup> The blurb to *Youth* mistakenly ignores this separation: ‘*Youth*’s narrator, a student in 1950s South Africa, has long been plotting an escape from his native country’.

characteristic of the writing self looking back upon the written self.<sup>9</sup> This lack of narratological resolution parallels Coetzee's account of the lack of confessional absolution in a secular age, a parallel that culminates at the end *Company*: 'With every inane word a little nearer to the last. And how the fable too. The fable of one with you in the dark. The fable of one fabling of one with you in the dark [...] And you as you always were. Alone' (42). For Coetzee, the difficulty of conjuring a Beckettian form of impersonal personality manifests as a 'question of narration', described in the notebooks:

[Neither] inside [n]or outside the action. What I have to do is to invent a position between the two that does not belong to realism, that is in effect a fictional construct. Neither a ten-year old incapable of reflecting on himself nor the same boy grown up, looking back seeing implications (HRC MS Coetzee Papers, Box 35, Folder 2).

By undermining the conventions of the genre, therefore, including the confluence of narrating and narrated consciousnesses and the teleology of progress from the 'then' of the narrative to the consummated 'now' of the time of writing, Coetzee's life-writing invites us to consider how truth is mediated through an exchange between the realms of private and public, self and other.

By turning to Coetzee's earlier inaugural lecture, 'Truth in Autobiography' (1984), we can explicate this economy of self/other or impersonal personality, in terms of the relation between life form and literary form, through Coetzee's reading of an economy of shame in Rousseau's *Confessions*. Coetzee argues that shame structures Rousseau's confession via an 'economy [whereby] everything shameful is valuable: every secret or shameful appetite is confessable currency' (3). This economy prevents Rousseau from carrying out his own enquiries into the nature and origins of his desires and motivations: '[T]ime after time in the *Confessions*, Rousseau performs the double movement of offering to spend one of his mysterious contradictions, then withdrawing it, in order to maintain the freedom which, in his system, belongs to those who hold their assets in reserve' (3). By withholding the truth Rousseau thereby propagates what Coetzee terms the 'economic life of the discourse' (6). Coetzee draws upon this idea to disavow the 'privilege[d]' status upheld by literary criticism as the discourse which seeks to 'tell the truth of literature' (5). In Coetzee's analogous formula, the critic seeking to tell the truth of the work is situated in the place of the confessant or autobiographer seeking to tell the truth of himself.

---

<sup>9</sup> The indebtedness of Coetzee's life-writing to Beckett is further compounded by a strange mini-biography cum autobiography, entitled 'Samuel Beckett in Cape Town – An Imaginary History' (2003), in which Coetzee envisages a counter-history that explores Beckett's life in South Africa as a Professor of Romance Languages at the University of Cape Town.

Coetzee's economic account of the genre conventions of autobiography, and of the inevitable fissuring of the autobiographical subject in the transposition of life to writing, thus yields an implicit account of literature as related to a disavowal of mastery.<sup>10</sup>

The concept of shame helps ground this disavowal of masterful or authoritative truth-claims in relation to the alternative truth attributed to the suffering body and, by extension, to life in relation to death. Shame not only marks a sense of abject life but, through Coetzee's appeal to a metaphor of economy, the temporal-dynamic sense of an ineluctable embeddedness that corresponds to how the narratological time of autobiography or confession is overcome by a different order of time, namely material finitude as that which splits the self from itself (just as in textual terms shame licenses the authority of the confession whilst simultaneously preventing the confession from authoritatively concluding). The experience of shame, unlike repentance, evades re-inscription in the circle of self-deception as a physical-affective response that ultimately resists formal articulation. We might thus think of shame in the same way that grace comes to demarcate Lurie's physical response to his situation in the second half of *Disgrace*. This physical-affective nexus is integral to a literary thinking of life that is neither reducible to the self-evasion of the transcendental solution to confession (God) nor to self-deception of the abysmal logic of secular reason.

*Boyhood*, in particular, is marked by a series of shameful incidents that concern John's mother. The opening chapter ends with an account of John's betrayal of his mother: "That evening he joins in with his father's jeering. He is well aware of what a betrayal this is. Now his mother is all alone" (3). The structure of self-awareness is here, as elsewhere, presented not merely as a product of retrospection but as immediate. These intense episodes, once read as confession rather than fiction, become as Attridge argues, markers of their 'power as memory, as lasting imprint[s] on the same psyche that is producing the words we read' (*J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 151). Arguably, however, the fictional framework heightens the ethical effect of the narrative by doing the opposite; by effecting a dissociation between the narrative episodes and an authorial figure. A visceral scene,

---

<sup>10</sup> Such an account recalls Coetzee's indebtedness to Derrida, and indeed the latter's notion of supplementarity is key to Coetzee's writings on confession (the archived research materials demonstrate a strong interest in the deconstructive criticism of both Derrida and Paul de Man). Indeed, for Andrew Dean the confession essay marks the high-water mark of Coetzee's relation to 'post-structuralist theory' ('Double Thoughts: Coetzee and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism', 57). One might therefore draw a parallel between Coetzee's moving away from the linguistic turn of post-structuralism, towards questions of animal life and ethics, and the 'ethical turn' (discussed in the previous chapter) in deconstructive criticism in the 1990s. Both can be seen to arise from a desire to locate the ethico-political significance of a deconstructively inspired thinking of literature.

where John mutilates his brother's hand, stages this process. During a trip to a farm that supplies fruit to their father's company, Standard Cannery, John and his younger brother come upon a mealie-grinding machine. John persuades his brother to put his hand down the funnel while he turns the handle:

For an instant, before he stopped, he could actually feel the fine bones of his brother's fingers yield as the cogs crushed them. His brother stood with his hand trapped in the machine, ashen with pain, a puzzled, inquiring look on his face. Their hosts rushed them to hospital, where a doctor amputated the middle finger of his brother's left hand [...] He has never apologized to his brother, nor has he even been reproached with what he did. Nevertheless, the memory lies like a weight upon him, the memory of the soft resistance of flesh and bone, and then the grinding (119).

This gruesome account, told as a memory, heightens the problem of self-truth by refusing to yield an explanation or justification. That this passage is staged as a memory, in the past tense, provokes our expectation of a penitent and contrite reflection yet Coetzee subverts this generic convention with a reflective moment that simply re-inscribes the sensory experience of the horror. By withholding an explanation for the heinous act, the truth of the episode emerges in affective and embodied terms that are neither properly subject to knowledge nor self-deception. Such a presentation of the event avoids the double-thought inherent to confession, where the desire to confess is always contaminated by the shameful desire to exculpate or excuse. The shameful fact of the suffering body, in this instance, ends the cycle of doubt not by providing a moment of absolution but by refusing the very possibility of a certain or authoritative position of responsibility. The economy of shame here seems to affect a deeper doubt than that of the sceptic; a doubt that precedes the moment of ethical responsibility by marking a non-position that would guard against even the slightest possibility of self-interest. This self-directed and embodied account of shame – rather than the externally oriented doctrine of the sympathetic imagination – places the onus of judgement on the reader whose is thereby implicated and drawn in to the action.<sup>11</sup> The narrative embeddedness of the action, which the restricted narration leaves ultimately undecidable, thus appeals to our dynamic embeddedness as readers.

Just as the co-implication of self and other ties the generic problem of ending (in confessional narratives) to the experiential present of reading, then Coetzee's literary

---

<sup>11</sup> In the absence of being able to say 'what goes on in people's inner lives?' (216), as a character asks in *Summertime*, the reader's sympathetic imagination becomes less other-directed and more self-directed. In other words, by failing to fully inhabit an other we are left to confront ourselves as other.

thinking poses the self as vital to any ethical encounter or approach to otherness. This is staged at the end of *Boyhood*, where the truth of the self and the truth of the confessional genre materialise simultaneously:

Sometimes the gloom lifts. The sky [...] opens a slit, and for an interval he can see the world as it really is. He seems himself [...] not a child [...] yet still as stupid and self-enclosed as a child. childish; dumb; ignorant; retarded. In a moment like this has can see his father and mother too, from above, without anger: not as two grey and formless weights seating themselves on his shoulders, plotting his misery day and night, but as a man and a woman living dull and trouble-filled lives of their own. The sky opens, he sees the world as it is, then the sky closes and his is himself again, living the only story he will admit, the story of himself' (160-161).

John's epiphanic but fleeting vision of himself and the world 'as it is' depends upon the irruption into his self-narrative of others, his parents. However, rather than an apprehension of alterity, the truth of the self emerges only at the point where other selves are deemed to be also autobiographically capable (i.e. as independent selves with competing stories of their own). This entanglement of self and other in the works is hence not a transition from the former to the latter but informs a complex dynamic; a dynamic, as intimated in Coetzee's commentary in *Doubling the Point*, between one's conscience and one's embeddedness. Accordingly, implicating the reader in the meaning-making processes of the work is not necessarily ethical in itself. I return to this in my conclusion by addressing the key topic of censorship in Coetzee's writings.

Rather, the affective economy of shame in *autre*-biography – as that which attests to the embeddedness of self and other by staging the other as a part of oneself – helps illustrates the inward-looking stance of Coetzee's ethics. As Gilbert Yeoh argues of *Age of Iron*, rather than a Levinasian ethics of alterity Coetzee's works elaborate a 'skeptical ethics of the self' (J.M. Coetzee and Samuel Beckett: Ethics, Truth-telling, and Self-deception', 332). Exacerbating the challenge to Levinas's ethics, conducted in *The Lives of Animals* by extending the concept of alterity to animals, the confessional context of Coetzee's philosophical turn emphasises a 'Christian model' (345) of ethics that hinges on a notion of truth and self-truth. This is epitomised by the most recent Jesus fictions, which I discuss in the third section below. Coetzee's transcendental imperative thus corresponds not to a religious or transcendent moment outside of time but rather to a transcending *of* time itself. In the context of Coetzee's wider literary thinking, the problem of ending the life-story thus parallels the problem of judging and mastering the truth of life. As Hamm puts it in Beckett's *Endgame*:

The end is in the beginning and yet you go on [...] Then babble, babble, words, like the solitary child who turns himself into children, two, three, so as to be together, and whisper together, in the dark ... Moment upon moment, pattering down, like the millet grains of ... [*he hesitates*] ... that old Greek, and all life long you wait for that to mount up to a life. (*Dramatic Works*, 126)

\*

The economy of shame that structures Coetzee's *autre*-biography has a similarly structural importance in two earlier works. Shortly following the confession essay, *Age of Iron* (1990) is an epistolary confession cum testimony written in the first-person by the terminally ill Mrs. Curren to her daughter who has left South Africa to live in the United States. Coetzee's next novel, *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), dramatises the origin of the real Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* (the writing of which began a month after the close of Coetzee's narrative, in 1869), the novel featuring the famously censored chapter of Stavrogin's confession to Tikhon that Coetzee discusses in the confession essay ('Stavrogin' appears as the name of the final chapter in Coetzee's novel). The protagonist, a fictionalised Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, returns to Moscow after the death of his stepson Pavel and becomes embattled with the nihilist Nechaev. Both parental writers struggle to record and recount the truth of their times (what Curren calls: 'my truth: how I lived in these times, in this place', 130) in the face of a revolutionary and sacrificial politics of death, and in both narratives the activity of writing – particularly emphasised in Dostoevsky's case as an artist, a 'master of life' (141), a 'lord of resurrection' (153) – is entangled with an approach to otherness that situates truth perilously and ambiguously close to death.

In *Master of Petersburg*, this ambiguity is marked by the notion of possession; possession marks the opening of oneself to otherness that is key to act of artistic creation yet, as with structures of shame and impersonality in Coetzee's *autre*-biography, is premised on a certain receptivity to death. Dostoevsky's attempt to recover his dead son, to master life as, thus risks replicating the sacrificial logic of the young Nechaev who wields not 'the power of life, but the power of death' (112): 'Thoughts, feelings, visions. Does he trust them? They come from his deepest heart; but there is no more reason to trust the heart than to trust reason' (19). This openness to double thought – a sickness of reasoning – is dramatically epitomised in the scene at the top the shot tower, the place of his son's alleged suicide:

At once the wind begins to tug at them. He takes off his hat and grips the railing, trying not to look down. A metaphor, he tells himself [...] another word for a lapse of consciousness, a not-being-here, an absence. Nothing new. The epileptic



knows it all [...] He grips the rail tighter, shakes his head to chase away the dizziness. Metaphors – what nonsense! There is death, only death. Death is a metaphor for nothing. Death is death [...] Through clenched teeth he repeats the words to himself: *I should not have come*. But the *nots* are beginning to collapse, just as happened with Ivanov. *I should not be here therefore I should be here, I will see nothing else therefore I will see all*. What sickness is this, what sickness of reasoning? (118).

A similar sickness afflicts Mrs. Curren in her dealing with the enigmatic Vercueil, a drunken tramp who suddenly arrives outside her door and plays the role of an unwitting confessor (he is entrusted with delivering the letter – the book we are reading – to her daughter after her death). Although patently ill-suited to the role of messenger, his existence outside the violent historico-political present and unmediated intrusion into her life leads Curren to perceive him as a kind of indeterminate angel. This contradictory response to his presence – ‘Because I cannot trust Vercueil I must trust him’ (130) – is mirrored by his contradictory form; his angelic form is simultaneously that of the divine messenger and, as Coetzee describes him, that of a ‘herald of death’ (*Doubling*, 340).

Just as Dostoevsky paradoxically sets out to expect the unexpected in his attempt to recapture his lost son, to respond to the call from his heart or to a modality of truth that would evade the phantom of self-interest and thereby maintain the ‘integrity of his grieving’ (125), Curren’s wager on trust is predicated on an account of truth that would not be reducible to the mere facts of one’s life. Such an appeal attests to the importance Curren places on writing since this truth, which she seeks to bequeath to her daughter, will not be contained by a discourse of mastery or self-knowledge: ‘Mother and daughter on the telephone [...] Our words taken apart, hurled through the skies, put together again whole, flawless [...] On the telephone, love but not truth’ (128-9). It is thus through the experiential matrix of writing and reading, marked by the irrational faith she places in Vercueil, that she hopes to transmit a truth that would not be simply reducible to a form summative or propositional knowledge. This receptivity to otherness, to an order of life outside the profane realm of sacrifice without end, does not however portend a flight from politics to ethics. The truth Curren seeks to transmit, and that is elicited by the indeterminate figure of Vercueil, does not simply correspond to an alterity that evades the finite realm but rather one that situates and divides the self: ‘Death is the only truth left. Death is what I cannot bear to think. At every moment when I am thinking of something else, I am not thinking death, am not thinking the truth’ (26). Consequently, Vercueil’s angelic indeterminacy, between life and death, signals an otherness at the heart of the self: ‘To whom this writing then? The answer: to you but not to you; to you in me’

(6). Curren's literary truth is thus tied to death; to the onset of dying that presages her desire to write the letter in the first place and in accordance with the death inscribed by the very act of writing as that which will survive her and hence testify to her absence.

That death is structurally related to the higher sense of truth Coetzee associates with the literary – a truth that anchors the self in a sea of fictions – is consonant with Walter Benjamin's notion of the authority of the storyteller in the 1935 essay 'The Storyteller'. For Benjamin, death sanctions the authority of 'everything that the storyteller can tell' (93). Death marks the proleptic structure of the story and the activity of reading; the anticipation of the end, or better, the anticipation of retrospection that the narrative end affords. It is death, therefore, that paradoxically facilitates what Benjamin directly refers to as the 'meaning of life' (100). The storyteller's authority is not, however, linked to mere 'intelligence' but rather to what Benjamin calls 'wisdom', which is described as the 'the epic side of truth' (86). The wisdom of the story endures beyond both the moments of production and reception (moments of mere succession), but without transcending the finitude of embodied life in the name of an absolute or theological end. Benjamin describes how the story 'was inclined to borrow from the miraculous', in propagating a notion of life as more than a 'concatenation of definite events' but as nevertheless 'embedded in the great inscrutable course of the world' (95). It is this fundamentally anti-theological account of literary truth or wisdom, I argue, that forestalls the primacy of a post-secular or Levinasian ethics of alterity.<sup>12</sup>

Rather than 'thematizing of unconditional hospitality' (*Secretary of the Invisible*, 113), as Marais argues, Curren's self-renouncing leap of faith – her trust in Vercueil to deliver the meaning of her life to her daughter – is thus also a risk; the immanent death that structures her truth, which is also the novel's truth as both a discursive and affective testament to ultimately unmasterable nature of embedded life, is entwined with a sense of imminent loss, epitomised by Vercueil as an angel of death, that suspends the meaning of her death between poignancy and irrelevance. It is this potential irrelevance from whence the spiral of doubt and shame begins. For Curren, shame is: 'The name for the way in which people live who would prefer to be dead. Shame. Mortification. Death in life' (86). Thus, to circumvent a revolutionary politics of sacrifice without end one is condemned to what is

---

<sup>12</sup> A similar account of the literary is spelled out in Roland Barthes' 'The Death of the Author' (1968): 'In precisely this way literature [...] by refusing to assign a "secret," an ultimate meaning, to the text (and the world as text), liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases - reason, science, law' (147)

termed in *Master of Petersburg* as a process of ‘confession without end’ (222); a process that thereby would refuse to categorically assign a meaning or value to the life since it is precisely via such an assignation of value that life is made vulnerable to sacrifice. The final chapter in *Master of Petersburg*, entitled ‘Stavrogin’, dramatises this risk of sacrifice that – as in *Disgrace* – follows a yielding to a sense of what Attridge terms ‘absolute otherness’ (132). Dostoevsky discovers that by seeking to imaginatively recover his lost child, to be a master of life, one inevitably risks betraying the dead and thereby compounding the sacrifice: ‘No longer a matter of listening for the lost child calling from the dark, no longer a matter of being faithful to Pavel when all have given him up. Not a matter of fidelity at all. On the contrary, a matter of betrayal – betrayal of love first of all, then of Pavel and the mother and child and everyone else’ (235). The shame of betrayal inverts Costello’s doctrine of the sympathetic imagination, profoundly troubling any privileged sense of ethics.

The fundamental negativity of writing constitutes the death-like shame with which the work closes: ‘*They pay him lots of money for writing books*, said the child, repeating the dead child. What they failed to say was that he had to give up his soul in return. Now he begins to taste it. It tastes like gall’ (250).<sup>13</sup> This economy of shame, as death in life, attests to the ineluctability of material finitude; of one’s embeddedness in a time and place. It is precisely such a situatedness in the here and now which the sacrificial logic of the younger generations seeks to sublimate in the name of a future or life to come. By making the condition of confession endless, by withholding the moment of absolution or redemption, these works signal the wider ethico-political import of Coetzee’s literary thinking: far from proliferating an endless scepticism, the undeniable and certain truth of one’s life – death – occasions a literary thinking that affirms an unredeemable relation to the present moment, the moment of both life and writing. Like *Disgrace*, these works are animated by a desire to sacrifice; to sacrifice the appeal to any ultimate judgement over life and death by situating life as fundamentally precarious, as the unstable ground for any ethical or political programme.

## **ii. The Death of the Author: Coetzee’s Bio-logico Literary Experiments.**

---

<sup>13</sup> The reference to gall foreshadows Lurie’s description of Petrus’ slaughter sheep in *Disgrace*: ‘Sheep do not own themselves, do not own their lives. They exist to be used, every last ounce of them [...] except perhaps the gall bladder, which no-one will eat. Descartes should have thought of that. The soul, suspended in the dark, bitter gall, hiding’ (124). This depiction of the sheep’s soul suspended in gall further undermines the purported seriousness of animal life and speaks of a certain complicity between the profane and the sacred.

Taking literally Roland Barthes' conceit of impersonality, famously apotheosised by the notion of the death of the author, Coetzee's third fictionalised memoir, *Summertime* (2009), principally consists of a series of interviews conducted by a biographer, Mr. Vincent, with former colleagues and friends of the recently deceased writer, John Coetzee. This structural irony exacerbates the *autre*-biographical mode of *Boyhood* and *Youth* as *Summertime* explicitly thematises the very work of (auto)biography and of the possibility of a narrative truth between the private and public domains. The conjunction of interview transcripts and supposed notebook materials also thematise the processes of archiving a life. In so doing *Summertime* produces a vertiginous sense of irony. This is distilled in an episode where Mr. Vincent warns Sophie, a former university colleague, against trusting Coetzee's personal papers:

Mme Denoel, I have been through the letters and diaries. What Coetzee writes there cannot be trusted, not as a factual record – not because he was a liar but because he was a fictioneer. In his letters he is making up a fiction for his correspondents; in his diaries he is doing much the same for his own eyes, or perhaps for posterity (225).

This is not only a nod to the future scholar of Coetzee's works but at a technical level constitutes an instance of the text *performing* what it is saying; fictioneering the very notion of a fictioneer. This effect of narrative embeddedness, where the formal and thematic elements are entwined, marks the relation between literary truth and life.<sup>14</sup> By staging John's literary influences and the belief, as Martin recounts, in the 'creative force of unconscious processes' (213) (this is most apparent as John starts spontaneously quoting from Lucky's speech in *Waiting for Godot*: "Given the existence of a personal God," he says, "with a white beard quaquaquaqu outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia loves us deeply quaquaquaqu with some exceptions", 112), *Summertime* establishes an intractable irony: the John of the narrative, who passively yields to the forces of the muse or artistic agency beyond the rational, contrasts sharply with the active author-god J.M. Coetzee, who stands seemingly without extension beyond the work.

This contrast between two versions of the author relates the central conceit of *Summertime* (the death of the autobiographical subject) to the very heart of Coetzee's immanent

---

<sup>14</sup> For example, the dramatised sense of marginality and alienation, which pervades the autobiographical trilogy, cannot be separated from the subversion of narrative mastery at the formal level. In *Youth* this is thematised explicitly in relation to Beckett, as John identifies in Beckett a kindred spirit who is 'outside class, as he himself would prefer to be' (*Youth*, 96)

questioning of literary authority. If the author of autobiography conventionally stands above the work, all-seeing like a blackbird or a God, the irony of *Summertime* gestures towards a sense of truth or self-truth that echoes the impossibility of death in Blanchot's writings on literature. Unable therefore to grasp the ultimate source of textual authority, the reader is left with a sense of biographical life as both finite and somehow infinite, or unfinishable. Such a truth of life corresponds to Coetzee's statement that 'all autobiography is storytelling, all writing is autobiography' (*Doubling*, 391). If the former clause entails the inevitability of fiction, and hence of the unfinished quality of any self-truth, the latter clause entails the necessity of an embeddedness that refuses the position of an overarching or impersonal authority. In *Slow Man* (2005) and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) Coetzee pursues this paradoxical thinking of literary authority through an investigation of what JC – Coetzee's orthonym in *Diary of a Bad Year* – terms 'the writing life' (191). Indeed, the intersection between the writing of life and the notion of 'the writing life' is central to the self-reflexive configuration of even the very earliest fictions, examples include: Coetzee's use of an orthonym in *Dusklands*; Magda's role as a poet of natural life; the Magistrate as an amateur historian and writer in *Waiting for the Barbarians*; and, perhaps most significantly, *Foe's* fictionalised version of Daniel Defoe (this fictionalisation of a real author is repeated in *Master of Petersburg* with Dostoevsky). Elizabeth Costello is Coetzee's most prolific author-protagonist, however, and her appearance in *Slow Man* signals an apogee of this conjunction of life forms and literary truths, or what protagonist Paul Rayment, terms a 'biologico-literary experiment' (114).

This conjunction of life and literature explains why, if all autobiography is necessarily for Coetzee a form of storytelling, all writing or storytelling is also a form of life-writing. This is to say not only that all writing is ineluctably a matter of self-positing or positioning, but that writing is linked to a temporal-affective dynamic that engenders a sense of life, in relation to death, that challenges the self-sufficiency of the human mode of being. This relation between the temporal-affective dynamic of Coetzee's works and an implicit concept or vision of life they present is captured by the notion of 'creaturely life' in the work of Eric Santner. Derived partially from a reading of Rilke, whose influence on Coetzee's Jesus fictions I trace below, Santner outlines creaturely life as a mode of exposure or vulnerability humans experience when prior forms of life no longer sustain them.<sup>15</sup> Lurie's transfiguration into a dog-man, as his liberal-humanist discourse breaks

---

<sup>15</sup> By forms of life Santner refers to an ontological rather than merely biological vulnerability. Such a vulnerability stems from a creatureliness which 'signifies a mode of exposure that distinguishes human

apart, is perhaps exemplary of this sense of creatureliness as a ‘human form of animality’ (*On Creaturely Life*, 13, n. 22). The notion of creaturely life, therefore, helps relate the temporal-affective dynamic of Coetzee’s works – the possibility of a specifically literary modality of thinking – and the focus on different modes of being, through the relations between creator/creation in living *and* literary terms (this staged in *Elizabeth Costello*, formerly through Costello’s account of Kafka and his ape and latterly via the relation between Costello herself and the implied author).

The temporal-affective dynamic of literary creation, a central aspect of Coetzee’s critique of structuralism in the doctoral thesis on Beckett, is reinforced by an essay entitled ‘Thematizing’ (1993), where Coetzee describes the ‘process of writing’ as resulting from ‘a certain back-and-forth motion’ (289). This dynamic temporality of writing is opposed to the ‘reasoning imagination’ which mistakes the means (specific themes) for the end. Rather, the process Coetzee terms ‘thematizing’ involves the activity of the writer and the reader in both a search for meaning and a ‘giving of oneself up’ (289) to the work. This combination of activity and passivity, discussed in Chapter 1, is integral to a sense of creaturely life that is epitomised by the 2005 novel *Slow Man*. *Slow Man* follows the story of Paul Rayment, an elderly amputee who loses a leg following a car crash on the opening page of the novel, and his relationship with his carer Marijana. The mimetic or narrative world created by the fiction perilously overlaps with the diegetic realm of the storytelling when Elizabeth Costello unexpectedly turns up in the middle of the novel knocking at Rayment’s door. This sudden and unexplained intrusion again stages the relation between creator and creation, author and character, as Rayment becomes convinced that Costello is simply using him as fodder for a novel (implicitly the novel we are reading).

Alongside this metafictional conceit, however, Costello’s account of the poetic or creative process (which she feels is lacking in Paul’s life) – as a matter of yielding oneself to the ‘rhythm of life’ (158) – is yoked to the life-giving and life-bearing duties thematised through the notion of care. Echoing her previous incarnation in *Elizabeth Costello*, the

---

beings from other kinds of life: not exposure simply to the elements or to the fragility and precariousness of our mortal, finite lives, but rather to an ultimate lack of foundation for the historical forms of life that distinguish human community [...] We could say that the precariousness, the fragility - the “nudity” - of biological life becomes potentiated, amplified, by way of exposure to the radical contingency of the forms of life that constitute the space of meaning within which human life unfolds’ (*Royal Remains*, 5). Insofar as biological life is potentiated through social and historical forms, Santner’s account of creaturely life recalls both Agamben and, more interestingly, Weller’s account of the doubledness of life in Beckett’s works (that is, Weller posits the identification with animal life in Beckett as only arising from a consciousness of the difference that separates human and animal, therefore opening onto a double bind).

novel thereby situates her quasi-romantic appeal to an aesthetics of the ‘heart’ (157) in the bathetic context of physical disability and inescapable ageing. In Pieter Vermeulen’s reading, the metafictional framework of the novel attests not to disavowal of lived reality but rather to an exploration of suffering and of ‘creaturely life’ once the ‘time-honoured forms of life’ (Vermeulen, 49) associated with the novel genre have become obsolete. We might associate these forms with the implicit eighteenth-century context that informs Costello’s own account of the sympathetic imagination (i.e. the rise of the liberal-humanist individual attuned to the affective strategies of novel reading; namely, for Vermeulen, ‘desire and empathy’, 51). As with the breakdown of liberal-humanism in *Disgrace*, the ‘biologico-literary experiment’ (114) that is *Slow Man* presents a sense of life distinctly more indeterminate than that which can be contained by conventional novelistic notions of empathy or sympathy. Insofar as life is enmeshed with the literary – that is, insofar as Paul fails to live a life ‘that may be *worth* putting in a book’ (229) – this indeterminacy merges with our reading experience and thereby situates the reader within the affective-temporal dynamic Coetzee attributes to writing.<sup>16</sup>

Far from turning away from the suffering of lived reality, then, Coetzee’s metafictional strategies – the interrogation of the processes of writing life – provoke an engagement with life by stimulating our active response as readers receptive to the affective modalities of the work that go beyond the pre-inscribed templates of feeling and knowing traditionally associated with the novel. This constitutes the cornerstone of Coetzee’s literary thinking and is marked by the consistent use of a quasi-transcendent heart-speech that appeals not only to a sense of privation, given the absence of absolute truth in a secular world, but rather to the excess generated by a sense of fictional or literary truth that, as per the fictionalised memoirs, is no less true for not corresponding with an empirical or verifiable world of facts.

*Diary of a Bad Year* addresses explicitly how such a truth might be devised via an interrogation of the concept of literary authority in one of JC’s ‘Strong Opinions’ (this section constitutes the first band of the novels tri-partite structure and consists of a series of arguments on various subjects). In the section ‘On Authority in Fiction’ JC interrogates the paradoxical authority of the writer:

What the great authors are masters of is authority. What is the source of authority, or of what the formalists called the authority-effect? If authority can be achieved

---

<sup>16</sup> For Peter D. McDonald, Paul Rayment is ‘obdurately unnovelistic or unnovelizable’ (‘The Ethics of Reading’, 493).

simply by tricks of rhetoric, then Plato was surely justified in expelling the poets from his ideal republic. But what if authority can be attained only by opening the poet-self to some higher force, by ceasing to be oneself and beginning to speak vatically? The god can be invoked, but does not necessarily come. *Learn to speak without authority*, says Kierkegaard. By copying Kierkegaard's words here, I make Kierkegaard into an authority. Authority cannot be taught, cannot be learned. The paradox is a true one (151).

JC's rejection of the rhetorical tricks behind the 'authority effect' – condemned by Plato but lauded by Barthes, as JC points out, as the birth of the reader – overlaps with the appeal to a 'higher' truth that Coetzee posits in his commentary on autobiography. Such a higher sense of truth would exceed a biographical or factual account of the author's life but, crucially, would not simply yield to the proliferating account of the postmodern text.<sup>17</sup> JC's concern to substantiate a form of contrary *parrhesia*, or truth-speech, against the duplicity of a debased public sphere, here turns inward to address both the authority of his own strong opinions but also that of the work *Diary of a Bad Year*. If JC's account of authority pins the authority of fiction in general to a certain debunking of authority in public discourse, this is replicated by the novel's staging or debunking of its own authority (via the plurality of voices both in and behind the work, including the authorial J.M. Coetzee).

In the second half of *Diary of a Bad Year*, JC's commentaries turn increasingly inward to reflect on the relation between the affective-temporal dynamic of artistic creation and the possibility of a truth spoken from the heart; a truth that appears to answer the paradox of authority, that closes the first half, with a key concept in Coetzee's heart speech: grace. Music, especially the music of J.S. Bach (who is also important to Mrs. Curren in *Age of Iron*), hypostasises the peculiar quality of a truth issued from the sense of artistic authority deriving from an absence of authority.<sup>18</sup> As JC says in an earlier entry: 'Music expresses feeling, that is to say, gives shape and habitation to feeling, not in space but in time' (130). Later Bach's music is described in grace-like terms: 'It comes as a gift, unearned, unmerited, for free' (221). *Diary of a Bad Year* thus stages the authority of a literary work as a writing of life (both in the private sense of biography and as an interrogation of different forms of life) through the intersection of the creative and the creaturely; that is, the intersection between the temporal-affective dynamic that comprises the 'anarchic' life of literary thinking and a corresponding thought of life. In other words, although

---

<sup>17</sup> The postmodern text can be associated with what Coetzee in a letter to Auster terms 'the doctrine of the arbitrariness of the signifier' (*Here and Now*, 78).

<sup>18</sup> Curren describes the music of Bach as effecting a form of 'Pure spirit' (*Age of Iron*, 24).



Coetzee's unconventional later works, including the *autre*-biographies, appear as metafictional commentaries on the act of writing, they also expand on the ethico-political consequences of a vision of life poised between self and other, life and death.

The final entry in *Diary of a Bad Year*, which juxtaposes Jesus and Dostoevsky, helps to unravel these consequences in a way that foreshadows the thinking of life conducted in Coetzee's two most recent fictions, *The Childhood* and *Schooldays of Jesus*. As opposed to Jesus, JC appeals to the voice of the impassioned Ivan in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*: 'It is the voice of Ivan, as realized by Dostoevsky, not his reasoning, that sweeps me along' (225). By speaking beyond both the arbitrariness of political decision-making and the absolute truths or moral injunctions of the Christian ethics of his creator, Ivan's voice encapsulates the grace which marks the authority of fiction in general; an authority that attests to the truth of life as neither divine and wholly other, nor accessible to the calculative domains of rationality and human self-knowledge. The relation of literary truth to life form in the recent Jesus fictions similarly depends upon an authority that is somehow suspended between reason and religion.

The fragile or weak authority, however, also marks how the Jesus fictions continue to dramatise the risk of sacrifice. By examining the notion of passion below, I demonstrate how the heart-speech of the later writings does not indicate a flight from the here and now into other modalities of being but rather an appeal to the unmasterable nature of life; of the sense of infinity, of infinite possibilities, that mark the present. Such a sense of life might be terrifying but it also demarcates the very possibility of ethics and, therefore, of the ethical dimension of truth that Coetzee aligns with what he terms a 'writer's way of thinking': 'to think of a life-story as a compendium of memories which one is free to interpret in the present according to the demands (and desires) of the present seems to me characteristic of a writer's way of thinking' (*The Good Story*, 13).

### **iii. The Life After Death.**

'The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing' — Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* 423, 127.

Foreshadowing the theme of private languages in the recent *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013) and *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016), *Summertime* – in a scene where John recounts how he killed a locust as a child – sets up an irony that pervades Coetzee's most recent novels: 'In the afterworld there are no language problems. It's like Eden all over again' (96). The

irony of such a statement derives from how Coetzee's life-writing stages an implicit awareness of the fundamental complicity between grace and cynicism. After the Fall man's *shameful* state as mortal splits both his being (between life and death) and his language (between word and world). In other words, that which was formerly taken as divine, the word of God, now registers as a private language wholly inaccessible to others. This renders grace, in a secular context, perilously linked to the possibility of self-deception.<sup>19</sup> This complicity between the sacred and profane is fundamental to Coetzee's recent Jesus fictions and is manifest both thematically (via the private language that informs the education of the Christ-like David,<sup>20</sup> the character we are led to believe is the young Jesus referenced in the books' titles) and formally through an estranged allegorical mode that draws upon the Beckettian ambiguity of the earlier works.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, by staging themes and issues that return us to the earliest writings on Beckett's *Watt* (including notions of nominalism and quantification, allegory, and the opposition of scepticism and idealism) the Jesus novels invite us to link the defining characteristics of Coetzee's later works (notably the heart-speech which follows the philosophical turn of the confession essay) back to the question of Coetzee's modernist inheritance. By emphasizing the relations to *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello*, I explore how Coetzee's deployment of a theological lexicon attests to a repudiation of a post-romantic or vitalist modernism by appealing not to a sense of infinite, absolute, or sacred life but to a sense of the infinity of life.

The entanglement of life and literature is therefore again not merely a question of overlapping forms but of form as subject to time. As such, the relation between temporal life and the possibility of a literary or higher truth emerges through an allegorical mode where a staging of life in relation to infinity (to an incalculability that forestalls conventional moral reasoning) is inseparable from a staging of truth in relation to irony (to an impossibility of interpretation that forestalls a summative reading).<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Further indication that the Jesus novels bear a relation to the confessional context of Coetzee's *autre*-biography is witnessed by the reference to Tolstoy's autobiographical trilogy (which includes *Childhood*, *Boyhood* and *Youth*, published 1852-1857) in the titles of Coetzee's works.

<sup>20</sup> David is spelt David in the first novel, *Childhood*, but for the sake of consistency I use the accented spelling from the more recent work throughout this section

<sup>21</sup> We might associate this estranged allegorical mode with how JC in *Diary of a Bad Year* describes Tolstoy's late short fiction as an attempt to 'face directly the one question that truly engaged his soul: how to live' (193). Coetzee appears to echo these views and in a letter to Auster describes the notion of late style thus: 'In the case of literature, late style, to me, starts with an ideal of a simple, subdued, unornamented language and a concentration on questions of real import, even questions of life and death' (*Here and Now*, 97).

<sup>22</sup> This higher sense of truth is intimated in the Jesus fictions – recalling the problematic overlap of biology and ethics in *Disgrace* – through the distinction between what is real and what is true: 'You use the word

This overlap between ontological infinity and textual irony can be extrapolated through an account of the ambiguous afterworld-like narrative world (indeed, the Jesus fictions are the first works since *Waiting for the Barbarians* to be ambiguously located outside of any recognisable geographical and historical reality). The plot unfolds in Novilla (and then Estrella, in *Schooldays*), where new citizens arrive by boat wholly ‘washed clean’ (*Childhood*, 208) of their old memories. The lack of a fundamental allegorical referent, however, – that the promised Jesus-figure in the books’ titles fails to arrive – leaves the meaning of both works, in terms of the truth of life, perilously suspended. By utilizing a narrative embeddedness that prevents the neat separation of form and content, both Jesus fictions create a complex textual irony that is best described by drawing upon Coetzee’s characterization of Beckett’s *Molloy*: ‘in this universe all mysteries are without mystery, or – to say the equivalent – everything is equally mysterious’ (*Late Essays*, 196-197).

This structural ambiguity, that equivocates between the sacred and the profane, is foreshadowed by the final chapter of *Elizabeth Costello*, ‘At the Gate’.<sup>23</sup> Costello finds herself in a strange purgatory between life and death that resembles a Kafkaesque literary theme park’ (208). As is the case in the two later Jesus fictions, the overly determined sense of the narrative world (full of allusions and semblances of allegory) produces a profoundly undetermined sense of meaning. When demanded by a group of judges to submit her beliefs Costello simply answers: ‘It is not my profession to believe, just to write’ (194). Echoing Lady Chandos’ appeal to diminutive life-forms, eventually Costello confesses to a belief in the frogs who populated the Dulgannon riverbed of her childhood and who live through a cycle of hibernation and reanimation, between life and death. The judges muse over her tale and ask: ‘You believe in life?’, to which Costello replies: ‘I believe in what does not bother to believe in me’ (218). Through Costello’s non-response, the chapter disrupts the assignation of both literal and figurative meaning therefore raising the question of literature, both for her (especially as an author) and for us as readers. The Jesus fictions build upon this ironic account of belief by exposing an afterworld in which language problems are very much apparent and, consequently, a sense of unredeemable

---

real’, Simón says to Senora Otxoa in *Childhood*, ‘You say we are not his real mother and his real father. What exactly do you mean by real? Surely there is such a thing as overvaluing the biological’ (207).

<sup>23</sup> The Nobel lecture, ‘He and His Man’, further stages allegory by reversing the roles of creator and creature through a story about a fictional Daniel Defoe being written into existence by the returned castaway Robinson Crusoe (the ‘He’ in the story). The lecture ironises the historical Defoe’s aptitude for creating narrators that were mistaken for real or actually *living* people. Whereas ‘his man’, the literal-minded Defoe, ‘can see no allegory for the life of him’ (19), and tours England constructing life-like narratives, he – Crusoe – relies on a quasi-mystical account of poetic invention: ‘*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’ (20).

finitude means that man's fallen state can be read neither figuratively (as the possibility of grace) nor as merely literal (in the sense of being calculable or rational).

The estranged allegorical mode of the Jesus fictions is exemplified by the relation between the flat narrating voice and the affectless narrative world. Following Coetzee's other later works, the narrative voice is in the third-person present tense and is focalised through a central character (in *Childhood* this is Simón). Lacking in ornament and descriptive detail, the voice maintains an ironic and affectless distance to the action. This is correlate to the affectless and chaste world of Novilla into which Simón and David arrive together directly from a camp where, for six weeks, they have been instructed in the common tongue of Spanish and assigned their new names.<sup>24</sup> The land in which they are now citizens resembles a socialist utopia. The buses are free, they are given lodgings and a settlement allowance, and Simón is assigned work as a stevedore at the docks. Having been washed clean of their former lives, Simón takes on the role of David's *padrino*, his guardian, until his real mother can be found (the driving force of the plot). This new world, however, is peculiarly lacking in desire; as Simón declares, Novilla is 'bloodless [...] No one swears or gets angry. No one gets drunk' (*Childhood*, 30). Rather than a positive utopia, then, Novilla seems to rather signal the etymological sense of utopia as a non-place.

When Simón seeks to satiate his thirst for a more passionate existence by attending a course on philosophy at the Institute, he discovers little more than a banal Platonic discourse about 'what it is that makes all tables tables, all chairs chairs' (120). He later tells a fellow stevedore that what he wants instead is the 'kind of philosophy that changes one's life' (238). This subtle hint to Rainer Maria Rilke's *Archaic Torso of Apollo* (1918), and the line 'you must change your life [du muss dein leben andern]'<sup>25</sup> (Rilke, 83), foreshadows the romantic and 'late romantic' (*Doubling*, 208) allusions in *Schooldays*, notably to the idealist framework of Heinrich von Kleist's 1803 *Über das Marionettentheater* and, in particular, to the notion of grace.<sup>26</sup> As in the later novel, the philosophical and literary allusions seem to bathe the literal narrative world in an ironic light that hints at a realm beyond mere appearances. Indeed, through the conjunction of the affectless irony

---

<sup>24</sup> Jean-Michel Rabaté is another commentator to note how the contrast between the affectlessness of the narrative world and the messianic framework generates irony, or what he terms a 'textual Uncanny' (*The Pathos of Distance*, 176).

<sup>25</sup> The Rilke allusion appears explicitly in *Disgrace* in Lurie's free indirect narration (209)

<sup>26</sup> 'Late romantic' is a term Coetzee uses to describe Robert Musil. Musil's *The Confusions of Young Törless* (1906) is a notable intertext for *The Schooldays of Jesus*. Musil's novel is about a troubled boy with an interest in, as Coetzee tells us in an essay, 'irrational numbers, numbers that evade representation in terms of whole numbers' (*Inner Workings* 37).

established through the relation between the narrative voice and narrative world, and the novels' allusive religious register, the novels disclose the impossibility of an affectless or Platonic reasoning.

The principal figure for an alternative or affected or *passionate* reasoning, especially in the second book, is the grace-like David.<sup>27</sup> This is dramatised especially in the *Schooldays* as David enrolls at the Academy of Dance, a heterodox educational establishment in Estrella (where the young family have fled after David's expulsion from school in Novilla). The Academy, run by Senor Juan Sebastián Arroyo (a translation into Spanish of Johann Sebastian Bach) and his angelic wife, Ana Magdalena, is suited to David's divine nature. However, by staging an irrational or passionate logic of the heart – in Pascal's sense – the novel dramatises the inherent riskiness or danger of a divine or Edenic speech. This is epitomised the Dostoevskyan character of Dmitri in *Schooldays*, the enigmatic security guard at the museum next to the Academy who usurps Simón as the principal figure of passionate intensity in the second novel and sacrificially murders Ana Magdalena in a '*crime passionel*' (144). As he declares: 'When it comes to life's great choices, I follow my heart. Why? Because the heart is always right and the head is always wrong' (119).<sup>28</sup> Through a lexicon of 'grace', the 'soul' and the 'heart', *Schooldays* establishes a literary thinking between reason and religion that exceeds a mere affectless reasoning or truth to fact yet holds back from a post-secular ethics that, by secularising a sense of the sacredness of life risks secularising a logic of sacrifice along with it.<sup>29</sup>

The displacement of an alternative logic of the heart, and of a competition between two modes of reasoning, onto the very allegorical operation of the text itself can be traced through David's vexed relation to the symbolic practices of naming and numbering. In *Childhood*, we are told by his tutor, Senor Leon, that David suffers from 'a specific deficit linked to symbolic activities' (*Childhood*, 205), and it is through the novel's thematizing of the link between counting and providing an account that a larger question emerges: that

---

<sup>27</sup> Rather like John's specialness in *Boyhood* – 'The boy is special, Aunt Annie told his mother, and his mother in turn told him. But what kind of special? No one ever says' (165) – David's indeterminate messianicity portends an otherness at the very heart of the self and that functions as a synecdoche of the allegorical ambiguity of this uncanny narrative world.

<sup>28</sup> Dmitri's confession thus encapsulates the juxtaposition first set out in the confession essay, between 'the voice of reason [...] saved from error by another voice speaking from the heart' (*Doubling*, 261).

<sup>29</sup> Walter Benjamin traces such a secularisation of sacredness in the liberal 'doctrine of the sanctity of life' which, he outlines, is precisely exemplified by its complicity with 'the revolutionary killing of the oppressor' ('Critique of Violence', 250-251).

of abstraction.<sup>30</sup> The question of abstraction occurs across Coetzee's works, notably in the form of the danger that partakes of the reasoning imagination as it seeks to separate word from world and thereby sacrifice the living (this can be traced from the mythography of *Dusklands* to the tautology of reason in *Elizabeth Costello*).<sup>31</sup> Following the earlier works, however, the threat of abstraction is not simply presented as such but made integral to the reading experience. Accordingly, the opposition between grace and cynicism that structures David's education is inseparable from the status of the works as *literary* works.<sup>32</sup>

Recalling the infinite regression of Watt's permutations discussed in Coetzee's thesis, David's tendency to reject the implied tautologous nature of secular reason results in a similar privation to Watt's nominalist consciousness. Indeed, David's state of grace emerges as a private language in a world wholly absent of absolution.<sup>33</sup> Towards the middle of *Childhood* Simón quizzes David and discovers the boy is completely unable to understand the principle of counting, that 889 is bigger than 888, and instead receives in defiance the reply: 'How do you know? You have never *been* there' (150). This incapacity to think in terms of sequence is paralleled by the inability to think in terms of generality regarding language (the scene in *Childhood* where David fails to comprehend arithmetic comes shortly before Simón starts to teach David to read using a children's illustrated version of *Don Quixote*, a key intertext in both novels). As Simón tells David after he expresses a desire to speak his own, private language: 'There is no such thing as one's own language [...] Language has to mean something to me as well as to you, otherwise it doesn't count as language' (*Childhood*, 186). The idea that 'language is always the language of the other' (*Here and Now*, 65-67) – as Coetzee writes to Auster – is inimical to the

---

<sup>30</sup> My privileging of the notion of abstraction is reinforced by Coetzee's comments in a review that 'there are a priori grounds for thinking poetry and mathematics together, as two rarefied forms of symbolic activity' ('Review of *Strange Attractors*, 944-6).

<sup>31</sup> As JC writes in *Diary of a Bad Year*: 'I have never been easy with abstractions or good at abstract thought' (203). He then goes on to discuss the relation between ethics and quantification: 'moral theory has never quite known what to do with quantity, with numbers. Is killing two people worse than killing one person, for example?' (204).

<sup>32</sup> In a letter to Auster, regarding the 2008 financial crash, Coetzee hints at similar privation to the endlessness of secular confession at the heart of supposedly rational forms of sense: '[W]hat exactly was it, signified by the new lower numbers, that made us poorer? The answer is: another set of numbers [...] Where does this regression in sets of signifiers end? Where is the thing itself they signify: the plague of locusts or the foreign invasion?' (*Here and Now*, 19).

<sup>33</sup> The same duplicity of idealism and scepticism, in which reason appears to have ironically usurped the unfallen or private language of the Gods, is at work in JC's discussion of mathematics in *Diary of a Bad Year*: 'The mathematics we have invented (in some accounts) or discovered (in others) [...] may equally well be a private language – private to human beings with human brains – in which we doodle on the walls of our cave' (96).<sup>33</sup> The allusion to Plato's Cave again makes palpable how such abstract questions intersect with fundamental notions of life; with the relation between representation and reality, word and world.

fiercely individualistic young child, and it is indeed David's precocious idealism that signals him as divine-like or unfallen and constitutes his hold over the other characters, as Arroyo puts it: "The word I use for him is *integral* [...] Nothing can be taken away from him. Nothing can be added" (*Schooldays*, 199). Like David's inability to understand sequence and generality, the reader is left similarly unable, like Beckett's Watt, to adopt an external frame of reference – an empirical or causal ground that would assure at least a factual sense of truth – that would facilitate one's mastery over life (in either narrative or ontological terms).

By overlapping the thematic problem of abstraction with the texts' meaning, both Jesus novels invite a reading sensitive to a literary thinking that promises neither an idealist solution to the production of textual ambiguity, nor simply withdraws into the bad infinity of postmodern allegory. This literary thinking can be brought into sharper relief by turning to how the contest envisaged between two modes of infinity, in *Childhood*, recalls a 17th Century debate between Blaise Pascal and René Descartes. Pascal, contrary to Descartes' method of rational scepticism, posits the heart as the center of the self; a center that we cannot know according to the criteria of certainty applied in the formulation of the self-intuitive cogito. Using reason to demonstrate that reason cannot ultimately know itself, Pascal appeals to a concept of infinity to outline his famous doctrine of "The Wager": "Our soul is cast into the body where it finds number, time, dimensions", however, this unity when 'added to infinity does not increase it at all' since 'the finite is annihilated in the presence of the infinite and becomes pure nothingness. So it is with our mind before God' (Pascal, 121). The heart, accordingly, is privileged with a different kind of reasoning to the dwindled capacities of the 'mind before God': 'The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing' (127). David's idealist sense of number similarly appeals to a sense positive, almost God-like, infinity. Consequently, however, David cannot comprehend the necessarily sequential nature of number since such an all-encompassing notion of infinity fails to explain the 'gaps' (*Childhood*, 176) between numbers and thus the relation of one number to another (in terms of addition or subtraction). How can one add or subtract from a perfect whole, from a sense of each number as immaculate and indivisible? Simón's colleague, Eugenio, tells him to reassure the child: "There are good infinities and bad infinities [...] A bad infinity is like finding yourself [...] in a life that is only a prelude to another life which is only a prelude, et cetera. But the numbers aren't like that. The numbers constitute a good infinity" (*Childhood* 250). The interesting analogy to life recalls the essay on autobiography where the notion of 'bad infinity' demarcates

the endless regression of self-consciousness: ‘the shamelessness of the confession is a further motive for shame, and so on to infinity’ (*Doubling*, 290). The good infinity of number, however, as Eugenio tell us, can ‘fill all the spaces in the universe’ (*Childhood*, 250). This switch to a spatial register underscores the sense of temporality implicit in the notion of a bad infinity. As opposed to a totalizing and plastic relation between the parts and the whole – where every number is both itself and equivalent to every other – a bad infinity discloses a temporality whereby to be (oneself) is also to *not* be oneself, or rather, to be subject to a temporal alterity that ties possibility to impossibility, life to death.

This spatial emphasis, however, is aligned with a romantic and vitalist aesthetic that is seen to both structure David’s education and reflect his immortal or divine status. This is compounded through the increasing allusions to Rilke and Kleist in *Schooldays*. Accordingly, an account of vital or divine life is dissimulated through the transcendental mathematics that are explicitly opposed to a calculative thinking that is epitomised by the character of Javier Moreno (a visiting scholar who appears near the end of *Schooldays*). Contrary to Moreno, who believes in a fundamental correspondence between the world and its ‘metra’ (242), the Academy of Dance teaches its students, through the lessons of Ana Magdalena, an alternative embodied thinking that Arroyo terms ‘music-dance’: ‘music and dance together, music-dance, is its own way of apprehending the universe, the human way but also the animal way’ (243). For Ana Magdalena, ‘the true numbers, are eternal and indivisible and uncountable’ (244).<sup>34</sup>

However, a palpable textual irony constantly undercuts the push towards transcendence. Ana Magdalena’s account of David’s relation to a prelapsarian truth is a prime example:

The child [...] still bears deep impresses of a former life, shadow recollections which he lacks words to express. He lacks words because, along with the world we have lost, we have lost a language fit to evoke it. All that is left of that primal language is a handful of words, what I call transcendental words, among which the names of the numbers, *uno, dos, tres*, are foremost. (67-68)

The embedded Spanish ‘*uno, dos, tres*’, which interrupts the flow of English language dialogue, deeply ironises the idealist language the words are purported to intimate. Indeed,

---

<sup>34</sup> Ana Magdalena’s numbers recall Coetzee’s discussion of Newton and the desire to perfect a suitably neutral language in which one could ‘trans[late] the truths of pure mathematics’ (*Doubling*, 193-194). In the preceding interview in *Doubling the Point* Coetzee revealingly discusses a certain overlap between idealism and scepticism: ‘In certain particularly dubious moods I wonder whether we know at all how the universe ‘really’ behaves: is our [...] representation of what happens in the universe perhaps not of the same order of privacy as our mathematics? Is this idealism? Probably. It is certainly scepticism’ (146).



we learn from this episode, and other intrusions of foreign languages (including German) throughout both fictions, that all the direct speech is in fact indirect since the narrative transposes the Spanish the characters are speaking into the English of the novels. By dramatizing or staging the ineluctability of linguistic embeddedness the novels not only achieve a parody of primal languages but, also, destabilise the fixity of what it means to be embedded. This is also replicated at the allegorical level insofar as the texts embed the idea of embodiment, the apotheosis of which is the Christian doctrine of Incarnation, only to suspend the arrival of any possible Messiah.

Coetzee's commentary on Rilke helps to elucidate this connection between epistemological or linguistic uncertainty and life or the question of different modes of being. On the one hand, writing on Rilke and translation Coetzee argues: '[A] human language is not a neutral code like a computer language. To be "English" is to be embedded in the English language and the English language's way of seeing the world' (*Stranger Shores*, 82). The Derridean (or Beckettian) insight that language is always a language of the other does not, however, simply prohibit self-expression or the possibility of a private truth but also yields the possibility of a way of being that is precisely irreducible to any such mastery (including the mastery presupposed by the complicit sovereignties of reason and religion). Thus, on the other hand, Rilke is seen as developing a post-romantic 'theory of essential gestures, archetypal movements of the body-soul' (78) that marks the 'effect of a speaker pushing at the *limits of language*, striving to find his own meaning' (*Stranger Shores*, 85). The hyphenated conjunction – 'body-soul' – recalls Arroyo's 'music-dance' in *Schooldays*; a vital commingling of the material and spiritual that, considering the textual irony and embeddedness of the works, attests not to a prelapsarian or divine way of being but rather to the infinite and unmasterable nature of finite or bodily life itself.

A similar undermining of divine or God-like being is thematised in *Elizabeth Costello*. In the chapter 'Eros', Costello speculates about the possibility of apprehending a god's mode of being. She discovers, however, that it is not the Gods who are unknowable but rather us: 'In marking us down for death, the gods gave us an advantage over them. Of the two, gods and mortals, it is we who live the more urgently' (189). Death is what determines the human mode of being as such, then, but only insofar as the human is seen to be constitutively indeterminate. This slippage between modes of being is staged in *Schooldays* in the depiction of Ana Magdalena who strikes Simón, when meets her for the first time

on a nudist beach, as incomparably alien: ‘He is not her equal: of that he is sure [...] he could spend hours gazing at her, rapt in admiration at the perfection she represents of a certain kind of creaturely form’ (93). This attraction is not sexual, or so he tells Inés. Instead, Ana Magdalena seems to represent an embodied form of angelic divinity, a feature exacerbated by the Edenic setting of the nudist beach: ‘Animals are not naked, they are simply themselves’ (100) Simón says. Like David, Ana Magdalena too seems gifted with a grace that sets her apart from the arbitrariness of the physical world. However, again this grace is ultimately indeterminable; the text refuses to anchor her ‘creaturely form’ in terms of either wholly allegorical or literal truth. Later, after her murder at the hands of Dmitri, she is described as ‘stranger than stranger, inhuman’ (139). This ambiguity is both mirrored and constructed by the production of a textual irony; the nudist beach is both Edenic and bathetic, a comic parody of biblical proportions. Rather than signaling a divine transcendence, then, Ana Magdalena’s ‘graceful’ (95) mode of being will be linked ineluctably to death; to an infinitising of the finite realm of embodied life that is constitutive of an ineluctable exposure to the possibility of suffering, to what cannot be calculated in advance.

That grace marks a logic of bad infinity, rather than an idealist sense of good infinity, can be elucidated in reference to both the key concept of passion in *Schooldays* (explored below) and to the allusions to Kleist’s *Über das Marionettentheater*. Building upon Kleist’s text, Coetzee’s *Summertime* construes a modality of life through its similar accounts of the John’s aesthetic sensibilities: ‘He saw Africa through a romantic haze. He thought of Africans as embodied, in a way that had been lost long ago in Europe [...] He had a whole philosophy of the body, of music and dance’ (231). Such a philosophy of music and dance is crystallised by the Academy of Dance in *Schooldays*, and it is the notion of grace that occurs to Simón upon watching David’s dance at the Metros lecture:

From some buried memory the words *pillar of grace* emerge, surprising him, for the image he holds to, from the football field, is of the boy as a compact bundle of energy. But now, on the stage of the Institute, Ana Magdalena’s legacy reveals itself. As if the earth has lost its downward power, the boy seems to shed all bodily weight, to become pure light. (246).

The rhetorical force of this passage derives from the erection of borders that are hitherto unnoticed; those between an ephemeral or physical world of ‘energy’ and another rapturous world of ‘pure light’. In an allusion to Kleist in an earlier scene at the Nudist beach, Arroyo explicitly figures such a juxtaposition through a distinction between mere beauty and grace:

The dance is not a matter of beauty. If I wanted to create beautiful figures of movement I would employ marionettes, not children. Marionettes can float and glide as human beings cannot. They can trace patterns of great complexity in the air. But they cannot dance. They have no soul. It is the soul that brings grace to the dance. (97).<sup>35</sup>

This same coalescence of intention and action is described in Kleist's *Marionettentheater*, by the character Herr C. Herr C proffers a conception of grace as a remedy to the abstraction of human consciousness: where grace is concerned, so the narrator reports, 'it would be quite impossible for a human body even to equal the marionette. In dance, he said, only a god was a match for matter [...] It seemed, he replied, taking a pinch of snuff, that I had not read the third chapter of Genesis' (Kleist, 414). For Herr C, in Kleist's short tale, it is the puppets who are capable of such grace because they are not split by a consciousness that names them 'I', and opposes this 'I' to the world outside the subject: '[W]hen consciousness has, as we might say, passed through an infinity, grace will return; so that grace will be most purely present in the human frame that has either no consciousness or an infinite amount of it, which is to say either in a marionette or in a god' (416).<sup>36</sup>

The possibility of 'passing through infinity' is, however, subtly ironised. The contrast between the inanimate and prosaic puppets, and the sublime and infinite realm of grace, dissimulates an irreducible bathos. By equating the purity of God with that of a jointed puppet, Herr C is blind to the obvious; total agency, where every decision is already decided, is the same as none at all. Further irony is created, as in Coetzee's Jesus fictions, at the diegetic level of the storytelling. The narrator recalls this conversation as happening 'one evening' (411), and of his seeing Herr C at the puppet theatre as a surprise. The juxtaposition of chance and fate, the quotidian and the sublime, establishes an irony that undermines the idealism that Kleist's parable is purportedly about. A former lover in *Summertime*, Adriana, similarly describes to John's biographer how '[d]ance is incarnation [...] it is the body itself that leads, the body with its soul, its body-soul' (199). In repeating

---

<sup>35</sup> Another later reference to marionettes is made in Chapter 16 when the three sisters, part-time patrons of David's education, gift him a set of the puppets in a "battered plywood box" (186). Alma, who gifts him the present, receives in return a whispered message from the boy which is unreported, emphasising the restricted narration.

<sup>36</sup> Kleist's appearance elsewhere in Coetzee's writings reveals an abiding interest in the writer and the idea of grace. In *Summertime*, the third instalment of Coetzee's fictionalised autobiographical trilogy, 'John' is described by Adriana as 'without grace' (172) and as a man 'made of wood' (200). In the archival notebooks for *Foe* (1986) Coetzee draws on Kleist as a source of inspiration to help devise a form of pure or divine expression (via dance) for the mute Friday, the figure of alterity in the work. In an entry dated 17 January 1985, Coetzee writes to himself: 'See Kleist, "Puppet Theatre".' (HRC, MS Coetzee Papers, Box 33, Folder 6).

the formulation ‘body-soul’, elsewhere applied by Coetzee to Rilke, Adriana follows Arroyo by flipping Kleist’s position on its head: ‘That is why the wooden puppet cannot dance. The wood has no soul’ (*Summertime*, 199). In light of the death of the author in *Summertime*, however, the sublimation of bodily knowledge is palpably offset by the self-reflexivity of the metafictional framework. Just as the sublimation of consciousness once ‘passed through an infinity’ ironically relies upon the material form of a wooden puppet, so to it would appear does the sublimation of bodily life rely upon an intellectual or self-conscious framework of knowledge. Like *Disgrace*, then, the Jesus novels deploy a theological lexicon equivocally and, by doing so, grace - rather than pointing to a source of extra-textual meaning - instead more closely names the internal operation of a literary thinking whose truth is neither simply literal nor metaphoric.

Rather than following a romantic or late romantic idealism, Coetzee’s literary thinking comes closer to a notion of romantic irony outlined by Simon Critchley, following Blanchot, as the ‘non-romantic essence of romanticism’ (*Very Little...Almost Nothing*, 135). That is, irony thereby marks a romanticism defined by incompleteness and finitude that is exemplified by the fragmentary forms of the Jena romantics.<sup>37</sup> As opposed to the synthetic capacity of wit, irony establishes irreconcilable antagonisms, ‘between the absolute and the relative’ (133), that proliferate a form of negative infinity.<sup>38</sup> This generates a ‘double bind’ that is constitutive ‘of the human condition [...] the recognition of the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of complete communication’ (134). For Schlegel, Critchley delineates, this marks ‘the *religiosity* of being human’ (134). These structural antinomies – between the absolute and the relative, religion and reason, embodiment and disembodiment – similarly inform both Jesus fictions and their propagation of a conceptual dissonance at the level of literary meaning or truth that encapsulates their presentation of life. Neither infinite nor finite, sacred nor profane, life corresponds to an infinitising of the very finite and material ground of its own embeddedness.

---

<sup>37</sup> Blanchot argues that romanticism springs from ‘the necessity of contradiction’ (‘The Athenaeum’, 352); from the ironic situation that is derived from the belief that ‘to speak poetically is to make possible a non-transitive speech’ (357). This contradictory impulse, Blanchot explains – whereby a work of literature is defined as such according to its lack of work, its incompleteness – is why the Romantics privileged the novel form and, especially, *Don Quixote* (a key intertext in the Jesus novels).

<sup>38</sup> The notion of negative infinity (*schlechte Unendliche*) is at the heart of Hegel’s critique of Romantic Irony. For Hegel, the romantics – by privileging the boundlessness of artistic inspiration – infinitely evade the external world as the arena of the actualization of spirit (see *The Science of Logic* where Hegel instead proffers a sense of ‘true infinity’ whose ‘image becomes the *circle*, the line that has reached itself, closed and wholly present, without *beginning* and *end*’, 119).

Again, Rilke helps explicate the relation between irony and the notion of a literary thinking and the question of forms of life. The romantic impulse thematised in Kleist's tale also structures Rilke's *Duino Elegies*. In the 'Eighth Elegy' this sense of purity or grace is not that of the puppet, however, but nature or the way of being simply called – like Ana Magdalena – *die Kreatur*. 'With all its eyes the natural world [die Kreatur] looks far into the Open' (Rilke, 165). The 'Open' marks a borderless commingling of subject and objects, a prelapsarian mode of being prior to the Fall. The task of Rilke's work is, as Coetzee describes, 'paradoxical': 'to find words that will take us back to before words and allow us to glimpse the world as seen by creatures who do not have words, or, if that glimpse is barred to us, then to allow us the sad experience of standing at the rim of an unknowable mode of being' (*Stranger Shores*, 84). That such a mode of being, marked by a divine or Godlike positive infinity, is not only inaccessible but also potentially threatening is attested by the radical indeterminacy of the figure of the Angel: 'Ein jeder Engel ist schrecklich [Every angel is terrible]' (Rilke, 130), writes Rilke in the First Elegy. This beauty of the Angel is terrifying since it marks the human as inherently mortal and finite and thereby subject to loss and to death. However, as in Costello's account of the Gods, the apprehension of beauty is ever the more affecting because we are human and finite *not* God-like (it is the possibility of loss, after all, that renders even the most ecstatic elements of the poem elegiac).

By way of Rilke it becomes possible to account for the poetics of exposure and of creaturely life, comparable to the liminal state of the inhuman in Beckett, that marks Coetzee's literary thinking. Rather than a sublimation of bodily or affective life, Coetzee's secularisation of a theological lexicon of angels, souls, and grace attests to the negative infinity of life itself; to a sense of material being that is constitutively and unconditionally exposed to death. Such a conception of life demarcates both the possibility of transcending the self-sufficient and sovereign discourses of rationality but also the vulnerability or inherently precarious nature of embedded life. The angelic figure of Ana Magdalena signals how our embeddedness is unlimited, and her death in *Schooldays* marks the pathos of a finitude that exceeds the totalising logic of both onto-biology and onto-theology – in Thacker's terms – or of any positive ontology of life; that is, any account, or *counting*, of life as that which inevitably risks sacrifice, the exclusion of what Derrida calls 'other others'.

This necessarily incomplete nature of any reckoning of life is played out through the census – described by Arroyo as an 'orgy of measurement' (243) – at the end of *Schooldays*,

where David once again eludes the state officials. As Diego, Inés' brother, asks: 'With so many millions of souls to count [...] what does it matter if they miss one?' (*Schooldays*, 255). The thematisation of the census bridges the domains of ontology and ethics, signalling a crucial difference between the positive ontology of an infinite or incalculable order of life and of life itself *as* incalculable. This recalls Dostoevsky's expecting of the unexpected in *The Master of Petersburg*. By opening himself to a different order of being, Dostoevsky is condemned help to 'every beggar' no matter how egregious: 'Yes, that is what Pascal would say: bet on everyone, every beggar, every mangy dog; only thus will you be sure that the One, the true son, the thief in the night, will not slip through the net' (84). The terrifying corollary to this hyperbolic or absolute responsibility (a corollary played out in ceding to the otherness or the possession that comes with his writing) is then immediately outlined in a biblical allusion: 'And Herod would agree: make sure – slay all the children without exception' (84).

Rather than propagating a sense of grace as the ground for an ethics of alterity, the post-secular imagination of the late fictions appeals not to a quasi-religious or Levinasian transcendence but rather to an infinity of responsibility which is correlate to a vision of life in which no census – or to paraphrase Coetzee's commentary on autobiography – no account of the facts will ever tell the truth. Just as the titular Jesus is poised between the singularity of a God and the generic sense of the name (popular in Spanish), David's absence from the census attests not to an infinite realm beyond calculation so much as to the infinite realm *of* calculation, a distinction that resonates through the ambiguity of the final lines of Rilke's ninth elegy: 'Existence beyond number, wells up in my heart [Überzähliges Dasein, entspringt mir im Herzen]' (172; my translation). Poised at the end between the incalculable sense of life (as divine), and the incalculability of life (as one child just as special, or normal, as any other), the novels inscribe life at the juncture between ethics and politics. Much like Lurie's case for the rights of desire, a true openness to the unexpected also entails the threat of violence.<sup>39</sup> Accordingly, the deconstruction of the human mode of being, and the proliferation of alternative forms of life, cannot be tied *in-itself* to a purely ethical sense of alterity or otherness. Exemplified by Dmitri's *coup de grace*, visited upon Ana Magdalena, the novels embrace a relation between life form and literary truth in which passion, or affective forms of reasoning, do not in themselves

---

<sup>39</sup> This openness is redoubled in our reading, as can be observed by the way Dmitri's '*crime passionnel*' recalls Lurie's lecture on Byron's 'Lara', in *Disgrace*, and the task of sympathetically identifying with Lucifer's 'mad heart' (33). There is, however, as Lurie knows, 'a limit to sympathy' (33).

constitute an ethical truth but rather relate truth to feeling by revealing the necessarily spatio-temporal embeddedness of thought.<sup>40</sup>

The fallacy of a Platonic or affectless reasoning does not, therefore, license a post-secular ethics of the heart, as David's childlike defence of Dmitri attests: 'Dmitri says he couldn't help himself. He says passion made him kill Ana Magdalena' (237). It is this sense of being open to an exterior force or agency that defines the discourse of passion in *Schooldays*. Passion, rather than emotion or feeling, both informs the novel's heart-speech and recalls the morally ambiguous non-response of Lurie before the court in *Disgrace*, as Dmitri's confession substantiates: 'The fault is not in my head, it's in my soul! I tell them, but of course they ignore me' (221); 'The law takes no reckoning of the state of a man's soul. All it does is make up an equation, fit a sentence to a crime [...] Some crimes are not measurable! They are off the scale!' (248). To be open to contingency and *passion* – which signifies suffering in the Christian sense – is thus to be open to both a chance and a threat; the chance of overcoming the paradigm of sacrifice that relates reason to religion, as each seek to master the present in the name of either the future or the life to come, but also the threat of one's own mortal finitude.<sup>41</sup>

Coetzee's heart-speech, as derived from the philosophical turn of the confession essay and later given voice by the creatures that populate the later works, thus corresponds to a truth of life as ineluctability precarious, constitutively open to death. Such a truth invites us to consider how the heart is not necessarily reasonless and, therefore, how there is hope for a reason that will not necessarily be heartless. Such a hope is pinned to a literary thinking that, in the absence of Christ as the ultimate scapegoat who ends a religion of scapegoating and sacrifice, requires us as readers to traverse the gaps for ourselves. Eventually Simón will embrace this openness to passion that he credits Dmitri for teaching him. *Schooldays* closes with him finally ready to embrace a finitude beyond mastery: 'Arms extended, eyes closed, he shuffles in a slow circle. Over the horizon the first star begins to rise' (260). At the end of *Diary of a Bad Year*, the experience of such a

---

<sup>40</sup> In *Disgrace* the phrase 'coup de grace' (95) is used to refer to the killing of dogs, and thereby makes explicit the relation of grace to the act of giving or offering that also underpins sacrifice.

<sup>41</sup> 'Passion' derives from the Latin the verb *patior*, meaning to 'to suffer, endure, resign oneself' and, as Giulia Sissa suggests, is one of the possible 'translations of the Greek *pathos*' ('Passion', 745). The original meaning of *pathos*, to be exposed to what befalls us, 'to receive an impression or sensation, to undergo treatment' (745), emphasises the passive rather than active dimension of the subject of feeling, and thus our ineluctable and finite embeddedness in a world exterior to our designs. By contrast, the word 'emotion' only appears once in *Schooldays*, in a blurb: 'In this mesmerising allegorical tale, Coetzee deftly grapples with the big questions of growing up, of what it means to be a parent, the constant battle between intellect and emotion, and how we choose to live our lives'.

passion in a world without redemption is attributed to the voice of Ivan. Although for JC it is Jesus who breaks ‘the cycle of revenge and reprisal’, and thereby makes the greatest contribution to ‘political ethics’ (224), it is the voice of the Ivan in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* who is the more compelling. It is to this standard, JC suggests, that any ‘serious novelist must toil’ (227) and, we might add, any serious reader also. By forgoing the sovereignty of both reason and religion, and thereby opening onto the inevitable riskiness of unredeemed or passionate life, one glimpses beyond the novel’s traditional forms of life to the possibility of a literary thinking that, by refusing any ultimate reading, opens onto an experience of a passion without sacrifice or martyrdom.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> As Nancy Armstrong in a 2014 essay entitled ‘The Affective Turn in Contemporary Fiction’: ‘By forcing us to feel beyond the present limits of personhood, for all we know, contemporary novels may be developing a generation of readers with an emotional repertoire more attuned to the demands of our time’ (464).



## Conclusion: From Census to Censor:

'But when the words stop, we have hope neither for a realized infinity nor for the assurance of something finished; led toward the limitless, we have renounced limits, and finally we must renounce the unlimited as well' — Blanchot, 'Kafka and Literature', 24.

Throughout this thesis I have framed the question of life after Beckett through a sense of life as a multi-sited context of meaning (rather than a single concept) in Coetzee's works. Although I have drawn upon various formulations of life (such as Beckett's account of the inhuman) – as well as contemporary theorists of life (including Thacker, Agamben, Hägglund and Santner) – an overriding concern has been that of the relation between literature and life. I have argued that by attending to the specifically literary aspects of Coetzee's works one grasps an embedded thinking of life across the oeuvre that demarcates a continuity often downplayed in the criticism. The self-reflexivity that marks Coetzee's works, especially with regard to the dynamic of writerly authority (a key theme in Coetzee's commentaries), reflects this process; by staging their own formal properties (generic, linguistic, cultural) they make explicit what is normally implicit with regard to the literary work of art: the embedded site of the reader/writer as that which subjects the literary form in question to the time of the living present through which meaning and truth emerge.

By addressing life in relation to *how* a literary work produces meaning, I have sought to develop a critical framework that extends beyond the methods of symptomatic or allegorical reading and the attendant extracting of propositional or *deep* knowledge. As the site of multiple overlapping interests (both ethical and ontological), however, life also discloses a certain complicity between the critical and creative that defines my account of literary thinking, attesting therefore to the ineluctability of an embeddedness that situates even the most literary aspects of a work within the social world. The link between literary embeddedness and the embeddedness of life – that the reading present is also the material present – hence also renounces any privileging of a text's surface. Accordingly, if a literary work has an ethico-political import *as* literary, then this binary opposition of surface and depth breaks down precisely when one cedes to the observation that, in both Beckett's and Coetzee's works, ways of knowing are intractably attuned to ways of feeling and ways of being. It is hoped that such an account of literary thinking will afford a new approach to the apprehension of the ethico-political effects of literary works, whilst also opening

up an avenue for future research into the legacies of modernist writing in contemporary literature.

My account of the relation between literature and life builds upon Attridge's account of the singularity of literature, notably the emphasis on the affective, experiential, and phenomenological dimensions of literary meaning. As Attridge argues in a recent essay: 'The specificity of literary works lies in the fact that they give us not information, moral exempla, or philosophical truths, but *experiences*, and experiences which, by taking us into new territory of meaning and feeling, are capable of changing us' ('A Yes Without a No', 100-101). Clarkson similarly follows Attridge by privileging a text's performative rather than constative dimension, arguing for a sense of the literary work as an experience rather than as a 'static reality' (*Countervoices*, 58). It is thus the living aspects of the literary text which make the work irreducible to a propositional knowledge and, thereby, – in my account – effect a form of thinking suited to the irreducibility of life. My rendering of the relation between life and literature, however, seeks to subtly modify the ethical claims both critics attach to the experiential dimension of reading. By emphasising the sense of the literary work as both an event and an *act* (a form of thinking), it is possible to observe how the performative aspects of a work cannot be simply extracted from the stated themes or ideas.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, the temporal-affective dynamic of the literary work, in terms of reading *and* writing, relays how truth cannot simply be divorced from the activity of calculating or discriminating in (and with) the present.<sup>2</sup>

By reconceiving of the relation between literary responsivity and ethical responsibility in terms of both act and event we can begin to sketch the problem that derives from a privileging of the experiential or formal effects of a work in ethical terms. If ethics is defined in terms of experience, rather than as a codified form of response, then the works suggest that there is no such concept of uncontaminated or pure experience (at least not one that would support *meaning*) outside of reason. As such, the experiential (as a source of ethics) does not attest to a truth or value in itself, but to the impossibility of an affectless, sovereign, or – as with Beckett's critique of rationality – an extra-temporal reasoning. Indeed, the self-reflexive strategies of Coetzee's narrative embeddedness ceaselessly expose the prerational core of supposedly rational thinking. That the reasoning

---

<sup>1</sup> 'What *would* a literary aesthetics be', Clarkson asks, 'that did not take into account the themes, motifs, images – loosely, the content of the work?' (*Countervoices*, 70).

<sup>2</sup> In *The Work of Literature* (2015), Attridge modifies his earlier emphasis on the event-like or passive nature of the literary work by introducing the critical term 'act-event' (3).

imagination bears a relation to a religious logic of sacrifice – observed via the sovereign or supra-ethical injunction of the right to death that lies behind the supposedly rational discourse of rights – should not thereby license, but rather profoundly disturb, any appeal to a framework outside of reason.

What is at stake in thus according the experiential effects of a work of literature with a post-secular conception of ethics as grace, substantiated by Attridge through an appeal to Derrida's notion of the *'arrivant'*, is the displacement of the very possibility of a responsive or responsible reading; that is, a displacement of the possibility an active engagement in light of a work's constitutive ambiguity (it is, after all, the lack of meaning that necessitates an active reading or negotiation with the text, as Adorno argues of Kafka).<sup>3</sup> Translated most simply as 'the one who arrives' (*J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 103), for Attridge the notion of the *arrivant* signals grace as both as a mode of being (the one who arrives) and as a disposition or attunement (an openness to the unexpected). Accordingly, grace is seen to correspond to an ethics of responsibility whereby: 'We are already obligated to the other, we find ourselves responsible for it/him/her/them, and responsible in absolute way; it is not a matter of calculating a certain degree of responsibility and then acting upon it' (103). However, by qualifying that, 'classification into "good" and "bad" belongs to the system of accounting that the *arrivant* eludes and exceeds' (182), it is hard to see how this qualification can do anything other than undercut the argument for the fundamentally beneficent event of grace. By affirming this fundamentally Levinasian conceit one thereby risks foreclosing the possibility of responsibility as a mode of response, of actively choosing to act benevolently on behalf of another (human or animal).

Instead, by locating alterity or otherness at the heart of the finite and embedded self, and at the centre of the logic of self-sufficiency presupposed by the reasoning imagination, Coetzee's literary thinking associates the elusive possibility of other others with the intractable possibility of other readings. As such, Coetzee's literary thinking politicises ethics by making the task of responsibility an endless negotiation in the present.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Echoing Adorno's sentiment, that '[a]s long as the word has not been found, the reader must be held accountable' (*Notes on Kafka*, 246), Blanchot writes in 'Reading Kafka' that 'True reading remains impossible [...] that is why we understand it only by betraying it' (4, 11). It is this impossibility that, contrary to negating meaning and truth, in fact orients the works towards a truth and necessitates an ongoing engagement, as Blanchot writes in 'Kafka and Literature': '[P]erhaps let us understand why art can succeed where knowledge fails: because it is and is not true enough to become the way, and too unreal to change into an obstacle. Art is an *as if*. Everything happens as if we were in the presence of truth, but this presence is not one, that is why it does not forbid us to go forward' (18-19).

<sup>4</sup> As Häggglund argues, it is through an exposure to the constitutive temporal alterity of an undecidable future that creates the very possibility of action: '[F]ar from providing an ethical ground, the deconstructive

However, by highlighting the ineluctably embedded and material ground of life the works ethicise politics by raising the inevitability of sacrifice or what Coetzee simply calls the overwhelming and indisputable ‘fact of suffering in the world’ (*Doubling* 248).<sup>5</sup> Alterity, which is after all marked most distinctly and consistently by the presence of death, thus constitutes not an ethical modality *per se* but rather the possibility of ethics.<sup>6</sup> Following Judith Butler’s modification of Levinas’ ethics in *Precarious Life* (2004), the task is therefore one of apprehending the fundamental ‘precariousness of life’ (xviii) as constitutively threatened by violence and death, and therefore of thinking responsibility as not simply conditioned in advance but arising from the fact that ‘[w]e are at once acted upon and acting, and our “responsibility” lies in the juncture between the two [...] In a certain way, and paradoxically, our responsibility is heightened once we have been subjected to the violence of others’ (16). By pursuing the question of life after Beckett it has thus been possible to witness how Coetzee’s works refuse to elide the possibility of ethics with real or committed ethical action (indeed, this elision is what Coetzee’s texts seek to guard against; what spurs the scrupulous deployment of self-reflexive literary forms). Consequently, Coetzee’s oeuvre is less about unconditional responsibility than about the unconditionality of being amongst others, of existing in relation.

If ethics for Coetzee is inherently linked to a lived experience of truth, this is explicitly related to a what he calls a ‘way of life [...] what you call “the literary life” [...] that provides means for interrogation of our existence’ (‘An Exclusive Interview with J.M. Coetzee’). Rather than a regulative or prescriptive understanding of ethics as the ground of a relation, ethics arises as the interrogation of the very possibility of any such ground. This reaches a zenith in the heart-speech that arises from the confessional context that informs Coetzee’s later writing, including the recent Jesus fictions. Such a heart-speech embeds the self in the here and now and simultaneously makes that embeddedness

---

thinking of alterity thus politicises even the most elementary relation to the other’ (*Radical Atheism*, 187). As Derrida insists: ‘[T]o be responsible in ethics and politics implies that we try to program, to anticipate, to define laws and rules’ (‘Perhaps or Maybe’, 6). It is worth noting that there is evidence in Derrida’s protean writings that supports both Attridge’s and Hägglund’s readings. The scale of this philosophical debate, however – which concerns not just ethics but questions about the nature of desire and immortality –, far exceed the remit of this study.

<sup>5</sup> As Coetzee writes, if it is not possible to deny the authority of suffering then this is not ‘for ethical reasons [...] but for political reasons’ (*Doubling*, 248).

<sup>6</sup> A vivid example of the general repudiation of claims to absolute alterity or otherness (as a source of aesthetic or ethical inspiration) is provided by Coetzee in an interview with Peter Sacks, and notably in terms with a strong Beckettian inflection. Sacks asks Coetzee about the nature of the ‘unimaginable’, and hypothesises that such a force of alterity, a nothingness behind the veil of reality, is not simply a ‘mere absence’. Coetzee’s reply is as devastating to the discussion as the proposition it contains: ‘It might be a mere absence though, one has to entertain that devastating possibility too’ (‘J.M. Coetzee talks to Peter Sacks’).

ineluctably precarious, infinitely open to a world beyond calculation and of existence beyond number. Life, as the ground of ethics both as an encounter between living beings and as a discourse or system of value, is consequently restricted from emerging as a synonym for alterity or absolute otherness. Derived from Beckett's aesthetics of (dis)embodiment, Coetzee's own literary thinking of embeddedness prevents the transcendentalising impulse by dividing the present between the event of the other (beyond our control) and the act of the self.

The importance of the embedded present to Coetzee's interrogative literary thinking, and notably how such a sense of embeddedness yields an ethics of truth rather than one of otherness (as discussed in Chapter 5), can be traced to the short essay, contained in the research materials of Coetzee's archive, by Michel Foucault, entitled 'The Art of Telling the Truth' (1984).<sup>7</sup> Therein Foucault excavates two distinct strands of modern thought derived from Kant's 1784 essay 'Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment?'. On the one hand, Kant 'laid the foundations for that tradition of philosophy that poses the question of the conditions in which true knowledge is possible' (147). On the other hand, however, Kant also poses 'for the first time' (139) the question of the present, problematising the very ground of metaphysics as the pursuit of extra-temporal truth. This second critical tradition, Foucault writes, involves an 'ontology of the present, an ontology of ourselves' (148). This orientation towards the present marks what Coetzee's calls the 'writer's way of thinking' (*The Good Story*, 13), and Coetzee's exploration of the plight of post-Enlightenment consciousness is thus similarly premised on a critical ontology of ourselves and of the present and, therefore, is oriented towards a truth that – following Blanchot in my epigraph above – is both in excess of the limited bounds of reason *and* the unlimited domain of a religion or of a vitalist or romantic aesthetics.

Coetzee's appeal to the ethical dimension of truth thus arises not from a sense of otherness beyond reason but rather from the interrogative site of the present. As Coetzee writes: 'It is hard, perhaps impossible, to make a novel that is recognisably a novel out of the life of someone who is from beginning to end comfortably sustained by fictions. We make a novel only by exposing those fictions' (*The Good Story*, 191). This insistence on the exposure of illusory fictions *through* fiction makes of Coetzee's writings a fundamentally critical enterprise. The truth of Coetzee's literary thinking is thus always a matter, in

---

<sup>7</sup> Foucault's essay is contained in Coetzee's archived research materials (HRC, MS Coetzee Papers, Box 65, Folder 1).

Foucault's terms, of the present as the moment of crisis or critique (from the Greek verb *krinein*, meaning to judge or decide). This moment would also include the act of *censere*, the Latin root (meaning, as the OED states: 'to estimate, rate, assess, be of opinion') of both census and censor, and accordingly by refusing to reduce to a static or timeless origin their own embeddedness (both socio-historical and linguistic-cultural) the works implicitly tie responsibility to irresponsibility. As Coetzee argues in *Doubling the Point*: 'Stories are defined by their irresponsibility [...] The *feel* of writing fiction is one of freedom, of irresponsibility, or better, of responsibility toward something that has not yet emerged, that lies somewhere at the end of the road' (*Doubling*, 246).<sup>8</sup>

By heeding Coetzee's comments on the relation between responsibility and irresponsibility it is possible to link the inherent openness or riskiness of writing/reading to the notion of the non-response that is so often staged across the works (most notably in *Disgrace*). Such a modality of negative response or responsibility is best addressed by turning to the recurrent notion of censorship. The notion of censorship helps also to ground what has hitherto been discussed as a contest between ethics and politics in terms of democracy. From this perspective, what is at stake in Coetzee's writing on censorship in *Giving Offense* is a critique of democracy in the form intimated by JC in *Diary of a Bad Year*: 'Democracy does not allow for politics outside the democratic system. In this sense, democracy is totalitarian' (15). In *Giving Offense*, the risk of totalitarianism is seen to arise from a certain complicity between theology and politics: 'Apartheid belongs to the realm not of politics but of eschatology' (178). As addressed in the third and fourth chapters in the present study – notably through the postcolonial contexts that comprise both the production and reception of the early novels –, to circumvent the sacralisation of the political Coetzee elaborates a 'nonposition' (84) that seeks to prevail over an oppositional logic of rivalry.

This dynamic of rivalry is understood to structure the twin sovereignties of the paranoid censor and the heroic writer, both of whom are therefore obliged to respond or take a position. Coetzee thus witnesses this totalitarian obligation to respond, as that which undermines democracy, as key to the paradoxical reciprocity between the historical regimes of authorship and censorship. Accordingly, Coetzee traces how the censor's 'paranoia', which stems from a desire to control or negate the present as the site of

---

<sup>8</sup> Coetzee's account of irresponsibility recalls Blanchot's statement, in 'Kafka and Literature': 'To write is to engage oneself; but to write is also to disengage oneself, to commit oneself irresponsibly' (26).

criticism, stems from the writer's originary claim on the future. The perceived threat of the work of literature is thus derived from the institutionalisation of the literary author as able to 'cross all spatial and temporal boundaries', hence instilling the 'visions of fame and immortality' that establish 'the mystique of the author as we know it today' (41). This mastery over life, as the shutting down of the present as the site of interrogation, change, or revision, led the State to perceive in authors a credible rival to its own sovereign authority.<sup>9</sup>

In Coetzee's practice as a writer, the subversion of the mastery of the author is thus wedded to a wider project that seeks to subvert the mastery of the censor. Following the affinity with Beckett's anti-heroism, Coetzee is suspicious of Seamus Heaney's conception of 'a modern martyrology' (*Giving Offense*, 44) in which the poet-hero crusades against the bureaucratic state censor. Instead Coetzee quotes Mario Vargas Llosa on 'the unmissiveness of literature': '[Literature] strikes equally at everything [that] stands for dogma and logical exclusivism in the interpretation of life [...]. *In other words, it is a living, systematic, inevitable contradiction of all that exists*' (qtd. in *Giving Offense*, 46). In the 'The Novel Today' this unmissiveness goes by the name of 'difference':

There is no addition in stories. They are not made of one thing plus another thing, message plus vehicle, substructure plus superstructure. On the keyboard on which they are written, the plus key does not work. There is always a difference; and the difference is not a part, the part left behind after the subtraction. The minus key does not work either: the difference is everything (296).

This account of difference anticipates both the logic of the non-position at work in *Giving Offense* and Coetzee's suspicion towards the heroic artist who seeks to rival censorship by drawing upon precisely the same censorious logic of opposition and exclusion: 'At the same, the metaphors of suffering (the suffering writer), like the metaphors of battle (the writer battling against the censor), seem to me to belong to the structures of opposition, of Either-Or, which I take it as my task to evade' (108). By attempting to demarcate a form of difference beyond mere oppositional or binary thinking (an aversion to which can be traced back to the beginning of Coetzee's career, to the doctoral thesis on Beckett, and to important context of linguistic determinism as discussed in my opening two chapters), the non-response which emerges from Coetzee's writings thus manifests

---

<sup>9</sup> Coetzee records Stalin's concerns about the poet Osip Mandelstam, notably whether or not the seditious poet was a 'master' (*Giving Offense*, 39). Coetzee then elucidates: 'What he meant was something like, Is he dangerous? Is he going to live, even if he dies?' (39).

an alternative literary thinking; a thinking integral to Coetzee's privileging of a Beckettian truth 'related to silence' (*Doubling*, 65).

By challenging the presuppositions of a masterful approach to literature, Coetzee's works disable the positive recuperation of life (which, as we have seen, is the central term in the interrogation of the legal discourse of rights). Any such attempt to positively assert life is therefore shown to inevitably fall back within the complicity that relates the writer to the censor and, thereby, risks replicating the very paradigm of sacrifice through which sovereign power is exercised (whereby the present, as the democratic site of contestation and of alternative readings, is sacrificed in the name of a predefined future).

The relation of literature and life in terms of sacrifice can be witnessed in the archived materials for an unrealised book project (begun shortly after the publication of *Dusklands*, in October 1973), entitled 'The Burning of the Books', a story about a state censor in the midst a revolutionary uprising. The manuscripts reveal a narrative trajectory that was clear from the beginning: 'As the repressions grows and grows, the need to incinerate bigger and better things grows greater. Finally bodies' (HRC, MS Coetzee Papers, Box 33, Folder 1). Such an outline suggests how Coetzee's sense of the irresponsible freedom of fiction is seen as a responsibility towards an undetermined and open future that is both imminent and immanent to the present. As Derrida argues in an interview: 'the duty of irresponsibility, of refusing to reply for one's thought or writing to constituted powers, is perhaps the highest form of responsibility' ('This Strange Institution Called Literature', 38). In *Disgrace* the right to non-response is enacted by both Lurie and Lucy. The staging of non-response and self-censorship marks *Disgrace* itself as a novel which seeks to document history as a history of silence, of the voicelessness of the oppressed. Such an endeavour is therefore linked to a negative or hyperbolic sense of responsibility (the duty of irresponsibility) that is neither before the law, nor to some utopian future, but is rather grounded in a critical sense of the present.

Accordingly, Coetzee's commitment to what has 'not yet emerged' (*Doubling*, 246) bears a structural relation to Derrida's notion of 'democracy-to-come' (*Spectres of Marx*, 81). For Derrida, democracy-to-come names, as Alex Thomson delineates, 'the experience of the impossibility of a full democracy with compels us here and now to criticise the inadequacy of so-called democracies' (*Deconstruction and Democracy*, 38). Democracy-to-come is not an ideal to be attained in the future but rather corresponds to the definition of democracy



proper defined as a political structure or process of open to ever possible revision.<sup>10</sup> In essence, democracy contains the right to critique everything, including itself. For Derrida, such an account of democracy is integral to the history and being of literature as such: ‘literature is a modern invention, inscribed in conventions and institutions which [...] secure in principle its *right to say everything*’ (*On The Name*, 28). However, no democracy can be defined solely in terms of individual freedom but is rather a negotiation, as Thomson argues, between the ‘principle of *equality*, and of the right to say anything’ (37).<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, censorship, as itself a mode of criticism, is linked to a responsibility that stems from the very irresponsibility of being able to say everything; after all, ‘the society which did not debate censorship would no longer be democratic’ (37). This irresponsible freedom therefore also acknowledges a right to non-response or self-censorship, since to require that one must always respond is not only a violent, totalitarian act, but also an act which presupposes ‘[a] concept of a subject that is calculable, accountable, imputable and responsible’ (*On The Name*, 29). That is, the sovereign subject-position of being-offended that grounds the activity of the censor as the one who, by seeking to dominate the present, cancels out the future. Accordingly, Coetzee’s non-position can be inscribed between these two poles, that of right to say anything and the right to not respond, and is thus oriented towards the future not as a prospective horizon but rather as a property of the present to be different from itself.

Coetzee’s attempt to think the non-position, to rival rivalry, is evidenced in a notebook entry for *Age of Iron*, dated 16 June 1986. Coetzee writes: ‘Who shall guard the guardians? Who shall censor the censors? The question is unanswerable without a theory of absolution. It is unanswerable in a secular framework. There must be a class or caste of people outside society’ (HRC, MS Coetzee Papers, Box 33, Folder 6). As we have seen, the difficulty of maintaining a Beckettian abyssal watchfulness or perpetual critique is taken up across Coetzee’s writings. In *Giving Offense* this pivots on a ‘reading position’ (184) that seeks to undermine the binary logic of what Coetzee terms ‘Apartheid Thinking’ (163). Such a non-position necessarily risks the capacity of literature to be a source of positive resistance or ethical value. Coetzee’s inheritance of Beckett’s late

---

<sup>10</sup> Häggglund elucidates this temporal dimension of Derrida’s account: ‘[T]o desire democracy is by definition to desire something temporal, since democracy must remain open to its own alteration in order to be democratic’ (*Radical Atheism*, 195).

<sup>11</sup> This negotiation can be traced across Coetzee’s oeuvre, as Clarkson argues, in terms of: ‘a tension between freedom of expression and responsibility to the other’ (“‘Wisselbare Woorde’”: J.M. Coetzee and Postcolonial Philosophy’, 200). The tension similarly structures the dual impulse, between conscience and community, of Coetzee’s transcendental imperative in *Doubling the Point*.

modernism thus corresponds to the duty of irresponsibility that underscores the hyperbolic foundation of responsibility itself.

Just as this hyperbolic foundation is derived not from a sense of absolute or infinite life or Otherness, but from an infinity of life or other others, the interrogative stance of Coetzee's literary thinking, rather than correcting politics from the position of ethics, is derived not from an appeal to affect or embodiment beyond reason but rather from the ineluctably embedded and material conditions (as exposed precariously to passion or finitude) that constitute the reader, the writer, and the living subject of ethics. Coetzee's critical sense of ethics, of questioning in the present, thus constitutes a form of commitment or vigilance aligned with politics and with a critical conception of democracy. This commitment to the freedom of an irresponsibility, that grounds any possible responsibility, stems from the dynamic stillness of life, between life and death, which we find in Beckett. As the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes, in the context of discussing one of Beckett's favourite painters, Paul Cézanne:

Two things are certain about freedom: that we are never determined and yet that we never change, since looking back on what we were, we can always find hints of what we have become. It is up to us to understand both these things simultaneously, as well as the way freedom dawns in us without breaking our bonds with the world (*Sense and Non-Sense*, 21).

Coetzee account of freedom in the *present tense*, 'of people slipping their chains and turning their faces towards to the light. I do not imagine freedom, freedom *an sich*; I do not represent it, Freedom is another name for the unimaginable, says Kant, and he is right' (*Doubling*, 341), thus attests to the impossibility of an untarnished or incorruptible freedom. This is given a further voice by Mrs Curren in *Age of Iron* who, following Molloy's question: 'Perhaps freedom is always and only what is unimaginable. Nevertheless, we know unfreedom when we see it – don't we?' (164). The ambiguity or negativity of freedom is intimated across Beckett's works, as when Molloy asks: 'Can it be we are not free? It might be worth looking into' (*Molloy*, 34). It is this profound intimation of unfreedom, then, grasped through Coetzee's literary thinking of life after Beckett, that opens onto the vigilance of an embedded freedom that 'dawns in us without breaking our bonds with the world'.

## Works Cited

- Abbott, H. Porter. *Beckett Writing Beckett: The Author in the Autograph*. Ithaca & London: Cornell UP, 1996.
- Abrams, M.H. 'The Deconstructive Angel'. *Critical Inquiry* 3. 3 (1977): 425-438.
- Ackerley, Chris. 'Style: Coetzee and Beckett'. *A Companion to the Works of J.M. Coetzee*, ed. Tim Mehigan. New York: Camden House, 2011. 23-38.
- Adorno, Theodor. 'Trying to Understand Endgame'. Trans. Michael T. Jones. *New German Critique*, 26 (1982): 119-150. [1961]
- . 'Notes on Kafka'. *Prisms*. Trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997.
- Adorno, Theodor, & Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002. [1944].
- Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998.
- . *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. New York: Zone Books, 1999.
- . *The Open: Man and Animal*. Trans Kevin Attell. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004.
- Anker, Elizabeth S. 'Why We Love Coetzee; or, *The Childhood of Jesus* and the Funhouse of Critique.' *Critique and Postcritique*. Eds. Anker and Rita Felski. Durham: Duke UP, 2017. 183-208.
- Anker, Elizabeth S., and Rita Felski. 'Introduction.' *Critique and Postcritique*. Ed. Anker and Felski. Durham: Duke UP, 2017. 1-28.
- Attridge, Derek. 'Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other'. *PMLA*, 114. 1 (1999): 20-31.
- . *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*. London: University of Chicago Press, 2004.
- . *Reading and Responsibility*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2011.
- . *The Singularity of Literature*. London: Routledge, 2004.
- . 'Sex, Comedy, and Influence: Coetzee's Beckett'. *J.M. Coetzee in Context and Theory*, Eds. Elleke Boehmer, Robert Eaglestone, Katy Iddiols. London: Continuum, 2009: 71-90.
- . 'A Yes Without a No': Philosophical Reason and the Ethics of Conversion in Coetzee's Fictions. *Beyond the Ancient Quarrel: Literature, Philosophy, and J.M. Coetzee*. Eds. Patrick Hayes and Jan Wilm. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017: 91-106.
- Attwell, David. 'Coetzee and Post-Apartheid South Africa'. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 27. 4 (2001): 865-867.
- . *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face to Face with Time*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015.
- . *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*. Oxford: University of California Press. 1993

- . 'Race in Disgrace'. *Interventions* 4.3 (2002): 331–341.
- Attwell, David & Michela Borzaga. 'A Life in Research' with J.M. Coetzee: An Interview with David Attwell'. *Life Writing*, 12. 3 (2015): 251-263.
- Aristotle. *De Anima*. Trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred. London: Penguin, 1986.
- Armstrong, Nancy. 'The Affective Turn in Contemporary Fiction'. *Contemporary Literature* 55. 3 (2014): 441-465.
- Badiou, Alain. *On Beckett*. Eds. Nina Power & Alberto Toscano. Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2003.
- Baldwin, Hélène. *Samuel Beckett's Real Silence*. London: Pennsylvania State UP, 1981.
- Barney, Richard. 'On (not) giving up: animals, biopolitics, and the impersonal in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*'. *Textual Practice* 30. 3 (2016): 509-530.
- Barthes, Roland. 'The Death of the Author'. *Image Music Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. London: Harper Collins, 1977: 142-148.
- Beckett, Samuel. *Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho, Stirrings Still*. Ed. Dirk Van Hulle. London: Faber & Faber, 2009.
- . 'Dante...Bruno. Vico..Joyce'. *Disjecta Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*. Ed. Ruby Cohn. New York: Grove Press, 1984: 19-34.
- . *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*. Ed. Ruby Cohn. New York: Grove Press, 1984.
- . *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*. Dublin: The Black Cat Press, 1992 [1932]
- . *Malone Dies*. Ed. Peter Boxall. London: Faber & Faber, 2010. [1951]
- . *Mercier & Camier*. Ed. Sean Kennedy. London: Faber & Faber, 2010. [1970]
- . *Molloy*. Ed. Shane Weller. London: Faber & Faber, 2009. [1951]
- . *More Pricks Than Kicks*. Ed. Cassandra Nelson. London: Faber & Faber, 2010. [1934]
- . *Murphy*. Ed. J. C. C. Mays. London: Faber & Faber, 2009. [1938]
- . *Proust*. London: Calder & Boyas, 1970. [1930]
- . 'Recent Irish Poetry'. *Disjecta Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*. Ed. Ruby Cohn. New York: Grove Press, 1984: 70-76.
- . *Texts for Nothing and Other Shorter Prose, 1950-1976*. Ed. Mark Nixon. London: Faber & Faber, 2010.
- . *The Complete Dramatic Works*. London: Faber & Faber, 2006.
- . 'The New Object'. *Modernism/Modernity* 18. 4 (2011): 878-880. [1948]
- . *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: Volume 1, 1929-1940*, eds. Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Lois More Overbeck, Dan Gunn, George Craig. Cambridge UP (2009).
- . *The Unnamable*. Ed. Steven Connor. London: Faber & Faber, 2010. [1953]
- . *Watt*. Ed. C. J. Ackerley. London: Faber & Faber, 2009. [1953]

- Beckett et al. 'Poetry is Vertical'. *Transition* 21 (1932): 148-149.
- Begam, Richard. *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996.
- Benjamin, Walter. 'Critique of Violence'. *Selected Writings: Volume 1, 1913-1926*. Ed. Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004: 236-252.
- . 'Franz Kafka'. *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt, Trans. Harry Zorn. London: Pimlico, 1999: 108-135.
- . 'The Storyteller'. *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt, Trans. Harry Zorn. London: Pimlico, 1999: 83-107.
- Ben Zvi, Linda. 'Samuel Beckett, Fritz Mauthner and the Limits of Language'. *PMLA*, 95 (1980): 183-200.
- Benveniste, Émile. *Problems in General Linguistics*. Trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek. Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1971. [1966]
- Best, Stephen, and Sharon Marcus. 'Surface Reading: An Introduction'. *The Way We Read Now*, special issue of *Representations*, 108. 1 (2009): 1-21.
- Blanchot, Maurice. 'Literature and the Right to Death'. *The Work of Fire*. Trans. Charlotte Mandell. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995: 300-344.
- . "'Where now? Who Now?'". *The Book to Come*. Trans. Charlotte Mandell. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003: 210-217.
- . 'The Athenaeum'. *The Infinite Conversation*. Trans. Susan Hanson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993: 351-359.
- . 'Kafka and Literature'. *The Work of Fire*. Trans. Charlotte Mandell. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995: 12-26.
- . 'Reading Kafka'. *The Work of Fire*. Trans. Charlotte Mandell. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995: 1-11.
- Bolin, John. *Beckett and the Modern Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013.
- Boxall, Peter. 'Samuel Beckett: Towards a Political Reading'. *Irish Studies Review* 10. 2 (2002): 159-170.
- . 'Since Beckett'. *Textual Practice* 20. 2 (2006): 301-317.
- . *Since Beckett: Contemporary Writing in the Wake of Modernism*. London: Continuum, 2009.
- . 'The Threshold of Vision: The Animal Gaze in Beckett, Coetzee and Sebald'. in, *Journal of Beckett Studies* 20. 2 (2011): 123-148.
- Brits, Baylee. 'The Name of the Number: Transfinite Mathematics'. *J.M. Coetzee's The Childhood of Jesus: The Ethics of Ideas and Things*. Eds. Jennifer Rutherford & Anthony Uhlmann. London: Bloomsbury, 2017: 129-146.
- Brooks, Cleanth. 'The New Criticism'. *The Sewanee Review* 87. 4 (1979): 592-607.
- Bryden, Mary. 'Beckett and the Dynamic Still'. *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* 14 (2004): 179-192.
- Buber, Martin, *I and Thou*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008.

Buning, Marius. 'Samuel Beckett's Negative Way: Intimations of the Via Negativa in His Late Plays'. *European Literature and Theology in the Twentieth Century: Ends of Time*, eds. David Jasper and Colin Crowder. London: Macmillan, 1990. 129-142.

Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2004.

Cantor, Paul A. "Happy Days in the Veld": Beckett and Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*'. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 93. 1 (1994): 83-110.

Cavaliere, Paola. *The Death of the Animal: A Dialogue*. New York: Columbia UP, 2009.

Chomsky, Noam. *Cartesian Linguistics: A Chapter in the History of Rationalist Thought*. New York and London: Harper & Row, 1966.

Clarkson, Carrol 2009. *J.M. Coetzee: Countervoices*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

---. 2011. 'Coetzee's Criticism'. *A Companion to the Works of J.M. Coetzee*. Ed. Tim Mehigan. New York: Camden House, 2011: 222-234.

---. "'Wisselbare Woorde": J.M. Coetzee and Postcolonial Philosophy'. *Beyond the Ancient Quarrel: Literature, Philosophy, and J.M. Coetzee*. Eds. Patrick Hayes and Jan Wilm Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017: 180-214.

Coetzee, J.M. *Age of Iron*. London: Penguin, 2010. [1990]

---. 'As a Woman Grows Older'. *New York Review of Books*, 15 January 2004: 11-14.

---. *Boyhood*. London: Vintage, 1998. [1997]

---. 'Critic and Citizen: A Response'. *Pretexts: Literary and Cultural Studies*, 9. 1. (2000): 109-111.

---. *Disgrace*. London: Vintage, 2000 [1999]

---. 'Die Skrywer en die Teorie'. SAVAL Conference Proceedings. Trans. Karen Jennings. Bloemfontein 1980: 155-161.

---. *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992.

---. *Diary of a Bad Year*. London: Harvill Secker, 2007.

---. *Dusklands*. London: Vintage, 2004. [1974]

---. 'Eight ways of Looking at Samuel Beckett'. *Samuel Beckett Today/ Aujourd'hui* 19 (2008): 19-31.

---. *Elizabeth Costello*. London: Vintage, 2004. [2003]

---. *Foe*. London: Penguin, 1987. [1986]

---. *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

---. 'Homage'. *The Threepenny Review* 53 (1993): 5-7.

---. 'He and His Man: The 2003 Nobel Lecture'. *World Literature Today* 78. 2 (2004): 16-20.

---. *In the Heart of the Country*. London: Vintage, 2004. [1977]

---. *Inner Workings: Literary Essays 2000-2005*. London: Penguin, 2008.

- . *Late Essays: 2006-2017*. London: Harvill Secker, 2017.
- . *Life & Times of Michael K*. London: Vintage, 1998. [1983]
- . 'Linguistics and Literature'. *An Introduction to Contemporary Literary Theory*. Eds. Rory Ryan & Susan van Zyk. Johannesburg: Donker, 1982: 41-52
- . 'Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and the Primacy of Art'. *UCT Studies in English* 5 (1974): 1-7.
- . 'On Literary Thinking'. *Textual Practice* 30. 7 (2016): 1151-1152.
- . 'Review of *Strange Attractors: Poems of Love and Mathematics*. Eds. Sarah Glaz and Joanne Growney', *Notices of the AMS*, 56:8 (2009): 944-6.
- . 'Review of Wilhelm Fucks, *Nach allen Regeln der Kunst*'. *Style* 5. 1 (1971): 92-94.
- . 'Review: Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett*'. *UCT Studies in English* 9 (1979): 86-89.
- . 'Samuel Beckett's "Lessness": An Exercise in Decomposition'. *Computers and the Humanities* 7. 4 (1973): 195-198.
- . 'Samuel Beckett in Cape Town – An Imaginary History'. *Beckett Remembering: Remembering Beckett*. Eds. James & Elizabeth Knowlson. London: Bloomsbury, 2006: 74-77.
- . *Stranger Shores: Essays 1986-1999*. London: Vintage, 2002.
- . *Slow Man*. London: Vintage, 2006. [2005]
- . 'Statistical Indices of "Difficulty"'. *Language and Style* 2. 3 (1969): 226-232.
- . *Summertime*. London: Harvill Secker, 2009.
- . 'Surreal Metaphors and Random Processes'. *Journal of Literary Semantics*, 8. 1 (1979): 22-30.
- . *The Childhood of Jesus*. London: Harvill Secker, 2013.
- . *The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett: An Essay in Stylistic Analysis*. Doctoral Thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1969.
- . *The Lives of Animals*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999.
- . *The Master of Petersburg*. London: Vintage, 2004. [1994]
- . 'The Novel Today'. *Upstream*, 6. 1. (1988): 2-5.
- . 'The Old Woman and the Cats'. *Crippenwood/Kreupelhout*. Ed. Berlinde De Bruyckere and J.M. Coetzee. Brussels: Mercatorfonds, 2013: 7-28.
- . 'The Right to Life'. *Reform* 91 (2007/8): 9-10.
- . *The Schooldays of Jesus*. London: Harvill Secker, 2016.
- . 'Thematizing'. *The Return of Thematic Criticism*. Ed. W. Sollors. Cambridge, Cambridge and London: Harvard UP, 1993: 289.
- . 'Truth in Autobiography', Inaugural Lecture, University of Capetown 3 October 1984. University of Cape Town Printing Department, New Series, 94 (1985): 1-6.

---. *Voiceless: I Feel Therefore I Am* (Address written by Coetzee and read by Hugh Weaving at the exhibition opening held at the Sherman Galleries, 22 February 2007, [www.voiceless.org.au](http://www.voiceless.org.au)).

---. *Waiting for the Barbarians*. London: Vintage, 2004. [1980]

---. *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1988.

---. *Youth*. London: Vintage, 2002.

Coetzee, J.M., & David Attwell. "All Autobiography Is *Autre*-biography": J.M. Coetzee interviewed by David Attwell'. *Selves in Question: Interviews on Southern African Auto/biography*. Eds J. Lütge Coullie, S. Meyer, T. Ngwenya and T. Olver. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006: 213–18.

---. 'An Exclusive Interview with J.M. Coetzee'. *Dagens Nyheter*, 12 August 2003. <http://www.dn.se/kultur-noje/an-exclusive-interview-with-j-m-coetzee/>

Coetzee, J.M. & Paul Auster. *Here and Now: Letters 2008-2011*. London: Harvill Secker, 2013.

Coetzee, J.M. & Richard Begam. 'An Interview with J.M. Coetzee'. *Contemporary Literature*, 33. 3 (1992): 419-431.

Coetzee, J.M., & Arabella Kurtz. "Nevertheless, My Sympathies Are With The Karamazovs": An Email Correspondence: May - December 2008'. *Salmagundi* 166/167 (2010): 39-72.

---. *The Good Story: Exchanges on Truth, Fiction and Psychotherapy*. London: Harvill Secker, 2015.

Coetzee, J.M., Lawrence Rainey, David Attwell & Benjamin Madden. 'An Interview with J.M. Coetzee'. *Modernism/Modernity*, 18. 4 (2011): 847-853.

Coetzee, J.M. & Folke Rhedin. 'J.M. Coetzee: Interview'. *Kunapipi*, 6. 1 (1984): 6-11.

Coetzee, J.M. & Peter Sacks, 'J.M. Coetzee talks to Peter Sacks'. *Lannan Podcasts*, 8 November 2001. <https://podcast.lannan.org/2010/06/28/j-m-coetzee-with-peter-sacks-conversation-8-november-2001-video/>.

Coetzee, J.M., & Joanna Scott. 'Voice and Trajectory: An Interview with J.M. Coetzee'. *Salmagundi*, 114/115 (1997): 82-102.

Coetzee, J.M. and Sévry, Jean. 'An Interview with J.M. Coetzee'. *Commonwealth: Essays and Studies*, 9. 1 (1986): 1-7.

Coetzee, J.M. and Stephen Watson. 'Speaking: J.M. Coetzee'. *Speak* 1. 3 (1978): 21–4.

Coetzee, J.M. & World Literature Today. 'An Interview with J.M. Coetzee'. *World Literature Today*, 70. 1 (1996): 107-110.

Connor, Steven. *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1988.

---. *Theory and Cultural Value*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992.

---. *Beckett, Modernism and the Material Imagination*. Cambridge: CUP, 2014.

Crary, Alice. 'J.M. Coetzee, Moral Thinker'. *J.M. Coetzee and Ethics*. Eds. Anton Leist & Peter Singer. New York: Columbia UP, 2010: 249-268.



- Critchley, Simon. *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy and Literature*. London: Routledge, 2004.
- . *Notes on Suicide*. London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2015.
- Currie, Mark. *Postmodern Narrative Theory*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998.
- Casaliggi, Carmen & Paul March-Russel eds. *Legacies of Romanticism: Literature, Culture, Aesthetics*. London: Routledge, 2012.
- Danta, Chris, Julian Murphet & Sue Kossew, eds. *Strong Opinions: J.M. Coetzee and the Authority of Contemporary Fiction*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.
- Danta, Chris. "‘Like a Dog... like a Lamb’: Becoming Sacrificial Animal in Kafka and Coetzee". *New Literary History* 38. 4. (2007): 721-737.
- Davidson, Donald. "What Metaphors Mean?". *Critical Inquiry* 5. 1 (1978): 31-47.
- Dean, Andrew. "Double Thoughts: Coetzee and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism". *Beyond the Ancient Quarrel: Literature, Philosophy, and J.M. Coetzee*. Eds. Patrick Hayes and Jan Wilm. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017: 52-69.
- De Boever, Arne. *Narrative Care: Biopolitics and the Modern Novel*. London: Bloomsburg, 2013.
- Dennis, Amanda. "Glitches in Logic in Beckett's *Watt*: Toward a Sensory Poetics". *Journal of Modern Literature* 38. 2 (2015): 103-116.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Force and Signification". *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. London: Routledge, 1978: 1-35.
- . "White Mythology". *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1984: 207-271.
- . *The Gift of Death*. Trans. David Wills. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- . *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. London: The John Hopkins UP, 1997.
- . *Monolingualism of the Other, or, The Prosthesis of Origin*. Trans. Patrick Mensah. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998.
- . "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)". *Critical Inquiry*. Trans. David Wills, 28. 2 (2002): 369-418.
- . *Specters of Marx*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. Oxon: Routledge, 2011.
- . *The Death Penalty: Volume I*. Ed. Geoffrey Bennington et al. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014.
- . *Of Hospitality*. Trans. R. Bowlby. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000.
- . "Perhaps or Maybe: Jacques Derrida in Conversation with Alexander Garcia Duttman". *PLI: Warwick Journal of Philosophy*, 6 (1997): 1-36.
- . "Cogito and the History of Madness". *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. London: Routledge, 1978: 36-76.

- Derrida, Jacques & Derek Attridge. "‘This Strange Institution Called Literature’: An Interview with Jacques Derrida". *Acts of Literature*. Ed. Derek Attridge. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Deleuze, Gilles & Felix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Trans. Dana Polan. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.
- De Man, Paul. *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. Yale UP, 1979.
- Descartes, René. *Discourse on Method. Selected Philosophical Writings*. Trans John Cottingham et al. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006: 20-56.
- Dimitriu, Ileana. "‘Attachment with Detachment’: A Post-secular Reading of J.M. Coetzee’s Recent Fiction". *British and American Studies* 21 (2015): 133-141.
- Drichel, Simone, 'Disgrace (1999)'. *A Companion to the Works of J.M. Coetzee*. Ed. Tim Mehigan. New York: Camden House, 2011: 148-171.
- Dovey, Teresa. *The Novels of J.M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories*. Craighall S.A.: Ad. Donker, 1988.
- Dudley, Jack. "‘along a road that may lead nowhere’: J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* and the Postsecular Novel". *Studies in the Novel* 49. 1 (2017): 109-130.
- Durrant, Sam. *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning: J.M. Coetzee, Wilson Harris, and Toni Morrison*. State U of New York P, 2004.
- Eagleton, Terry. 'Political Beckett?'. *New Left Review* 40 (2006): 67-74.
- Effe, Alexandra. *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Narrative Transgression: A Reconsideration of Metalepsis*. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017.
- Faber, Alyda. 'The Post-Secular Poetics and Ethics of Exposure in J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*'. *Literature and Theology* 23. 3 (2009): 303-316.
- Farin, Ingo. 'Heidegger and Hegel: The Time of Life and The Time of Life-Philosophy'. *Parrhesia*, 15 (2012): 24-34.
- Feldman, Matthew. *Beckett Books: A Cultural History of Samuel Beckett’s ‘Interwar Notes’*. London: Continuum, 2006.
- . 'Beckett and Philosophy, 1928-1938'. *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* 22 (2010): 163-180.
- Felman, Shoshana. *Writing and Madness*. Trans. Martha N. Evans & Shoshana Felman. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985.
- Fish, Stanley. 'How Ordinary is Ordinary Language?'. *New Literary History* 5. 1. (1973): 41-54.
- Foucault, Michel. 'The Art of Telling the Truth'. *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*. Ed. Michael Kelly. Cambridge: MIT press, 1994: 139-148.
- . *The History of Sexuality: Volume I, The Will to Knowledge*. Trans. Robert Hurley. London: Penguin, 1998.

- . *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*. Trans. David Macey. London: Penguin, 2004.
- Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Trans. Jane E. Lewin. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1980.
- Girard, René. *Violence and the Sacred*. Trans. by Patrick Gregory. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1989.
- Gordimer, Nadine. 'The Idea of Gardening'. *The New York Review of Books*. 31. 1, 2 February 1984. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1984/02/02/the-idea-of-gardening/>.
- Graham, Lucy. "'Yes, I am giving him up': Sacrificial responsibility and likeness with dogs in JM Coetzee's recent fiction". *Scrutiny* 2, 7. 1 (2002): 4-15.
- Graver, Lawrence & Raymond Federman, eds. *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge Kegan & Paul, 1999.
- Griffin, Donald R. *Animal Minds: Beyond Cognition to Consciousness*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Hägglund, Martin. *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2008.
- . 'The Non-Ethical Opening of Ethics: A Response to Derek Attridge'. *Derrida Today* 3. 2 (2010): 295-305
- Hayes, Patrick. *J.M. Coetzee and the Novel: Writing and Politics After Beckett*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010.
- Hayes, Patrick & Jan Wilm, eds. *Beyond the Ancient Quarrel: Literature, Philosophy, and J.M. Coetzee*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017.
- Head, Dominic. *J.M. Coetzee*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997.
- Hegel, G. W. F. *The Science of Logic*. Trans. A. V. Miller. Amherst NY: Prometheus Books, 1999.
- Heidegger, Martin. *The Principle of Reason*. Trans. Reginald Lilly. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991.
- . 'What is Metaphysics'. *Basic Writings*. Ed. David Farrell Krell. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Hillis Miller, J. 'The Critic as Host'. *Critical Inquiry*, 3. 3 (1977): 439-447.
- Hofmannsthal, Hugo von. 'The Letter of Lord Chandos'. *Selected Prose*, Trans. Mary Hottinger. NY: Pantheon Books, 1952: 129-141.
- James, David. 'Dusklands (1974)'. *A Companion to the Works of J.M. Coetzee*. Ed. Tim Mehigan. New York: Camden House, 2011: 39-55.
- Johnston, Peter. 'J.M. Coetzee's Work in Stylostatistics'. *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 8. 3 (2014), <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/8/3/000188/000188.html>.
- Juliet, Charles. *Conversations with Samuel Beckett and Bram van Velde*. Trans. Janey Tucker. Leiden: Academic Press, 1995.

- Kafka, Franz. 'A Report to an Academy'. *Metamorphosis and Other Stories*. Trans. Michael Hofmann. London: Penguin, 2007: 225-235.
- . 'A Hunger Artist: Four Stories'. *Metamorphosis and Other Stories*. Trans. Michael Hofmann. London: Penguin, 2007: 237-283.
- . *The Trial*. Trans. Idris Parry. London: Penguin, 2000.
- . *Metamorphosis*. *Metamorphosis and Other Stories*. Trans. Michael Hofmann. London: Penguin, 2007: 85-146.
- Katz, Daniel. *Saying 'I' No More: Subjectivity and Consciousness in the Prose of Samuel Beckett*. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1999
- Keller, John Robert. *Samuel Beckett and the Primacy of Love*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2002.
- Kenner, Hugh. *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study*. London: Calder, 1962.
- Kleist, Heinrich von. *Selected Writings*. Ed & Trans. David Constantine. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company Inc, 1997.
- Knowlson, James. *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*. London: Bloomsbury, 1997.
- Koehler, Wolfgang. *The Mentality of Apes*. Trans. Ella Winter. New York: Liveright 1976. [1917].
- LaCapra, Dominick. *History, Literature, Critical Theory*. Cornell UP, 2013.
- Lakoff, George & Mark Turner. *More Than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Trans. A. Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1969.
- Leist, Anton & Peter Singer, eds. *J.M. Coetzee and Ethics: Philosophical Perspectives on Literature*. New York: Columbia UP, 2010.
- Leslie Johnson, Keith. 'Biopolitical Coetzee; or, "The Will to be Against"'. *Approaches to Teaching Coetzee's Disgrace and Other Works*. Eds. Laura Wright, Jane Poyner, & Elleke Boehmer. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2014. 162-166.
- Levinson, Marjorie. 'What Is New Formalism?' *PMLA*, 122. 2 (2007): 558-569.
- Locatelli, Carla. *Unwording the World: Samuel Beckett's Prose Works After the Nobel Prize*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990.
- Lukács, Georg. *The Theory of the Novel*. Trans. Anna Bostock. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971.
- Lund, Jacob. 'Biopolitical Beckett: Self-desubjectification as Resistance'. *Nordic Irish Studies*, 8. 1 (2009): 67-77.
- Maclachlan, Ian. *Marking Time: Derrida Blanchot Beckett des Forêts Klosowski Laporte*. Leiden: Rodopi, 2012.
- Marais, Mike. "'Little Enough, Less Than Little: Nothing': Ethics, Engagement, and Change in the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee". *Modern Fiction Studies* 46, 1 (2000): 159-182.
- . *Secretary of the Invisible: The Idea of Hospitality*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009.

- . 'The Possibility of Ethical Action: J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*'. *Scrutiny* 2, 5. 1 (2000): 57-63.
- . 'J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and the Task of the Imagination'. *Journal of Modern Literature* 29.2 (2006): 75-93.
- . 'Literature and the Labour of Negation: J.M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*'. *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 36. 1 (2001): 107-125.
- . '*Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980)'. *A Companion to the Works of J.M. Coetzee*, ed. Tim Mehigan. New York: Camden House, 2011: 65-75.
- Maude, Ulrika. *Beckett, Technology and the Body*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011.
- Mauthner, Fritz. *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*, III Vols. Leipzig: Verlag von Felix Meiner, 1923.
- McDonald, Peter D. 'Disgrace Effects'. *Interventions* 4. 3. (2002): 321-30.
- . 'The Writer, the Critic, and the Censor: J.M. Coetzee and the Question of Literature'. *Book History*, 7 (2004): 285-302.
- . 'The Ethics of Reading and the Question of the Novel: The Challenge of J.M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*'. *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 43. 3 (2010): 483-499.
- . 'Coetzee's Critique of Language'. *Beyond the Ancient Quarrel: Literature, Philosophy, and J.M. Coetzee*. Eds. Patrick Hayes and Jan Wilm Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017. 160-179.
- Mehigan, Tim, ed. *A Companion to the Works of J.M. Coetzee*. New York: Camden House, 2011.
- Meffan, James & Kim L. Worthington. 'Ethics Before Politics: J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*', in, *Mapping the Ethical Turn*, eds. by Todd F. Davis & Kenneth Womack. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Sense and Non-sense*. Trans. Patricia Allen Dreyfus. Illinois: Northwestern UP, 1992.
- Mills, Catherine. 'Life Beyond Law: Biopolitics, Law and Futurity in Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*'. *Griffith Law Review*, 15. 1 (2006): 177-195.
- Monson, Tamlyn. 'An Infinite Question: The Paradox of Representation in *Life & Times of Michael K*'. *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 38. 3 (2003): 87-106.
- Mulhall, Stephen. *The Wounded Animal: J.M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2009.
- . 'Health and Deviance, Irony and Incarnation: Embedding and Embodying Philosophy in Literature and Theology in *The Childhood of Jesus*'. *Beyond the Ancient Quarrel: Literature, Philosophy, and J.M. Coetzee*. Eds. Patrick Hayes and Jan Wilm Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017: 17-34.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Pale Fire*. London: Penguin, 2000.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 'On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense'. *Friedrich Nietzsche On Rhetoric and Language*. Ed. and Trans. Sander L. Gilman, Carole Blaire, David J. Parent. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989: 246-257.

- Norris, Margot. *Beasts of the Modern Imagination: Darwin, Nietzsche, Kafka, Ernst & Lawrence*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1985.
- Ohmann, Richard. 'Mentalism in the Study of Literary Language'. *Proceedings of the Conference on Language and Language Behavior*. Ed. Eric M. Zale. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968: 188-212.
- Pattie, David. *The Complete Critical Guide: Samuel Beckett*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Pascal, Blaise. *Pensées*. Trans. A. J. Krailshiemer. London: Penguin, 1995.
- Patton, Paul. 'Becoming-Animal and Pure Life in Coetzee's *Disgrace*'. *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 35, 1-2 (2006): 101-119.
- Pecora, Vincent. *Secularization Without End: Beckett, Mann, Coetzee*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015.
- Poulet, Georges. 'Phenomenology of Reading?'. *New Literary History* 1. 1 (1969): 53-68.
- Poyner, Jane. *J.M. Coetzee and the Paradox of Postcolonial Authorship*. London: Routledge, 2009.
- Rabaté, Jean-Michel. *The Pathos of Distance: Affects of the Moderns*. London: Bloomsbury, 2016.
- . "'Think, pig!': Beckett's animal philosophies". *Beckett and Animals*. Ed. Mary Bryden. Cambridge: Cambridge UP: 2013. 109-125.
- Ramsay, Stephen. *Reading Machines: Towards an Algorithmic Criticism*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2011.
- Richards, I. A. *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgement*. Ed. John Constable. London: Routledge, 2011. [1929]
- Ricks, Christopher. *Beckett's Dying Words*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Selected Poems*. Trans. by Susan Ranson & Marielle Sutherland. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011.
- Rutherford, Jennifer & Anthony Uhlmann, eds. *J.M. Coetzee's The Childhood of Jesus: The Ethics of Ideas and Things*. London: Bloomsbury, 2017.
- Rose, Arthur. *Literary Cynics: Borges, Beckett, Coetzee*. London: Bloomsbury, 2017.
- Salisbury, Laura. *Samuel Beckett: Laughing Matters, Comic Timing*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2012.
- Sanders, Mark. 'Disgrace'. *Interventions* 4. 3 (2002): 363-373.
- Saunders, Rebecca. 'Disgrace in the Time of a Truth Commission'. *Parallax*, 11:3 (2005): 99-106.
- Santner, Eric. *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006.
- . *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011.
- Schmitt, Carl. *Political Romanticism*. Trans. Guy Oakes. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991. [1919].

- Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Representation: Volume I & 2*. Trans. E. F. J. Payne. New York: Dover Publications, 1966.
- Scott, Nathan A. *Samuel Beckett*. London: Bowes & Bowes, 1965.
- Sebald, W.G. *Austerlitz*. Trans. Anthea Bell. London: Penguin, 2002.
- Sissa, Giulia. 'Passion'. *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*. Eds. Barbara Cassin. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2014: 745-749.
- Smith, Russell. 'Introduction: Beckett's Ethical Undoing'. *Beckett and Ethics*. Ed. Russell Smith. London: Continuum, 2008: 1-20.
- Smith, Zadie. 'An essay is an act of imagination. It still takes quite as much art as fiction'. *The Guardian*, 21 November 2009, Features and Reviews, 2.
- Spitzer, Leo. 'Zum Stil Marcel Prousts'. *Stilstudie, II: Stilsprachen* (1928): 365-366.
- Stauffer, Jill. *Ethical Loneliness: The Justice of Not Being Heard*. New York: Columbia UP, 2015.
- Stevens, Wallace. 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird'. *Selected Poems*. London: Faber & Faber, 2010: 34-37.
- . 'Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction'. *Selected Poems*. London: Faber & Faber, 2010: 85-115.
- Tajiri, Yoshiki. 'Beckett's Legacy in the Work of J.M. Coetzee'. *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* 19 (2008): 361-370.
- Thacker, Eugene. *After Life*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- . 'After Life: Swarms, demons and the antinomies of immanence'. *Theory After Theory*. Eds. Jane Elliott & Derek Attridge. London: Routledge, 2011: 181-193.
- . 'Darklife: Negation, Nothingness, and the Will-To-Life in Schopenhauer'. *Parrhesia*, 12 (2011): 12-27.
- Thomson, Alex. *Deconstruction and Democracy*. London: Continuum, 2005.
- Uhlmann, Anthony. 'Beckett and Philosophy'. *A Companion to Samuel Beckett*. Ed. S. E. Gontarski. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2010.
- . 'Dusklands and the meaning of method'. *Textual Practice* 30. 3 (2016): 399-415.
- Vermeulen, Pieter. *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel: Creature, Affect, Form*. Palgrave: Basingstoke, 2015.
- Vlies, Andrew van der. *J.M. Coetzee's 'Disgrace'*. London: Continuum, 2010.
- Weller, Shane. *Beckett and the Ethics of Alterity*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006.
- . 'Unwords'. *Beckett and Nothing: Trying to Understand Beckett*. Ed. Daniela Caselli. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2010: 107-124.
- . 'Not Rightly Human: Beckett and Animality'. *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* 19 (2008): 211-221.
- . 'Beckett and Late Modernism.' *The New Cambridge Companion to Samuel Beckett*. Ed. Dirk Van Hulle. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015: 89-102.

- Wilm, Jan. *The Slow Philosophy of J.M. Coetzee*. London: Bloomsbury, 2016.
- Wilson, Ross. 'Introduction'. *The Meaning of 'Life' in Romantic Poetry and Poetics*. Ed. Ross Wilson. London: Routledge, 2009: 1-12.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986.
- Woessner, Martin. 'Beyond Realism: Coetzee's Post-Secular Imagination'. *Beyond the Ancient Quarrel: Literature, Philosophy, and J.M. Coetzee*. Eds. Patrick Hayes & Jan Wilm. Oxford: OUP, 2017: 143-159
- Wood, James. 'A Frog's Life'. *London Review of Books* 25. 20 (2003): 15-16.
- Yeoh, Gilbert. 'J.M. Coetzee and Samuel Beckett: Nothingness, Minimalism and Indeterminacy'. *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 31. 4 (2000): 117-137.
- . 'J.M. Coetzee and Samuel Beckett: Ethics, Truth-telling, and Self-deception'. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 44. 4 (2003): 331-348
- Zimmler, Jarad. *J.M. Coetzee and the Politics of Style*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2014.