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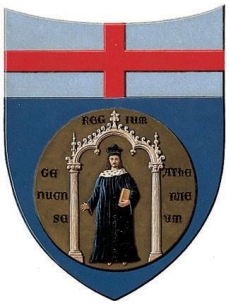

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Valeria Mosca

“To you but not to you; to me; to you in me”
Dialogism and Monologism in J.M. Coetzee’s work

Tutor: Prof.ssa Stefania Michelucci

Contents

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations have been used for J.M. Coetzee's works:

Dl for *Dusklands*

HotC for *In the Heart of the Country*

WftB for *Waiting for the Barbarians*

MK for *Life and Times of Michael K*

AoI for *Age of Iron*

DtP for *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*

MP for *The Master of Petersburg*

GO for *Giving Offense*

B for *Boyhood. Scenes from Provincial Life*

LoA for *The Lives of Animals*

D for *Disgrace*

Y for *Youth*

EC for *Elizabeth Costello. Eight Lessons*

SM for *Slow Man*

DBY for *Diary of a Bad Year*

St for *Summertime. Scenes from Provincial Life*

CoJ for *The Childhood of Jesus*

AF for *We Are All Flesh*

Cw for *Cripplewood*

GS for *The Good Story*

Introduction

At the beginning of J.M. Coetzee's second published novel, *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), the narrator remembers an exchange between her father, an Afrikaner farmer, and a young would-be farm worker. The conversation she recalls is simple and fast-paced: the young man is quick to provide information about himself, and careful not to overstep the social boundaries that regulate his interactions with a white *baas*. The boy is hired right away, and Magda thinks about the scene she has witnessed: "How satisfying, the flow of this dialogue. Would that all my life were like that, question and answer, word and echo, instead of the torment of And next? And next?" (*HotC*, 22).

The *torment of And next?* is a constant feature in Coetzee's writing. His aesthetics has been described as one of tentativeness (Rogez 2010: 99) and rumination (Wilm 2017: 14), and Coetzee himself has stated that his own thought process is "slow and painstaking and myopic" (*DtP*, 246). Undoubtedly, a tendency to meditative and inquisitive thinking is a trait Coetzee shares with many of his best-known characters. Most of them, like Magda, are incapable of straightforward, prompt exchanges that follow the rhythm of "question and answer, word and echo". Coetzee's fiction is punctuated by a sense of "failed self/other relationship [and] incommensurability" described by many critics (Attwell 2008: 229).

Ludmila Gruszweska-Blaim appropriately points out that "Coetzee seems to revel in exposing […] his fictional worlds and figures to a cul-de-sac syndrome" (2018: 12). Indeed, the feeling of stagnation and the constant need for reexamination pertain to multiple aspects of Coetzee's fiction, such as plot progression (*Slow Man* and *The Childhood of Jesus*, for example, have been described as "episodic" and "erratic"[1]) and narrative techniques (the famously controversial meta-fictional structure of *Elizabeth Costello*), as well as the ontology

[1] Bellin 2013: online.

of characters (most notably, in the pseudo-autobiographical trilogy) and the incommunicability between them. Clearly, this last feature is especially easy to detect in dialogical exchanges (or lack thereof): from the tongue-less Friday in *Foe* to the reticent Barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, from the frustrating exchanges between Elizabeth Costello and her son to the uncanny echo of Socratic dialogue in *The Childhood of Jesus*, Coetzee's fiction is punctuated by characters who, like Magda, are either unable or unwilling to engage in successful verbal exchanges.

Ironically, in spite of his characters' inability to communicate, Coetzee's writing has been described by many as intrinsically dialogic. Carrol Clarkson's *Countervoices* (2009) is a book-length study stemming from Coetzee's famous declaration that "there is a true sense in which writing is dialogic: a matter of awakening the countervoices in oneself and embarking upon speech with them" (*DtP*, 65); similarly, Jan Wilm's 2016 monograph *The Slow Philosophy of J.M. Coetzee* examines the work of an author who, even in his later writing life, "has not exhausted the dialogic potential of [his] narrative" and whose "inquiring *ouevre*" causes an unavoidable "inclination toward dialogue." (150) Even Gruszweska-Blaim, in her study on Coetzee's dead ends, does acknowledge the dialogic nature of his writing – in fact, she argues that Mikhail Bakhtin's description of Dostoevsky's work may apply to Coetzee's as well: "Whatever is firm, dead, finished, unable to respond, whatever has already spoken its final word, does not exist in [his] world."[2] Coetzee's "relentless polyphony precluding the finality of the word", she adds, may actually be an additional kind of impasse. (2018: 12)

The aim of my work is to analyse dialogism and monologism in Coetzee's work against the backdrop of the seemingly contrasting critical takes I outlined above: on one hand, dialogism is unanimously recognized in the community of Coetzee scholars as a distinguishing feature of his writing and a means to generate readerly response; on the other hand, however, 'dialogue proper' in Coetzee's fiction – verbal exchanges between his characters – is rarely successful. More often than not, it exacerbates conflicts and produces communicative impasses that reflect in the plot, and that characters are often unable to overcome. The first goal of my analysis will focus on those impasses, as I will try to establish

[2] Quoted in Gruszweska-Blaim 2018: 12.

whether the communicative and conversational failures of Coetzee's characters are in any way related to the other kinds of dead ends we encounter in his works. Is dialogue just one more item in a list of the various tools Coetzee uses to represent incommunicability, or does it play a more significant and, perhaps, representative role as the underlying pattern of Coetzee's narratives of impossibilities and incommensurability?

After assessing the role dialogue plays in Coetzee's tentative plots and halting plots, it will become necessary to frame it in the ongoing critical discussion of dialogism in Coetzee's *oeuvre*. Once again, is there a relationship between the 'countervoices' Clarkson rightly identifies as a prominent feature of Coetzee's writing process and the unrewarding exchanges that his characters regularly engage in? Are they simply and randomly coexistent, or rather meaningfully antipodal?

Each chapter in this work will tackle different issues stemming from my two sets of questions. Chapter One presents an introductory analyses of selected fragments of Coetzee's fiction. After a brief assessment of the most recent criticism on Coetzee and dialogue, I will examine the interplay between conversational dead ends and the 'dialogical monologue' of Coetzee's countervoices, as well as its effect on the narrative pace of his works. A closer analysis of *The Childhood of Jesus* and the link between its episodic narrative structure and rambling dialogues will close the chapter.

While Chapter One aims at exemplariness, rather than exhaustiveness, Chapter Two, Three and Four tackle specific aspects of Coetzee's production. Chapter Two is a study on Coetzee's famously elusive public *persona* and the dialogical components to its construction. While autobiography has been at the forefront of Coetzee's critical attention since the beginning of his literary career, his relationship with life-writing is far from straightforward. A famously reluctant interviewee, Coetzee usually refuses to share his own opinions or life stories with journalists and critics. Despite his secretiveness and his skepticism of the interview format, however, he did cooperate with David Attwell and J.C. Kannemeyer on two massive interview-based (auto)biographical projects, which I analyze in the first part of the chapter. While the narrative tone of Kannemeyer's conventional, third-person biography

makes it difficult to focus on its dialogical genesis, Coetzee's work with Attwell famously resulted in a collection of essays and interviews that lays the groundwork for studies on Coetzee's dialogical self-writing. On one hand, *Doubling the Point* forces readers to ponder over Attwell's role as the interlocutor chosen by Coetzee. One the other hand, however, it is in *Doubling the Point* that Coetzee describes autobiographical writing as a process that happens within the self: a conversation, indeed, but an internal one. The second half of Chapter Two focuses on Coetzee's fictional, rather than critical production, and it opens with an outline of the critical debate surrounding Elizabeth Costello, the literary alter-ego who has often been identified with Cotezee himself. After investigating the monological and dialogical tendencies in Costello's failed attempts at self-knowledge, I move on to Coetzee's famous *autre*biographical trilogy. Special focus is placed on its third instalment, *Summertime*, which is mostly written in interview format and thus allows to explore the limitations of dialogue-based biographical exchanges. Finally, the chapter wraps up looking at Coetzee's latest critical study on autobiography, an epistolary volume titled *The Good Story* (2015) he co-authored with psychotherapist Arabella Kurtz.

The backdrop of Chapter Three is the recent development in animal studies and posthumanist theory. Starting from the mid-Nineties, animals have obviously been a central concern in works by Coetzee, and his fiction has inspired an overwhelming number of critical and philosophical analysis of the animal condition. However, while theoretical reflection on animals and their ontological and ethical status abounds in Coetzee's production, animals are scarcely represented in Coetzee's narratives, unless of course they are the topic of philosophical discussion between human characters. My aim in the first part of the chapter is to address those few instances when animals do appear in Coetzee's fiction – mostly as symbols or representations of anthropological qualities and concepts. The later portion of Coetzee's production, however, presents a shift in the representation of animals which reaches its culmination in the hybrid works of art he created with the Belgian sculptress Berlinde De Bruyckere. Those works are the focus of the second part of the chapter, which addresses problems of co-authorship and authorial responsibility, communication strategies between

Coetzee and De Bruyckere, and their effect on representation of animal and human corporeality.

Chapter Four is about Coetzee's intertextual relationship with Platonic dialogues and Christianity in *Elizabeth Costello* and *The Childhood of Jesus*. The analysis is primarily based on the Bakhtinian approach to the dialogues as works of art rather than merely philosophical: on one hand, such approach lays the groundwork for an interpretation of the Costello character as a Socratic figure. On the other hand, it allows us to see how Coetzee's intertextual choices merely mimic the form and vocabulary of the hermeneutic process. At all times, however, Coetzee's use of dialogue never allows for advancement in either communication or knowledge. Similar remarks are made on Coetzee's frequent use of religious lexicon, which, while building a frame for the narrative with a series of references known to many, is usually ironic or even grotesque. My main argument is that both intertextual choices point to the insufficiency of human logos as a means to achieve knowledge in the philosophical realm and communion with the other in the religious one.

Two factors have contributed to the choice of works by Coetzee I have analyzed more deeply. One is obviously thematic; the other is chronological. On one hand, the use of dialogical formats is more prominent in the later part of Coetzee's production (it suffices to think about Elizabeth Costello's confrontations and debates, the interviews in *Summertime*, the mock-Platonic conversations in *The Childhood of Jesus*, as well as Coetzee's choice to cooperate with other artists on epistolary projects); on the other hand, Coetzee's choice to shift from first- to third-person narrators in the Nineties shows, according to Derek Attridge, that Coetzee "implicitly dissociates the narrative voice from the narrated consciousness" (2005: 143), thereby allowing for the inner dialogism that characterizes his narrations.

As for the choice of secondary sources, my first frame of reference was obviously the ever-expanding body of work produced in Coetzee studies. With the amount of critical material on J.M. Coetzee growing every day, the critical network that has been developing in the last thirty years has become an indispensable resource for every new Coetzee scholar. As David Attwell notices, "there are surprisingly few schisms among Coetzee's scholars, and the

whole field is founded on the repudiation of a remarkably insubstantial group of statements about his supposedly irresponsible politics" (Boehmer 2010: 60). Aside from this invaluable basis, the thinkers who feature most prominently are Mikhail Bakhtin for his theorization of dialogism as well as his lesser-known interpretation of the Socratic dialogues, Emmanuel Lévinas and his ethics of otherness and Jacques Derrida for his work on the animal/human divide and Cary Wolfe for his broader conceptualization of posthumanist theories and discourses.

Dialogue is obviously a vast field to investigate, and the word itself has a long philosophical tradition that is not possible nor useful to explore here. While exploring the dialogical dimension of Coetzee's writing, as I said, my theoretical foundation was Bakhtin's theories and his accolades'. As for verbal exchanges between characters, however, I have chosen to rely on Coetzee's "fairly technical" definition of dialogue: "an act of communication [with] a number of requirements to be met. Among those are: two participants, an I and a You, prepared to both emit and receive messages; and a shared code" (*The Good Story*, 54).

The rocky, oftentimes impossible relationship between these I and You has been the main object of my analysis. More often than not, verbal communication in Coetzee's work is faulty, and ultimately insufficient for authentic reciprocal understanding. At the same time, however, it has proven to be the imperfect driving force that allowed narrative and representational dead-ends to be overcome. It is on these premises that I have based my work, hoping that it will shed some more light on otherness in Coetzee's narratives as shadowy counterpart which, in Less Murray's words, "permit[s] itself to be neither ignored nor understood" (1993: 39) – and thereby allows narrative desire never to extinguish.

Chapter One

The Narrative Peculiarity of Coetzee's Fictional Dialogues

There ought to be [...] some way of rounding off the morning and giving it shape and meaning: some confrontation leading to some final word. There ought to be an arrangement such that she bumps into someone in the corridor [...]; something should pass between them, sudden as lighting, that will illuminate the landscape for her, even if afterwards it returns to its native darkness. But the corridor, it seems, is empty.
Elizabeth Costello

1.1 Dead Ends, Countervoices, and the Problem of Desire

"My name is Eugene Dawn. I cannot help that. Here goes." (*Dusklands*, 1): thus famously begins *Dusklands* (1974), J.M. Coetzee's first published novel. Of course, in Carrol Clarkson's words, this short statement is also "the inaugural narrative declaration of Coetzee's fictional *oeuvre*" (2009: 138), and an ambiguous one at best. Right away, readers face a twofold statement: the narrator's helplessness in the face of his own identity ("My name is Eugene Dawn. I cannot help that.") and the seemingly unstoppable narrative flow that follows after he admits to it ("I cannot help that. Here goes.").

Issues of personal and historical identity are immediately at stake, as critics have highlighted. David Attwell speaks of an "ontological drama" in *Dusklands* that is "continuous with a moral critique of, and indeed, resistance to, Jacobus Coetzee", the Afrikaner ancestor whose colonial narrative is the object of the second part of the book (1991: 29). From the outset, however, the theme of historical heritage and personal responsibility are intertwined

with meta-narrative references. The first, and most blatant, is the nameplay. Obviously, the narrator's name – Dawn, the signal of a new beginning – stands in stark and bitterly ironic contrast with the title. Even more poignant is the way the first of many characters named Coetzee is introduced in the novel right after the incipit. The description Dawn gives of him is less than flattering: "Coetzee has asked me to revise my essay. […] I am steeling myself against this powerful, genial, ordinary man, so utterly without vision. I fear him and despise him for his blindness" (*Dl*, 1). Many Coetzee-characters will cross paths in this first novel as well as in subsequent works of fiction and, as Sue Kossew remarks in her monograph *Pen and Power*, issues of meta-narrative and historical identity converge in a confessional-like mode that will later pervade Coetzee's production: the narrator feels the "need to present his story as self-therapy" (1996: 36).

Eugene Dawn's confessional flow does not just present the readers with recurrent themes (historical memory and responsibility) and modes (the confessional narrative) in Coetzee's work; it also displays distinguishing features of his aesthetics: what Jan Wilm describes as a "complex oscillation between momentum and stasis" (2016: 2), a Beckettian sense of moving forward while also being slowed down. We soon learn, in fact, that, like many of Coetzee's characters, Dawn is entrapped in a stagnating existential situation that stands in stark contrast with his hyperactive and repetitive inner monologue ("I am an egg that must lie in the downiest of nests under the most coaxing of nurses before my bald, unpromising shell cracks and my secret life emerges" – *Dl*, 1).

Coetzee's characters will find themselves again and again in Eugene Dawn's predicament. Their impasses, however, are usually even plainer for the reader to see because – as opposed to Dawn's almost solipsistic approach to reality – they play out in their failed attempts to communicate with others. The main character and narrator in Coetzee's second novel is in a situation not unlike Dawn's: Magda is an unmarried woman whose solitary life in a South African farm is presented to the reader through a fragmentary, repetitive monologue tinged with hysteria. Differently from Dawn, however, Magda both longs and fears human contact – an ambiguous feeling that is reflected in equally ambiguous declarations: at the beginning of the book, she dreams about the day when she "must have

another human being, hear another voice, even if it speaks only abuse" (*HotC*, 17) and she envies the connection other people seem to share thanks to a mysterious "private language, with an *I* and a *you* and a *here* and a *now* of their own" (38). When she attempts to establish some sort of human connection, however, Magda feels that the words she uses are corrupted by reality and social structures. The untainted language of an unspecified mythical past cannot be recovered, and her conclusion is that she "cannot carry on with these idiot dialogues. […] What passes between us now is a parody" (106). Eventually, she convinces herself that her inability to communicate will grant her freedom: "this is not going to be a dialogue, thank God, I can stretch my wings and fly where I will" (110). Once again, in typical Beckettian fashion, Magda does not move away from the farm, nor does she find some form of human contact and escape her inner monologue.

We see that Coetzee's writing, from its very outset, has been staging incommunicability between characters as well as other kinds of dead ends and impossibilities. Paradoxically enough, however, Coetzee has often been described in criticism as a dialogic writer. Such stance has been explored most thoroughly in Carrol Clarkson's famous 2009 monograph *Countervoices*, now a pivotal text in Coetzee's studies. Clarkson borrows Bakhtin's words on Dostoevsky to describe Coetzee's single-voiced narrations as "conversation[s] of the most intense kind, for each present, uttered word points to something outside itself, beyond its own limits, to the unspoken words of another person."[3] According to Clarkson, there are many reasons why Coetzee is a dialogic writer: he "raises a countervoice" and "produces a discourse inflected by an invisible interlocutor" (Clarkson 2009: 8), but he is also "responsive to other writers and to practitioners and philosophers […] in ways that enable him to develop a refined literary-critical discourse of his own, and to conduct experiments in prose fiction himself with a heightened degree of consciousness about the process" (*ibidem*); he is preoccupied with the idea of a monologic, dominating authorial consciousness, to which he opposes a fiction with "a number of competing voices and discourses" and "no central claim to truth or authority" (Clarkson 2009: 9), and he constantly elicits readerly response (*ibidem*).

[3] Quoted in Clarkson 2009: 8, originally from Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984: 197).

Clarkson later devotes an entire chapter ("You", 47-73) to the ethics and aesthetics of Coetzee's literary addresses. While she starts off with an acknowledgement that "one thinks immediately of the playing-out of precarious and difficult 'I-you' relations within the fiction" (47), she soon moves on to her primary interest: "Coetzee's sustained philosophical engagement with questions about the logic of literary address" (*ibidem*). It is precisely on this contraposition – the arduous I-you relations depicted in Coetzee's fiction vs. the author's ethical engagement with addressing the other – that I want to focus on in my analysis.

The beginning of Coetzee's fictional *oeuvre* features monologists like Magda and Eugene Dawn, who are trapped in their own discourse. Subsequent moments in Coetzee's production, however, display more complex dialogical attempts at mutual understanding which, more often than not, turn out to be inconclusive. Jan Wilm describes two kinds of dialogues between Coetzee's characters. One is the juxtaposition of two monologues that may somehow be relevant to one another, but still fail to take each other into account and to truly respond to the other's observations and objections: "characters do not seem to communicate instrumentally, […] they do not ask questions as a means towards an end, […] and their communication is hardly phatic or expressive" (Wilm 2016: 153). This is obviously an unsuccessful kind of communication between characters, but it "implicitly […] prompt[s] a philosophical dialogue between the text and the reader" (*ibidem*). However, there are also kinds of dialogues where one or both speakers do try (and usually fail) to rely on the same code and establish a connection. The incommunicability is often shown in long series of non-sequiturs, which prompts Wilm to define this kind of dialogues as "non-teleological" (2016: 155).

One clear example is Mrs Curren's confrontation with Mr. Thabane in *Age of Iron* (1990). Both interlocutors are retired teachers in apartheid South Africa, and they meet when Mrs Curren, a white, middle-aged, and terminally ill woman, finds herself involved in her domestic worker's desperate attempt to find her teenage son, who has taken part in an anti-apartheid guerrilla action and disappeared. Curren and Tahabane still do not know that the boy, Bheki, is dead. Minutes before finding his body, they stop among the burning shacks of a black community in the suburbs of Cape Town: Mrs Curren is exhausted, she has fallen down

repeatedly, and she is torn between the right of care she feels entitled to as a dying woman and her historical responsibility towards the repressed community. The situation is, indeed, metaphorical, but it also presents mere practical problems: Curren does not just represent the white oppressor – she is also slowing down the search for Bheki because of her physical condition of frailty. When Thabane reluctantly stops the search to wait for her, a small crowd gathers and listens to their exchange:

> "I must get home soon," I said. It was an appeal; I could hear the unsteadiness in my voice.
> "You have seen enough?" said Mr Thabane, sounding more distant than before.
> "Yes, I have seen enough. I didn't come here to see sights. I came to fetch Bheki."
> "And you want to go home?"
> "Yes, I want to go home. I am in pain, I am exhausted." […]
> "You want to go home," he said. "But what of the people who live here? When they want to go home, this is where they must go. What do you think of that?" […]
> "I have no answer," I said. "It is terrible." (*AoI*, 97-98).

Thabane wants Curren to react to the situation they are both in; at the same time, Curren is torn between the empathetic feelings she is experiencing in the face of physical violence and historical oppression and her own rights as an innocent bystander and cancer patient.

> "This is not just terrible," he said, this is a crime. When you see a crime being committed in front of your eyes, what do you say?" Do you say, 'I have seen enough, I didn't come to see sights, I want to go home'?"
> I shook my head in distress.
> "No, you don't," he said. "Correct. Then what do you say? What sort of crime is it that you see? What is its name?"
> He is a teacher, I thought: that is why he speaks so well. What he is doing to me he has practised in the classroom. It is the trick one uses to make one's own answer seem to come from the child. (*AoI*, 98)

Curren wants to answer, but as she tries to develop her argument it becomes clear that she is speaking a different language than Thabane, and that their discourses are simply incommensurable:

> "There are many things I am sure I could say, Mr Thabane," I said. "But then they must truly come from me. When one speaks under duress – you should know this – one rarely speaks the truth. […] There are terrible things going on here. But what I think of them I must say in my own way." […]
> "These are terrible sights," I repeated, faltering. "They are to be condemned. But I cannot denounce them in other people's words. I must find my own words, from myself. Otherwise it is not the truth. That is all I can say now."
> "This woman talks shit," said a man in the crowd. He looked around. "Shit," he said. No one contradicted him. […]
> "Yes," I said, speaking directly to him. "You are right, what you say is true." […] "But what do you expect?" I went on. "To speak of this – I waved a hand over the bush, the smoke, the path – you would need the tongue of a god."
> "Shit," he said again. (*AoI*, 98-99).

"The tongue of a god": with this phrase Curren conveys an impossible, pre-linguistic and perhaps even pre-moral ethical stance. What is required of her, in order to truly and authentically understand the other, is to completely renounce her identity and individuality, to become an empty container who can take in and embody the *you* she is addressing.

The abstractedness of Mrs Curren's statement is reflected in Clarkson's commentary on the aesthetic and ethical ramification of linguistic questions in Coetzee's writing (2009: 53). Clarkson quotes Coetzee's assertion in *Doubling the Point* that "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" (*DtP*, 72). Coetzee, of course, is only speaking in terms of empty linguistic categories (he is referring to Emile Benveniste's *Problems in General Linguistics*); however, as he develops his discussion, his argument "begins to take on a suggestive ethical resonance […] and gains force in Coetzee's linking of Benveniste's linguistic observations to the central ethical preoccupations of Martin Buber" (Clarkson 2009: 53). Martin Buber describes the I-you encounter as a disruptive event that "take[s] place and scatters" (1937: 80). Its magnitude is beyond human capability, which makes it impossible not to objectify the *you* into an *it*: moments of communion are necessarily just that, moments, and they have to be followed by a third-person objectification of the *you* in order for individual identities to be preserved.

Within the realm of human experience, the only lasting interaction which seems to promise a similar fusion of *I* and *you* is the one which is prompted by the dynamic of desire.

Desire, however, is never a case of the *I* disappearing to make room for the *you*; on the contrary, it presents a grotesque reversal of the moral encounter evoked by Buber (and by Mrs Curren's desperate realization): the *I* who desires does not renounce itself, but rather takes in the *you*, not in order to comprehend it, but rather to possess it. It is not a mere coincidence that in *Age of Iron* it is a woman who has to face this impossibility; as Emmanuel Lévinas writes in *Totality and Infinity* the feminine being is "the welcoming one par excellence, welcome in itself" (157), and "the I-Thou in which Buber sees the category of interhuman relationship is the relation not with the interlocutor but with feminine alterity" (155). Mrs Curren states the impossibility of becoming an empty *you* whose only function is to accommodate another speaking *I* when she complains that "only the tongue of a god" would be able to comply with Thabane's request.

In Mrs Curren's case we witness an inner conflict (she feels the weight of her historical responsibility as a white woman, but she also refuses to relinquish the rights she feels she is entitled to as a human being) as well as an interpersonal one (she refuses to give in to Thabane's request to fully embrace his cause in spite of the extreme consequences she would face). Similar situations are often staged in Coetzee's fiction, and they obviously generate different kinds of dead-ends. Some of them are narrative (the plot halts and turns on itself), others are communicative (characters fail to comprehend one another). What allows Coetzee's plots to move forward is, therefore, the interplay between the drive to satisfy desire and the obstacles (oftentimes, of a communicative kind) that hinder such process.

Unsatisfied desire as the driving force of Coetzee's fiction is at the center of Giulia Zanfabro's study on Coetzee's characters and 'gendered' storytelling. In a 2013 essay[4] Zanfabro distinguishes between two kinds of female monologists in Coetzee's *oeuvre*: the focalizers (Magda, Susan Barton, Elizabeth Curren, Elizabeth Costello), and the figures of silence. The latter are characters such as Lucy in *Disgrace*, the nameless girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and Marijana in *Slow Man*, who all have – and act on – desires that are never known to nor understood by the male protagonists within the narration. Zanfabro's thesis is

[4] Zanfabro, G., 2013, "Desideri, Fallimenti, Resistenze: Figure Femminili nella Narrativa di J. M. Coetzee", *Between*, III:5, 1-28. All translations of the quotes from this essay are mine.

that both kinds of women – those who own their stories silently and those who are moved to tell them – constitute resistance to an androcentric monologue which consists of the self-appointed right to tell one's own story in one's own terms: "male narrative desire is never staged. This is because [male] characters hold *de facto* an authorial position before they can actually experience any desire for it. They already are those who can tell their stories" (2013: 11). A paradox emerges: is the focus on storytelling, or on the desire to narrate and the authority to do so? Zanfabro does indeed go on to state that what is at stake is "whose desires are not staged" (*ibidem*), and that Coetzee's male 'silent characters' – Michael K, Friday, Vercueil – are just as powerfully unfathomable as the female ones. Yet again, it cannot be denied that, at least traditionally, desire and authorial authority are both gendered concepts. Zanfabro quotes (on page 1 and 15 respectively) from pivotal theoretical texts on the subject – the 1990 preface to *Gender Troubles*, where Butler questions Sartre's definition of desire as intrinsically masculine, heterosexual and troublesome,[5] and the question Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar famously ask in the opening of *The Madwoman in the Attic*: "Is a pen a metaphorical penis?".

When thinking of masculine desire as heterosexual and authoritative, some of Coetzee's male focalizers obviously come to mind. The first one is likely to be the main character in *Disgrace*, David Lurie: there is very little doubt that his conception of desire pretty much coincides with Sartre's: a manly force, not necessarily fueled by reciprocation, and troublesome. Lurie's controversial attempts to solve "the problem of sex" (*D*, 1) do in fact trigger the whole chain of events that make up the plot of *Disgrace*. Those events, of course, also constitute Lurie's story – a story that he feels entirely entitled to share or hide, comment upon, and make sense of according to his own thoughts and feelings, even when he is being judged by a commission investigating his sexual misconduct with a much younger student of his. While Lurie never questions his own authority over his story, though, he does not seem to comprehend his daughter Lucy's determination to do the same. While his desire sets a

[5] "I read Beauvoir who explained that to be a woman within the terms of a masculinist culture is to be a source of mystery and unknowability for men, and this seemed confirmed somehow when I read Sartre for whom all desire, problematically presumed as heterosexual and masculine, was defined as trouble". (Butler 2006: xxix-xxx)

narrative in motion that he feels he can legitimately control, Lucy's desires are an obstacle – a form of resistance, as Zanfabro says – to the very same narrative, as we can see very clearly during their dialogical exchanges. When Lucy tells her father that she is pregnant from the day they were both assaulted by a group of black men who stole from Lucy's farm, raped her, killed her dogs, and beat her father unconscious, Lurie is astonished that her daughter has decided not to have an abortion:

> "You could have told me earlier. Why did you keep it from me?"
> "[…] I can't run my life according to whether or not you like what I do. Not any more. You behave as if everything I do is part of the story of your life. You are the main character, I am a minor character who doesn't make an appearance until halfway through. Well, contrarily to what you think, people are not divided into major and minor. I have a life of my own, just as important to me as yours is to you, and in my life I am the one who makes the decisions." (*D*, 198)

Contrarily to Mrs Curren, Lucy has chosen to surrender her own identity in order to accommodate someone else's – just not her father's. Whichever authority David Lurie holds over the story of their mutual experience of violence is implied and taken for granted; Lucy's refusal to conform to it challenges her father's authority, and Lurie can only meet his daughter's response with skeptical resignation.

A similarly poignant example of the connection between male sexuality and authority over storytelling comes from *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Its male main character, the Magistrate, takes it for granted that it is his duty to 'write history', and his failed attempts to do so are found throughout the book[6]. The Magistrate feels that his narrative and sexual shortcomings are somewhat connected: "I found that I needed women less frequently […]. Not only that; there were unsettling occasions when in the middle of the sexual act I felt myself losing my way like a storyteller losing the thread of his story" (48); "[a]ll that day I sit in a trance at my desk staring at the empty white paper, waiting for words to come. […] On

[6] The Magistrate explicitly mentions both his narrative duty and failures in the end of the book: "It seems right that, as a gesture to the people who inhabited the ruins in the desert, we too ought to set down a record of settlement to be left for posterity buried under the walls of our town; and to write such a history no one would seem to be better fitted than our last magistrate" (168); "[f]or a long time I stare at the plea I have written. It would be disappointing to know that the poplar slips I have spent so much time on contain a message as devious, as equivocal, as reprehensible as this" (169).

the third day I surrender, put the paper back in the drawer, and make preparations to leave. It seems appropriate that a man who does not know what to do with the woman in his bed should not know what to write" (62-3). The "woman in his bed" is a barbarian girl; she belongs to the group of invaders that the Magistrate's Empire is trying to fight. Her story is mysterious: she has obviously been subjected to torture – her vision is impaired as a result – but, like Lucy, she refuses to talk about the violence she experienced and eludes the Magistrate's questions. An ambiguous relationship – sexual, but non-penetrative – develops between the two of them, and the Magistrate's frustration grows accordingly. He cannot claim possession either of the woman's body[7] or of her history, which she still will not share; as a result, he decides to organize an expedition to take her back to her people – and out of his narrative.

Examples such as those above support Zanfabro's argument that gender does indeed factor in Coetzee's 'dialogical monologues'. Yet, contrarily to what one may think at first, gender has more to do with narrating consciousnesses than narrated others. Friday and Vercueil's silent resistance is very similar to the barbarian girl and Lucy's; but Susan Barton and Elizabeth Curren are certainly different narrators than the Magistrate and David Lurie. Their storytelling styles are as tentative as they are self-questioning; and the desires they experience, but struggle to manage, trigger fragmentary narratives "that elude any attempt at classifications" (Zanfabro 2013:8).

1.2 A shaggy God story

If Zanfabro's analysis is to be taken into account, *The Childhood of Jesus* stands out in Coetzee's production as a puzzling work. It is easy to see that its characters do not quite fit in

[7] The Magistrate's idea that penetration equals possession of the female body is stated explicitly: "[t]he old delight in the warmth and shapeliness of women's bodies did not desert me, but there was a new puzzlement. Did I really want to enter and claim possession of these beautiful creatures?" (*Waiting for the Barbarians,* p. 49)

the frame Zanfabro creates while attempting a 'gendered classification' of Coetzee's narrating and narrated characters. Simón, the male focalizer, is undoubtedly a creature of desire – his appetites, either dietary or sexual, are indeed a motif in the book – but he does not seem to experience any authorial or authoritative ambition. When he finds himself in a dystopic, afterlife-like town where people seem to live free of their personal history and material legacies, he is not interested in retrieving memories of his own forgotten past and in making sense of his bizarre destiny; on the contrary, his undivided dedication is spent on the fulfillment of tasks he has unquestioningly taken on himself: caring for a boy named David and finding his lost mother. There are no instructions he can follow to do so: the only available ones were included in a letter that David allegedly lost before his arrival in the mysterious town of Novilla. Contrarily to what one might naturally expect, though, the mysterious lost letter does not become a major element either in Simón's thoughts or in the book. It is, in fact, barely mentioned. What would easily constitute a hole in the narration is not depicted as such; and one plausible reason for that is Simón's utter indifference towards it.

The mismatch between the intensity of Simón's material desires and his narrative apathy makes him untypical among Coetzee's male focalizer. However, I want to suggest that one of Coetzee's novels does bear a striking resemblance to *The Childhood of Jesus* – at least in terms of narrative structure and halting plot. In this section, I will focus on the narrative structure of both books and their connection to the failed dialogical exchanges that punctuate them. Hopefully, such a reading will shed more light on the role of dialogue in Coetzee's narratives of dead ends and incommunicability.

Slow Man was published in 2005; its novelistic format, just like *The Childhood of Jesus*'s, is thoroughly conventional. Although some may argue that *Slow Man*'s setting – a realistic-looking Adelaide – is very different from the unfathomable town of Novilla, Gillian Dooley's remarks about it unveil the barely detectable aura of cognitive dissonance that pervades Coetzee's fictional Adelaide, too. Dooley, Australian by birth, points out that although the city is altogether recognizable, many small details have been modified. She has no doubt that this was done on purpose, and she is equally certain that Coetzee has employed similar techniques to describe other places (Dooley 2010: 61).

Of course it would be ludicrous to postulate a special kinship between *Slow Man* and *The Childhood of Jesus* on the mere grounds of similar formats and, to a certain degree, settings. Another relevant analogy is the feeling of detachment from language that characters from both books have to deal with. In *The Childhood of Jesus*, characters have been washed clean of their pasts, including their mother tongues, and they are forced to learn Spanish as the new and only shared code for communication. A less radical situation is staged in *Slow Man*, where the main characters nonetheless need to resort to translation in order to communicate with each other: Paul Rayment and Marijana Jockić are both Australian immigrants (he from France, she from Croatia). The one language they have in common is a second language for both of them; their dialogues imply translating on both parts and, thus, an unnatural and mediated relation to English. Of course, Paul and Marijana have not forgotten their mother tongues, but time and lack of usage have made them distant and blurry. Once again, this analogy alone with *The Childhood of Jesus* may not be particularly poignant. Linguistic self-reflexivity is a major trope in Coetzee's production, and it can hardly be argued that problematic relations to language are specific to the two books I am discussing.[8] As I hope to show, though, *The Childhood of Jesus* and *Slow Man* are also connected by one major feature of their narrative structure.

In her monographic work on Coetzee's novels up to 2007, Giuliana Iannaccaro describes *Slow Man* as a *mise en abyme* of narrative roads not taken: "*Slow Man*'s plot could take many predictable roads, but in the end it does not move in any of those directions: it could easily take a turn for the tragic, the pathetic, or the romantic – all of these potential conclusions would fit the narrative. But the plot progresses unconventionally, and the characters act in unexpected ways. It is as if the novel itself deliberately avoided conforming to typically novelistic routes" (2009: 241).[9] What Iannaccaro does not say is that potential

[8] Coetzee claims in a letter to Paul Auster that after reading Jacques Derrida's *Monolingualism of the Other* in 2009 he was "struck" by new ideas about the "removed and interrogative" relations many people have with their own mother tongue (Coetzee 2013a: 65). Coetzee makes remarks to the effect that no such thing as a mother tongue may even exist anymore, and that language is not a "propriety": it is always "the language of the other", and "wandering into [it] is always a trespass" (*ivi*, 67). *The Childhood of Jesus* is the first new novel Coetzee has published after 2009 (it actually hit the shelves more or less simultaneously with his published correspondence with Auster, *Here and Now*). The issue of the mother tongue(s?) that its characters have mysteriously forgotten may well be seen in light of this.

[9] The translation from Italian is mine.

narrative lines are indeed abandoned altogether – but not before some tentative exploration. In a novel that could be (but of course ends up not being) Paul Rayment's quest for love, various women cross his way. Only one of them, the care-giver Marijana, remains in the book until the end; but two other female characters simply disappear from the plot. While Margaret – an old and flirtatious friend of Paul's – vanishes rather inconspicuously, it is difficult not to notice that the third woman – a mysterious blind girl named Marianna – abruptly disappears from the plot after a very awkward sexual encounter with the main character. Potential love stories are not lived through, nor mentioned again – which of course defies the readers' expectations for a follow-through and generates puzzlement. Making sense of these disappearances is easy enough once another female character enters the novel: Elizabeth Costello figures in *Slow Man* as the inconclusive author of Paul Rayment's story; or, to phrase this more appropriately, *Slow Man* is the story of Elizabeth Costello's failing attempts to either tell or create Paul Rayment's story. In spite of the little authority Costello holds over her fictional creation, though, it is plain to see that the women who disappear from the plot are failed narrative attempts of hers – aborted plot-lines that she had tried out, and later given up on. Narrative dead-ends are posited; the plot does not go beyond them, but the narrative as a whole – the narrative of narrating – does. In Zoë Wicomb's words: "the novel reveals its halting construction which substitutes for the story and at the same time constitutes the story" (Bradshaw & Neill 2010: 223).

Of course one cannot fail to appreciate the similarities between *Slow Man*'s narrative structure as it is described above and the plot of *The Childhood of Jesus*. Two women disappear from its plot, too – one of them gradually (Elena) and the other one abruptly (Ana). Simón meets them both while on his quest – a very explicit quest – for David's lost mother; and while Ana makes it clear from the very start that she is not a care-giver, Elena would gladly take on the role. Neither Ana's reluctance nor Elena's enthusiasm for motherhood, though, seem to have any impact on Simón's quest. Different dialogues between either of the two women and him fail both in terms of communication and empathy; and soon after the dialogical failure the women disappear from the plot. Narrative lines halt suddenly and, as Roger Bellin rightly states, the plot is episodic as a result. The narration becomes less

fragmentary once a third woman, Inés, unquestioningly agrees with Simón's conviction that she should mother David.

Of course all of this is very similar to what happens in *Slow Man* – with some major differences. The first one is the dialogic structure of the novel: it is in the context of their conversations with Simón that the two women seem to be driven away from him. The second is the idea of femininity and motherhood as blind acceptance, which once again is portrayed as an almost metaphysical phenomenon that allows the plot to continue; and the third is the lack of any authorial or authoritative figure. Whereas the narrative dead-ends Coetzee posits in *Slow Man* are easy to make sense of when we think of them as Elizabeth Costello's unsuccessful attempts at writing, how are we to understand the ones we find in *The Childhood of Jesus*, a novel where no authorial or authoritative voice is ever staged?

The erratic plot in *Childhood* is mainly determined by the sudden disappearance of Ana and Eléna. Inés's blind acceptance to Simón's request, conversely, allows the plot to continue, albeit in an unsatisfying way for readers and Simón alike. The former soon realize that there is no true, primal connection between Inés and David and that Simón's quest was more of an arbitrary decision than a necessity dictated by fate; the latter discovers that Inés is not a good mother, finds himself to have suddenly become a minor presence in David's life, and has to adapt to an even more unsatisfying life than before.

Wordplay allows us to make sense of a plot like *Childhood*'s if we think of the rambling, nonsensical jokes known as 'shaggy dog stories'. According to Harold Bloomvald, shaggy dog stories are "ridiculous in setting, long and drawn-out in style, and likely to be followed by more groans than laughs" (1963: 42). Their conclusions are not necessarily faulty of logic, but they are "psychological non-sequiturs, faulty of attitude and response" (43). Their punch lines are not supposed to be funny in the traditional sense, but they are meant to make the readers/listeners face their own expectations as to what a funny and accomplished narrative should be. When such a realization occurs, readers are likely to laugh at themselves and to question their presuppositions about what works of fiction should be. *The Childhood of Jesus* offers us a similar reading experience: its very title is, of course, loaded with expectations, which are regularly disappointed as we only find minor episodes from the

Gospels, which most of the time are rewritten parodically but not hilariously, audaciously but not blasphemously.

Like the punch-line in shaggy dog stories, the development of the plot in *The Childhood of Jesus* is rather inconspicuous and it makes readers aware of the nature of their expectations, which are often based on their knowledge of common narrative clichés rather than on the actual and singular reading experience. Fictions like *Childhood* do evoke commonly expected plot lines and narrative outcomes, but they stubbornly fail to conform to those same archetypes they refer to by intertextual means.

Childhood can thus be read as a shaggy… God story, not only because of the obvious references to the Gospels, but more significantly because, while all characters can be traced back to evangelical *personae*, no God-like figure is ever detected. As we said, there is no central authority and no authorial voice controlling the rambling narrative; characters appear in a new life with no possessions from their past, no memories to build their identity upon, and not even a mother tongue. The only element which figures in the readers' minds as a potential guiding principle is the letter – a text, written and authoritative – David claims to have had and lost. One would expect the letter to eventually turn up and thus provide a meaningful ending for David's story; yet, the letter is never found – indeed, no one ever even looks for it. Like a Bekettian Godot that only readers are waiting for, the letter simply disappears from the plot, leaving no trace of any superior authority whatsoever.

The ending to Simón and David's quest for a mother presents us with an anticlimactic character like Inés, who does not respond to any kind of expectations. Inés is actually much more inconspicuous than the two other women Simón had interacted with before, but her unconditional openness to communication turns out to be good enough for the plot to progress, however disappointingly. Good-enough-ness is presented in the figure of Inés as the only key to overcome narrative as well as communicative dead-ends – as the punch line in the shaggy dog story – once both readers and characters realize that God-like communion with the other is simply not attainable through such an imperfect means as human language.

Chapter Two

The Lives of Writers: Biographies, Memoirs, Alter-Egos, and One Good Story

This monologue of the self is a maze of words out of which I shall not find a way until someone else gives me a lead.
In the Heart of the Country

One of the most obvious challenges in Coetzee studies is keeping up with the overwhelming amount of critical responses Coetzee's writing generates every year. María López describes it as "wellnigh stupendous" (1) in her recent monograph *Acts of Visitation* (2010), and then she sketches its multifariousness in an introductory section. Aptly titled "Critical Appropriations and Hermeneutic Resistance", López's opening chapter traces the history of a literary phenomenon – an ever-expanding collection of critical work which, in spite of its diversity and fast-growing proportions, never quite seems to exhaust the elusive subjects of Coetzee's complex body of fiction and secretive authorial *persona*. Such *persona* is the object of this chapter, which sets out to analyse its numerous versions and variations and, most specifically, the dialogical component to its construction.

Of course, many attempts were made in the last few years at outlining the history of Coetzee criticism, either from specific critical perspectives or, more simply, chronologically. Some of these attempts are studies in their own right, while others serve introductory

purposes to specific critical readings.[10] However, as diverse as their aim and scope may be, nearly all these works begin with appreciative comments on the number of responses Coetzee's writing keeps on eliciting. A comparison is often made that borrows from Coetzee's own words: few scholars have failed to notice that the "small critical industry" (*EC*, 1) Coetzee describes as having developed around his character (and alleged literary alter-ego) Elizabeth Costello is in fact utterly similar to the one that has developed around himself.[11] It is easy to assume that Coetzee shares Costello's sceptical outlook on literary fame; so easy, in fact, that J.C. Kannemeyer chose to open *J.M. Coetzee. A Life in Writing* (2011) – a massive biographical work whose thoroughness still remains unrivalled – with such exact remark: "J.M. Coetzee's reference, in 2003, to a small 'critical industry' that had sprung up [...] around his fictional writer Elizabeth Costello could be seen as a possibly ironic allusion to the massive industry generated by his novels" (17). Coetzee's struggle with the management of his own literary fame is highlighted right away. Kannemeyer describes an author who both solicits and escapes attention in a number of ways, including the creation of characters like Costello: fictional alter-egos that generate unsolvable-yet-inescapable disputations on the degree of overlapping between them and their authors.

It is rarely the case in writings by as well as on Coetzee that the unsolvable quality of theoretical debate generates self-referential dead-ends.[12] The alter-ego critical trail was never exhausted in Coetzee studies, and it has in fact generated rich and nuanced responses that deserve to be thoroughly addressed in studies on Coetzee's public image.[13] Such an analysis does indeed take up much space in subsequent sections of Kannemeyer's book; the opening of the biography, however, moves rather quickly to other contradictory aspects of Coetzee's literary fame. The remarks on the magnitude of Coetzee's critical industry are followed by

[10] Aside from López's introdroduction many studies on the critical responses to Coetzee focus specifically on his alter-egos and public *persona*: most notably, the closing chapter of Dominic Head's 2009 *Cambridge Introduction to J.M. Coetzee* and Jane Poyner's essay on Coetzee's supposed political elusiveness (2009: 1-13).

[11] Many critics point this out; among them, David Lodge (2003, online), Karina Magdalena Szczurek (Boehmer/Eaglestone/Iddiols 2009: 40-41), and Andy Lamey (Leist/Singer 2010: 171).

[12] It is safe to say that this statement, however nonspecific, is generally agreed upon in the community of Coetzee critics. As David Attwell summarizes: "There are surprisingly few serious schisms amongst Coetzee's critics, and the whole field is founded on the repudiation of a remarkably insubstantial group of statements about his supposedly irresponsible politics. Every major critic revisits these statements and launches a more sympathetic reading." (The statement comes from an interview with Elleke Boehmer; see Boehmer 2010: 60).

[13] As for this work, controversy on Coetzee's literary alter-egos will be addressed in section 2.2.

comments on its character of exemplarity: Kannemeyer states that Coetzee's scholarship is "producing some of the most insightful and penetrating literary criticism in the field of English studies" (17). Similar statements have also been made elsewhere. In a 2010 essay, Michael Chapman treats Coetzee criticism as a small-scale mirror of the changes that the South African literary system went through during post-apartheid years, as well as a starting point for the development of new critical trends; María López expresses similar views, albeit on less specific terms: "the history of J.M. Coetzee's critical reception is a complex and fascinating one that traces the development not only of his narrative but also many of the main issues that have marked the development of South African, postcolonial, and international literary criticism in recent decades" (2). Indeed, agreement on Coetzee's exemplarity seems to be a non-issue; however, there is as little divergence among Coetzee scholars about the character of singularity that clearly marks his writing and much of the critical production about him. Such stance was famously articulated by Derek Attridge in his monograph *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (2004), and later reasserted by many. Mere pages before her remarks on exemplarity, López writes that she "fully endorse[s] Attridge's argument about the strong 'singularity' of Coetzee's literary works" (xiii). The two poles in the exemplarity/singularity opposition do, indeed, inform López's chapter on "appropriation and resistance" (and, broadly speaking, a trail of thought in Coetzee criticism), the resistance being provided by the elusiveness and autonomy of Coetzee's fiction from any ultimate theoretical categorization.

Stating that the singularity of Coetzee's literary work only elicits equally rich and nuanced critical responses would be naive at best. While many critical readings do focus on the literary and set out to investigate the ever-elusive specificity of Coetzee's voice from unique perspectives, others aim at a more factual and straightforward exploration of the relationship between Coetzee's writing and the context in which they were generated, be it historical, political, theoretical, or, as is the case with the critical material examined here, biographical. While each and every one of those critical perspectives implies a different set of difficulties – it is hard to describe Coetzee's relation to either historical or theoretical discourses as straightforward and unproblematic – biographical analyses of Coetzee's works

and public profile are especially challenging. This may look like an obvious statement: Coetzee's pseudo-autobiographical trilogy, *Scenes from Provincial Life*, experiments to such extents with blurring lines between the factual and the fictional that elements of self-consciousness are ingrained in all subsequent biographical sketches of its author.[14] However, there are other, subtler reasons for such difficulty which have to do with the paradoxical dichotomies surrounding Coetzee's public identity: his celebrity and his secretiveness, his ambivalent relationship to spotlights and controversy, and the highly idiosyncratic quality of a voice that is nonetheless described as representative. All those factors generated a double-bind that critics cannot seem to escape: biographical criticism on Coetzee abounds, and it may well be that the disproportionate amount of attention he receives stems from – rather than just factoring in – the ambiguity of his public figure. As a result, Coetzee's life story has often elicited unfocused attention; it often happens that studies claiming to have biography as their main aim turn into discussions on why, and to what degree, the 'real' Coetzee hides behind his alter-egos and *autre*biographical selves.[15]

To determine whether such theories truly deserves endorsing – whether the idea that a biographical account of J.M. Coetzee, the man, may indeed be hidden behind the intricately overlapping veils of his pseudo-autobiographical selves – we must proceed with separate analyses of those layers. The most external one would be the relatively small set of written or taped recordings of first-hand, non-fictional (or not fictionally-framed) materials Coetzee has chosen to share about himself: interviews and personal documents.

2.1 Interview-based biographical criticism

Coetzee's reputation for being a difficult interviewee is well-known.[16] Even though some scholars (including myself) have been surprised by his kindness and human warmth upon

[14] See Section 2.2.
[15] For an overview, see Krog 2005: 100-107.
[16] See Kannemeyer: "[Coetzee's] urge to privacy caused many journalists to over-emphasise the uncommunicative side of his personality and the dark, sombre aspect of his fiction, creating a one-sided image of the real J.M.

meeting him personally, examples to the contrary seem to greatly outnumber those rare occasions when conversations flowed smoothly. Aside from the two famous exceptions I am soon going to concentrate on – the conversations which provide the basis for *Doubling the Point* and *J.M. Coetzee. A Life in Writing* – Coetzee has agreed to interview only sporadically over the course of his long career. These rare interviews are often generic in tone, and they do not usually belong to any collection.[17] Most of them demonstrate very little beside Coetzee's recalcitrance and his taste for replies that, while formally accurate, often fail to meet conventional expectations for satisfying exchanges. Queries that are not explicitly and carefully worded are likely to be dismissed, and transparent hopes for elaborated answers often stand in stark contrast with Coetzee's curtness.[18] One of the most notable examples is an interview conducted in 2001 by Peter Sacks.[19] Coetzee's answers are always adequate in terms of semantics, but they can hardly be said to comply to the pragmatics of the questions, and Sack's attempt at establishing an empathetic connection are often dismissed, especially when the conversation revolves around Coetzee's feelings rather than mere events in his life. When Sacks tries to discuss the difficulties his interviewee experienced as a young novelist, Coetzee is quick to shrug off and even ridicule his remarks:

> PS: To make those first ventures into writing must have been in a way daunting, particularly daunting.
> JMC: I don't think one should make of indecisiveness and lack of willpower anything so large as daunting.[20]

Rian Malan, a fellow South African author who met Coetzee in the early Nineties, describes an entirely similar interviewing experience. When he asked Coetzee what kind of music he

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Coetzee"; "in interviews, it is true, journalists have found him cautious and hesitant. Aware as he is of the provisionality of an interview situation, there are often silences, as he searches for the best possible formulation" (2011: 423 and 425) and Malan: "J.M. Coetzee almost never gives interviews, so I counted myself very lucky when he granted me an audience in the early 1990s. […] We were to talk only of literature, but my opening question was greeted by dead silence. Coetzee was writing the question on his notepad. He pondered it for several seconds, then proceeded to analyse the assumptions on which it was based, a process that offered some sharp insights into my intellectual shortcomings but revealed absolutely nothing about Coetzee himself" (2013: online; last accessed in July 2018).

[17] See the bibliography for a full list of Coetzee's recorded and written interviews.

[18] Poignantly, such specific kind of reply is not at all infrequent in Coetzee's fiction, and especially in his most Kafkaesque works, as detailed elsewhere in this work (sections 1.3 and 4.2).

[19] Online: https://vimeo.com/12812247 (last accessed June 2018).

[20] 3'31'' to 4'04'' in the video.

liked (a fanzine-like question that Malan admits to asking out of sheer discomfort at Coetzee's icy demeanor), his reply was that he preferred "music [he had] never heard before"; when Malan voiced his views on Coetzee's novel *Foe*, expecting some sort of validation, Coetzee answered that he "would not wish to deny [Malan his] reading".[21]

Wry one-liners are certainly a defining feature of Coetzee's style as an interviewee. Monosyllabic responses are just as frequent (and, perhaps, irksome), as Jane Poyner's 2006 interview demonstrates:

> JP: How important do you think it is for artists and writers to memorialize catastrophe and atrocity […]?
> JMC: […] Surely artists and writers will decide for themselves what is important to them. […]
> JP: As a discourse (or set of discourses), does postcolonialism interest you? And if so, what problems does it raise or are implicit in it?
> JMC: I don't read much academic criticism. […]
> JP: Has your move to Australia opened up new possibilities for your writing?
> JMC: Yes. (Poyner 2006: 22 – 24)

Interviews such as Sacks's, Malan's, or Poyner's certainly arouse some anecdotal curiosity; however, they can hardly provide a solid basis for an analysis of the importance of interviews – or, speaking more broadly, of the dialogical form – in the construction of Coetzee's (auto)biographical *persona*. Such enterprise is best undertaken after a closer look at those few occasions when Coetzee did choose to share tales and thoughts about his personal and professional life, and to do so in a less laconic way than usual.

Information on Coetzee's life was made available in two forms: extensive interviews and personal documents, most of which are lodged in the Coetzee archive at the Harry Ransom Centre (University of Texas at Austin).[22] Given the fairly recent opening of the archive (spring 2013) and Coetzee's well-known reluctance to being interviewed, few studies have been published that develop their main arguments on the base of either or both sources.[23]

[21] Malan 2003: online (last accessed in July 2018).
[22] An index of the materials lodged at the Harry Ransom Centre is available online at this link: http://norman.hrc.utexas.edu/fasearch/findingAid.cfm?eadid=00717. Last accessed July 2018.
[23] Thus far, there has only been one academic event focusing on Coetzee's archive (as well as the topic of the archive in Coetzee Studies). It took place at the University of London, School of Advanced Study, in October 2017

The most famous, lengthy, and thorough are David Attwell's *Doubling the Point* (1992, interview-based) and *J.M. Coetzee: A Life of Writing* (2015, archive-based) and the already mentioned biography by J.C. Kannemeyer, *J.M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing* (both archive- and interview-based)[24]. It is on those works that I wish to focus before moving on with my analysis. However, seeing as how this work focuses on dialogue, attention is primarily based on interview-based criticism. Remarks on Attwell's *A Life of Writing* will only be ancillary to my main argument.

Kannemeyer's biography is traditional in shape and form, and the account of Coetzee's life follows a strict chronological order. It is divided in five parts, each of which covers the years spent by Coetzee in the different countries he has lived in (South Africa, England, the United States, once again South Africa, and Australia). Chapters and subchapters are divided according to fairly standard turning-points such as graduation, relationships and marriages, as well as professional achievements and failures. The chronology of Coetzee's activity as a writer provides a grid which Kannemeyer often uses to frame events of a more personal nature. Everything is documented so extensively as to provoke critical comments that range from the admired to the amused, as Gillian Dooley affirms when she praises Kannemeyer for the magnitude of his labour – while also criticising him for his "dogged approach to literature and less than incandescent prose" (2013: 20).

Kannemeyer's account is indeed supported by a massive number of documents ranging from Coetzee's personal and professional correspondence to reviews, manuscripts, unpublished drafts, notes, research and teaching materials, and more. Such materials are often quoted at unusual lengths, which certainly attests to Kannemeyer's stated intention to report events as factually as possible. Surprisingly, however, all the long and unedited quotes are exclusively from archive documents; conversely, the interviews Kannemeyer conducted with Coetzee, his life partner Dorothy Driver, his daughter Gisela, and other friends and family

(https://www.coetzeeandthearchive.co.uk/). Two ensuing publications, still untitled at the time of writing, are forthcoming.

[24] During Kannemeyer research years, the Coetzee section at the Harry Ransom Centre had not yet opened. Part of the archival material consulted by Kannemeyer came from the Houghton Library at Harvard, and a more consistent bulk was given to him by Coetzee himself (see *A Life in Writing*, 7).

members are only quoted word-for-word a handful of times in more than seven-hundred pages.[25] Most of the time, the interviews are only referred to in footnotes as the sources for whole paragraphs. On some of those occasions, Coetzee's voice and style are recognizable behind Kannemeyer's: see, for example, the scarce and paratactic account of Coetzee's everyday life with Dorothy Driver we find on pages 437-8:

> [Coetzee] said in an interview that Dorothy enjoys travelling and visiting unfamiliar places, and that he is more than happy to accompany her. He prefers France, because he is able to combine his visits with long cycle tours. In spite of what one may be led to believe by his novel *The Master of Petersburg*, he has never been to Russia. When visiting foreign countries, he does not go to museums or churches, because they soon exhaust him. Although he is very interested in music, he does not attend concerts, preferring to listen to recordings at home. He likes accompanying Dorothy to restaurants, but the initiative is usually taken by her. Like him, she is a vegetarian.

However, there are also instances where no clear lines can be traced so as to divide Coetzee's statements from Kannemeyer's phrasing of (and perhaps commentary on) them. This is especially evident when Kannemeyer writes about Coetzee's relationships with those who were closest to him, like Philippa Jubber, the wife Coetzee separated from in the late Sixties. Although the description of their relationship supposedly stems from Kannemeyer's interviews with Coetzee, no footnote is ever employed by Kannemeyer to back up the claims he makes pertaining Coetzee's married life, not even when they are as personal and specific as this example: "ultimately [Philippa Jubber] was never really part of the life [Coetzee] was creating for himself, and she felt at a loose end. [...] The result was that Philippa could not give Coetzee emotional security in the marriage, nor he to her". (162) Therefore, distinguishing between Coetzee's actual statements and the conclusions Kannemeyer draws from them is obviously impossible. Moreover, there are occasions when the rhetoric strategies we find in the biography seem better suited to the realm of storytelling rather than to matter-of-factly accounts of events. Although the fine line between those two kinds of narration is

[25] On those rare occasions when interview excerpts are quoted extensively and word-for-word, the subject matter is never personal. One of the lengthiest quotes is on page 373, and it concerns Coetzee's professional relationship with Breyten Breytenbach. Other, similar examples are to be found on page 426 (comments on the social history of cycling and driving in South Africa) and on page 471 (Coetzee speaks of the political climate in 2002 South Africa).

obviously blurred (a fact that Coetzee scholars in particular should be acutely aware of), the psychological insight, growing narrative tension, and sense of finality which are often found in Kannemeyer's writing (once again, with no supporting footnotes) make it difficult for the reader to clearly establish which kind of relationship there is between Kannemeyer's narration and the interview(s) it was based upon. The ending of Part 2 of the biography is a fitting example of these stylistic choices:

> A South African passport was issued to [Coetzee] on 20th November 1961, and in December he left by boat from Cape Town to Southampton, and from there by boat to London, with no clear idea of what to expect. He, fond as he was of the barren plot of ground that was Voëlfontein, could not have foreseen how the London winter would affect him. Neither could he foresee that the 'colonial', especially an intellectual, was often a lonely outsider in the British capital. (107)

The ending of Part 3 follows an entirely similar pattern: "When, in May 1971, [Coetzee] boarded a plane for the fatherland he had wanted to escape at all costs, he was on his way to an uncertain future, but with a half-completed manuscript". (204)

It is never specified in *A Life in Writing* whether Kennemeyer's re-elaboration of interview materials was previously agreed upon with Coetzee or, conversely, whether it was a stylistic choice he made autonomously. What we do know is that Coetzee "cooperated unstintingly and even enthusiastically" with Kannemeyer and "answered all [his] questions succinctly and pertinently, but did not want to be drawn into speculations and opinions" and "did not wish to see the manuscript before publication" (Kannemeyer 2011: 7 and 11). Consequently, it is impossible for the reader to determine whether implied insights in Coetzee's inner life result from his own statements (or his friends and family's) or Kannemeyer's speculation.

Ambiguities in Kannemeyer's work are not confined to his use of quotations. While the overall format of the biography is fairly traditional, its premise and methodology have raised some doubts that are worth discussing. *J.M. Coetzee. A Life in Writing* opens with the surprising statement that "the significance of biographical information in dealing with a writer like J.M. Coetzee is a moot point" (8). The explanation that follows includes quotations from works by prominent Coetzee scholars such as Teresa Dovey, David Attwell, and Derek

Attridge (8) as well as theorists of life-writing like Martin van Amerongen and James Olney (9). Kannemeyer weights those quotations against one another in order to address two fundamental issues: the idea that Coetzee's own pseudo-autobiographical work fundamentally pre-empts any attempt at writing his biography, and the concern that a biography may not be an especially useful critical tool when addressing the singularity of Coetzee's work. Kannemeyer's elaboration on both points gives away a slightly unfocused aim: he admits promptly to sometimes (and inconsistently) using Coetzee's fictionalized autobiographies as sources of factual data ("In my account of Coetzee's childhood I have allowed myself a certain liberty in regarding *Boyhood*", 9), and one page later he warns biographers "against being misled by the writer's creative reworking of the facts of his own life" (10). Then, he lays down his reasons for undertaking such a massive biographical enterprise. His intentions are voiced in a series of contradictory statements. It is said at first that Coetzee's life story is not necessarily interesting because of "the light it sheds on the author's creative output, or from its relevance to literary criticism", but simply "in its own right, [as Coetzee's] extraordinary novels stimulate an interest in him as a person" (10). The following paragraph, however, opens with a note on the importance of portraying Coetzee "as both a writer and a human being" (10). Shortly afterwards, focus shifts away from Coetzee's personal (rather than professional) self when Kannemeyer asserts that his own work "is not a psychological study of the man J.M. Coetzee" (14), and factual data is once again described as the main concern in Kannemeyer's work. Yet again, the Foreword closes with one final, ambiguous remark that once again points to more theoretical ambitions: "at the very least the biographer can make available facts that were not previously in the public domain, and with modesty and reticence may yet contribute something to an understanding of what it is to be human" (14).

It is perhaps not surprising that *A Life in Writing* has received some mixed reviews. Scholars of the calibre of Carrol Clarkson and Gillian Dooley have not failed to voice their puzzlement. In her review, Clarkson points to the problem that while Kannemeyer does succeed in "establish[ing] a reliable factual record of Coetzee's life and times, and […] bring[ing] into the public domain hitherto unknown documentary material", the fact remains that "the question of the self in writing is addressed with such critical and creative acuity

throughout Coetzee's oeuvre that the work of any other biographer would in some sense seem to be pre-empted" (2014: 264). The main critique Clarkson puts forth in her otherwise positive review regards precisely the way Kannemeyer "troubles literary-philosophical waters" (265).[26]

Gillian Dooley's arguments are not as favorable as Clarkson's. After an informal opening statement in which she establishes that anyone attempting to write Coetzee's biography must be "either brave or foolish" (2013: 19), Dooley lists a long series of problems in Kannemeyer's work, starting from minor ones such as inconsistencies in its editing and layout. Secondly, and more importantly, she focuses on the main ambiguity in the premises of the study: while Kannemeyer ostensibly aims at giving a factual record of the life and times of J.M. Coetzee, the man (a task he carries out "adequately, if briefly", 20), emphasis is in fact on his role as a writer and on his fictional works, which are used in the biography as "often disturbingly literal" sources (20).

A Life in Writing is a massive biographical undertaking – and, it should be remembered, an unfinished one, seeing as Kannemeyer died before the editing process was over;[27] my few notes about it certainly do not do justice to the broadness of its scope. Like Jillian Dooley does, however, it is still necessary to point to a series of problems – Kannemeyer's use of the sources as well as some contradictions in his theoretical premises – that make it impossible to assess the significance of the interview form in Coetzee's account of his own life and in the biographer's rewording of it. It is still to be determined whether this impossibility should be considered as a specificity of Kannemeyer's work alone, or, conversely, as a broader issue in biographical criticism on Coetzee.

At the opening of my discussion I mentioned María López's assessment of different critical approaches in Coetzee studies. Scholars, as she summarizes, are often grouped in two broad categories: one, with Derek Attridge as its most famous representative, focuses on the

[26] It should be noted that Clarkson thinks this may in part be due to problems in Michiel Heyns's English translation from Kannemeyer's original Afrikaans, particularly when it comes to the distinction between Coetzee's authorial and fictional self, since "Afrikaans is more attentive [than English] to the literary construction of the character" (267).

[27] See the Editor's Note by Hannes van Zyl (Kannemeyer 2012: 617)

singularity of Coetzee's authorial voice from a literary point of view; the other tries to explore the contextual roots of Coetzee's work and the relationship it maintains with different aspects of reality. The distinction made by López is comparable to the one proposed by Gillian Dooley. Her 2010 monograph, *J.M. Coetzee and the Power of Narrative*, also starts off with a short sketch of the history of Coetzee studies. While personally endorsing – once again, like López – Attridge's approach, Dooley also acknowledges the importance of the 'contextual' school, which, she feels, includes "excellent" as well as "less-than-excellent" works (1). There is little doubt that *A Life in Writing*, not yet published at the time, belongs to the 'contextual' category. In spite of how critical she is about it, however, Dooley does not fail to acknowledge its importance as well as of the overall relevance of the contextual branch in Coetzee criticism. Among the most prominent scholars she lists we find Laura Wright (*Writing 'Out of All the Camps'*, 2006), Dominic Head, Michela Canepari-Labib (*Old Myths, Modern Empires*, 2005) and, of course, David Attwell.

Of course, Attwell's international prominence as a Coetzee scholar is indisputable to say the least, and especially so when it comes to the biographical take in Coetzee studies. Kannemeyer acknowledges this promptly in his biography, and actually uses a quote from Attwell to back up his initial, ambiguous statement about biographical information on Coetzee being a "moot point" (8). Kannemeyer only quotes a very short fragment of an early study by Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee. South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (1993): "Dovey is correct to say that 'with a writer like Coetzee, personal biography does not, indeed, seem very important'" (Attwell 1993: 6).[28] The longer argument Attwell put forth at the time, however, conveyed a more complex idea – namely, that a critical, historicized reading of Coetzee's novels is an entirely different, and perhaps even lesser enterprise, than his intellectual biography would be:

> The readings offered here are by no means exercises in biography or biographical criticism. I have taken account of the non-fictional writings so as to return to the novels with what, I hope, are useful insights, in a project that has the more limited goal of explication. I would, of course, be pleased if these readings did not traduce

[28] The quote within the quote was originally taken by Attwell from Teresa Dovey's introduction to *J.M. Coetzee: A Bibliography* (Goddard & Read 1990: 12).

> what appears of Coetzee's intellectual biography on the surface of his writings. (6-7)

Attwell wrote of intellectual biography as something that "appears" out of textual analysis: not necessarily an objective, but still an inevitable by-product, of literary criticism. Therefore, he stated, critics should be respectful of the "life produced in, and by, [...] texts" (1993: 7) and careful with the risks of reading fiction back into its biographical context of origin. An endnote clarified things further: intellectual biographies are not interpretative aids, but rather products in their own right, and "the proper place for interested readers to look for [Coetzee's] intellectual biography" (1993: 128) is a different work from *South Africa and the Politics of Writing* – namely, a collection of essays Attwell himself had edited one year prior: J.M. Coetzee's *Doubling the Point. Essays and Interviews*.[29]

As any reader of Coetzee will know, *Doubling the Point* is a milestone in Coetzee studies. Its origins and development, however, are not as well-known. The essay collection, published in 1992, stemmed from a collaboration between J.M. Coetzee and David Attwell that began in 1989. As Elleke Boehmer rightfully states, the collection soon came to be known as a "massively influential [work] in shaping the definitions and dimensions of Coetzee criticism" (2010: 57). The book is divided in nine chapters, each of them comprising an interview and a series of essays about key areas in Coetzee's intellectual landscape: Beckett, The Poetics of Reciprocity, Popular Culture, Syntax, Kafka, Autobiography and Confession, Obscenity and Censorship, South African Writers, and one final retrospective commentary. Chronology is not always respected; however, the first sections generally include early essays from the Seventies and Eighties, whereas later critical pieces mostly appear in the second half of the book. From such a format, one can certainly gain some perspective on what Coetzee's intellectual *oeuvre* must have been; (auto)biography, however,

[29] Attwell's engagement with biographical criticism never extinguished. *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing* came out in 2015, more than two decades after *Doubling the Point* – a span of time which certainly attests to Attwell's cautiousness with the perils of suffocating the specificity of Coetzee's fiction with superimposed biographical filters. The book is described by its author as a "critical biography whose purpose is to read the life and the work of its subject, the novelist J.M. Coetzee, together. […] [It] is therefore not a biography in the conventional sense. Nor does it pretend to be an intellectual biography". On the following page, *Doubling the Point* is once again defined as intellectual biography proper. (Attwell 2015: 18)

is not necessarily at the forefront of the reader's mind when dealing with a collection of critical essays. What actually brings focus to it is the peculiarity of David Attwell's role as an editor, or, more specifically, Coetzee's comments about it.

All the essays in *Doubling the Point* were selected, edited and grouped thematically by Attwell. Coetzee has made it clear in the Author's Note that there is no previously unpublished critical material in the collection aside from the interviews he had agreed to, and that were later used by Attwell as introductory sections to each thematic chapter. The lack of new or even revisited material, in fact, is something Coetzee emphasises: "regarding the essays, [David Attwell and I] agreed that he would select and edit them, and that where I revised them I would do so with a light hand, since they were to be seen as part of a larger autobiographical text" (*DtP*, vii). No further explanation is given. Coetzee's intention is as unequivocal as it is unelaborated: it is clear that he sees his critical work as a valuable representation of his intellectual history, that he wants such history to be written, and that he deems it useful to the biographical enterprise to have its pieces put together by someone other than himself. However, the obvious question stemming from this choice – what is the role of the editor in such a process? – is not even posited, and much less answered, in the Preface.

Just like the Author's Note, the first interview begins with an unanticipated reference to autobiography: in his first question, Attwell states matter-of-factly that he "would like to begin at the beginning, by raising the question of autobiography" (17); he then goes on to describe Coetzee's critical engagement with the question of the self in writing (of course, Coetzee's fictionalized *memoirs* had not yet been published at the time of the interviews). The wording of Coetzee's answers sets a slight different tone than Attwell's question: rather than talking about autobiography – or, much less, his own autobiography – he chooses to address the broader subject of the truth about the self and the way it may be achieved in writing. He states that, while ultimately unattainable, truth can perhaps be a provisional outcome of a never-ending process of writing the self; whether this implies that the writer's intentions are only shown or, conversely, created while – or even *by* – writing, he is not sure. His whole opinion, he says, is tentative, and he is equally unsure as to what the purpose of his conversations with Attwell may be. While admitting he may have reached an impasse, he

expresses hope to find a way beyond the dead-end by allowing a different voice to join his own:

> The truth is, at this stage of our interchange I probably know as little as you about my purpose, which lies in the present, as about the drives and desires, lying in the past, that I am now returning to. Desire and purpose are on the same level: one does not command the other. Perhaps this is why I have turned to the mode of dialogue as a way of getting around the impasse of my own monologue. (*DtP*, 18-19)

This is how Coetzee's reply ends; however, some subsequent remarks demonstrate his ambivalence over the opportunities opened up by the interview format: after his famous declaration that writing is a matter of "awakening the countervoices in oneself and embarking upon speech with them" (*DtP*, 65), he goes on to say that "interviewers want speech, a flow of speech. That speech they record, take away, edit, censor, cutting out all its waywardness, till what is left conforms to a monologic ideal" (*ibidem*). And yet again, "[interviews] draw on the ancient strain of religious enthusiasm as well as on the practice of psychotherapy: in the transports of unrehearsed speech, the subject utters truths unknown to his waking self" (*ibidem*). Attwell does not comment on any of these contradictory statements. His own perspective on the origins of the project is never shared in the collection. It will only be addressed years later, in criticism by other Coetzee scholars.

Given the importance *Doubling the Point* holds in Coetzee studies, it is not surprising that the twentieth anniversary of Coetzee and Attwell's collaboration was cause for celebration of Attwell's role as well as critical reflection amongst Coetzee scholars. Attwell himself was interviewed by Elleke Boehmer for the occasion, and the memories he shares of the origins of the project shed light on his perspective on as well as his role in it. First, Attwell distances himself from Boehmer's claim that he played a key role "in the shaping of Coetzee, the writer persona" (Boehmer 2010: 57), which he believes would have developed regardless of his participation. As for Boehmer request, he goes on to explain something about the genesis of *Doubling the Point*, and he delves into details that were not disclosed at the time of its publication. Coetzee, he says, was asked by Harvard University Press to publish a study in linguistics, but he refused. Instead, he offered a selection of critical writings interleaved with

"conversations exploring the connections between fiction and non-fiction; [...] an intellectual biography of sorts" (*ibidem*). At that point, his correspondence with Attwell – who, at the time, was a younger academic looking for guidance – had already begun, not without some critical disagreements. According to Attwell, it is on the basis of such disagreements that Coetzee requested his collaboration: "what he wanted to avoid, I think, was having to work with an amanuensis" (58). Indeed, a series of counterpoints would follow as Attwell and Coetzee developed a shared creative process that was based on their responses to one another. After reading Coetzee's existing essays, Attwell chose a way to group them thematically; Coetzee responded with notes on each group; Attwell later used the notes as inspiration for drafting the questions he would ask Coetzee during the interviews (see Boehmer 2010: 58-59).

The whole process, including the interviews, was conducted in written form, in times when the immediacy of e-mail was not available. Although this obviously deprived the interviews of a certain kind of spontaneity and performativity, Attwell did not hesitate to describe the enterprise as dialogical – in fact, he referred to his collaboration with Coetzee as 'the dialogues' throughout his interview with Elleke Boehmer. She, on her part, remarked that Coetzee seemed to have taken over much of what traditionally pertains to the editor's role: "pitching the voice, [...] setting the agenda of the interviews, [...] determining the topics to be explored and the protocols of exploration" (59). Her next question followed suit, as Boehmer wondered whether it was possible to determine "who *steered* that mutual weaving together [...], the interviewer or the interviewee?" (*ibidem*, emphasis in the original). Attwell's answer, however, somehow eluded the question and shifted focus away from a critical framing of the degree of influence he and Coetzee had had over one another. Instead, he commented once again on Coetzee's "genuine willingness to allow the process to take its course, without preconceptions", stressing that their previous agreement was on the dialogical process, but not its outcomes (*ibidem*). Thus ended the trail of thought, and Boehmer moved on to other sections of her interview.

Coetzee did not join the 2012 debate on *Doubling the Point*. Even though he did not use the occasion to share further details on Attwell's role in its development, however, a 2011

statement shows that Coetzee's preoccupation with the interview format and its implication had not vanished over the years:

> Is lack of premeditation integral to the form? Is dialogue integral to the form, and — if so — what kind of dialogue? Is a certain verbal style to be preferred? If so, what? (Rainey/Attwell/Madden 2012: 852).

Coetzee voiced these doubts during an interview about his lifelong engagement with Samuel Beckett's work. The three interviewers (one of whom was, once again, David Attwell) had invited him to comment upon the increasingly codified genre of the literary interview (851) and its difference with the literary essay. Coetzee went on to describe the essay as a more "whimsical" (852) form than the interview, "where there are two persons in the room, one of them setting the agenda" (*ibidem*). Even though he addresses the 'normative' nature of the role played by interviewers, however, Coetzee does not follow through with the questions he had posited: no discussion follows of what "kind of dialogue" and degree of spontaneity should exist between interviewer and interviewee, and much less of their outcomes in terms of (auto)biographical truth.

The exchange between Coetzee and his interviewers may leave readers under the impression that his critical reflection on 'dialogical autobiography' is still carried out tentatively two decades after his cooperation with Attwell first began. Information found in *Doubling the Point* and, perhaps more importantly, revealed about it many years after its publication may well signal a necessity to reframe Coetzee's complex profile as an interviewee. However, his provisional thoughts on truth in autobiography, as well as the relatively few details he shares about Attwell's role in *Doubling*, do not provide adequate basis for drawing critical conclusions on him as a dialogical shaper of his own life story.

A Life in Writing and *Doubling the Point* are both interview-based.[30] In spite of their very different premises, methodologies, and aims, however, both works display a far-from-straightforward relationship with the question-and-answer format. Kannemeyer's biography is narrative in tone, and it hardly ever includes word-for-word quotations from Coetzee's

[30] The interview style, of course, is different: contrarily to Attwell's, Kannemeyer's interviews with Coetzee were face-to-face. See Kannemeyer 2011: 7 and 10.

interviews. Attwell, conversely, worked with Coetzee under the agreement that no one-voiced result would stem from their cooperation; their interviews would only come to life after a number of proposals and counterproposals, which of course compromised the immediacy and spontaneity of the exchanges.

Even though it is clear that Coetzee prefers a dialogical structure for critical or even fictional accounts of his own self, too much is left unspecified to draw even provisional conclusions as to the nature and intent of such dialogues. Hopefully, an analysis of other, more external layers of Coetzee's public *persona* – his literary alter-egos and fictional selves, along with the dialogues and interviews such characters engage in, will shed more light on the matter.

2.2 The Writer's Writers: Kaleidoscope Effects

2.2.1 His Man

It is well-known that Coetzee chose to read a short fictional story rather than delivering a traditional acceptance speech for his 2003 Nobel Lecture. Such a choice was not unprecedented: Coetzee had famously presented short fictions *in lieu* of traditional speeches at the 1996 Ben Belitt Lecture at Bennington College and at the 1997 Princeton Tanner Lectures, as well as other lesser-known occasions.[31] The pattern, as we now know, would

[31] Both the short stories were later republished and re-edited for different purposes: the Ben Belitt Lecture would later be edited to become "What is Realism" (*Salmagundi* 119.3, 1997) and then "Realism", the first chapter in *Elizabeth Costello*. More famously, the Tanner Lectures were published in 1999 as *The Lives of Animals*, and later on in 2003 as the third and fourth chapters in *Elizabeth Costello*. For details on the original events see Attridge 2004: 195 and Mulhall 2009: 139.

repeat itself: as of this day Coetzee still attends conferences and literary events to present short works of fictions, most of which remain unpublished.[32]

The untypical choice Coetzee makes for his public speeches certainly attests to his preoccupation with his role as a writer and storyteller who is also a public intellectual. Meta-literary reflection, however, is not brought about by the means of form alone, as intertextual choices are equally important in Coetzee's portrayal of the writing life. The Nobel Lecture, entitled *He and His Man*, is especially exemplary of Coetzee's concern with intertextuality. The concept of authorship is the main focus in the story, which explores the complex and nuanced relationship between characters and the writers who create them. 'He' and 'his man' are Robinson Crusoe and Daniel Defoe, who are featured as characters in Coetzee's fiction for the second time after famously appearing in the 1986 novel *Foe*. It soon becomes apparent that Crusoe, back from his island and living in Bristol, is writing Defoe into existence. Defoe-the-character, however, becomes increasingly independent from Crusoe-the-author and eventually reaches total autonomy. The two men never meet, and at the end of the story Crusoe wonders about their relationship: "How are they to be figured, this man and he? As master and slave? As brothers, twin brothers? As comrades in arms? Or as enemies, foes?" (Coetzee 2004: 20). Even though he yearns a face-to-face encounter, Crusoe admits to himself in the closing paragraph that no such thing will ever happen:

> If he must settle on a likeness for the pair of them, his man and he, he would write that […] they are deckhands toiling in the rigging, the one on a ship sailing west, the other on a ship sailing east. Their ships pass close, close enough to hail. But the seas are rough, the weather is stormy: their eyes lashed by the spray, their hands burned by the cordage, they pass each other by, too busy even to wave. (Coetzee 2004: 20)

In his commentary on the Nobel Lecture, Derek Attridge focuses on these last words, which he describes as an allegory of fictional writing, of the feeling of self-division it entails, and of the "unbridgeable distance between the person who lives in the world and the person,

[32] Since most of those works have never been published, it is difficult to know how many of them there are in total. To my knowledge, at least three of them exist. I was in the audience while J.M. Coetzee read an untitled piece with Elizabeth Costello as its main character. The reading took place in Milan on July 2nd, 2016. Derek Attridge also confirmed the existence of at least two further unpublished pieces (personal e-mail, July 5th, 2016).

or impersonal force, that produces the words" (2004: 200). David Attwell draws similar conclusions, but he dwells longer on the fragmentation of the writer's self. Coetzee's short story goes far beyond role reversal and stages a series of Chinese boxes: not only is Crusoe depicted as Defoe's creator; Defoe-the-character is also a fictional writer and, as the narrative progresses, he becomes more and more independent from his author's authority. Attwell describes this as metaphoric of an authorship that is "split" into a historical self (symbolized by Crusoe-the-author) and a writing self (symbolized by Defoe-the-character/writer) (Attwell 2006: 170[33]). Attwell also examines the epigraph chosen by Coetzee for his short story:

> But to return to my companion. I was greatly delighted with him, and made it my business to teach him everything that was proper to make him useful, handy, and helpful; but especially to make him speak, and understand me when I spoke, and he was the aptest scholar there ever was. (*He and His Man*, 3)

The quote is from Defoe's original *Robinson Crusoe* and it refers to Friday, who is depicted by Crusoe as the lesser companion in their lopsided dialectical/didactical relationship. This choice of epigraph strikes Attwell as "puzzling" (2006: 170):

> In Defoe's novel, obviously, Friday is "his [Crusoe's] man," whereas in Coetzee's text, "his man" is Defoe himself. Since we read Coetzee through Defoe […] we cannot fail to connect the Defoe figure, the writing self, with Friday, suggesting that around "his man" there is a shadow of strangeness or alterity, perhaps the footprint on the beach which signals a common humanity but one that cannot be fully known. Why does Coetzee cast the writing self, then, in this light – or perhaps half-light? (Attwell 2006: 171)

Attwell's explanation is that Coetzee is portraying the writing process as a tentative venture into a place of otherness. As he remarks (171), the same thought was phrased in *Doubling the Point*: in the 1992 interviews Coetzee had spoken of writing, and more specifically self-writing, as a dialectical movement between pushes into the unknown and forces of psychological and linguistic resistance. His stance on the results of such movement, however,

[33] Attwell's essay, "J.M. Coetzee and South Africa: Thoughts on the Social Life of Fiction" is part of the 2010 collection J.M. Coetzee's Austerities, edited by Graham Bradshaw and Michael Neill.

was far from conclusive: "out of that interplay there emerges, if you are lucky, what you recognize or hope to recognize as the truth." [34]

In 1992 Attwell had not responded further to Coetzee's closing and tentative remarks on self-writing and truth. However, much had changed in Coetzee studies by the time of the Nobel Lecture – and even more so by 2006, when Attwell's commentary on it was published. While Coetzee had not authored any more theoretical studies on self-writing, (pseudo)autobiographical elements were now a prominent feature in his creative work: *Boyhood* was published in 1997, *Youth* in 2002, and *Elizabeth Costello* in 2003. The last book in this list is a famously controversial collection of short stories, most of which were presented at various academic functions prior to publication; more often than not, they contain lectures framed in fiction. As Coetzee usually presented those short stories *instead* of lectures, much speculation arose over the degree of overlapping between the identities of the author and the eponymous main character: despite being a woman, Costello does indeed share similarities with her creator and is thought by many to be his literary alter-ego. *Boyhood* and *Youth*, on the other hand, are closer to a more traditional definition of self-writing. In spite of some visible discrepancies,[35] the main character of both books is recognizable as J.M. Coetzee: details of his upbringing, education, travels, and employments are verifiable as factual. Although a confessional tone clearly permeates both volumes, it does so in a slightly off-putting way, as the main character does not give an account of his past from the privileged position of old age and, possibly, wisdom – in fact, he appears in his life story as the focalizer in a third-person, present tense narration.[36] This stylistic choice, in addition to Coetzee's refusal to comment on his own works, has made *genre* affiliation especially difficult. *Boyhood* and *Youth* have variously been described as both fiction and non-fiction – more

[34] Fragments are quoted in Attwell 2006: 171 (originally from *Doubling the Point*, 18).

[35] Most notably, no mention of a romantic relationship (and much less of married life) is ever made in *Youth*. The book, however, chronicles events taking place between 1961 and 1964, the year of Coetzee's real-life wedding to Philippa Jubber.

[36] Derek Attridge (2004: 138-141) comments on Coetzee's highly recognizable, and yet idiosyncratic rendering of the confessional mode by comparing *Boyhood* and *Youth* to Augustine's and Rosseau's *Confessions*, Proust's *Recherche*, and "two obvious precursors that narrate the childhood of a writer with exceptional gifts" (141): *The Education of Henry Adams* and Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Some of those works are mixtures of facts and fictions and others use the third person, but none is written in the present tense. According to Attridge, it is precisely the simultaneous employment of the third-person and of the present tense that marks Coetzee's singularity.

specifically, as *memoirs*, fictionalized *memoirs*, autobiography, fictionalized autobiography, *autre*biography, and possibly other labels.[37]

Boyhood and *Youth* play a substantial a role in Attwell's reading of *He and His Man*. In addition to going back to *Doubling the Point*, Attwell compares the Nobel Lecture to Coetzee's autobiographical works: "the same splitting of selves [we find in *He and His Man*] is apparent in the autobiographies, *Boyhood* and *Youth*, [...] where 'John' would be the historical self, and the narrator would be comparable to the self of writing, 'his man'" (Attwell 2006: 170). The comparison is not made on the basis of analogy alone; in fact, it refers to Coetzee's short introductory speech to his own Nobel Lecture. The anecdote is not part of the published version of *He and His Man*, but a video featuring Coetzee reading it is still available online on the Nobel Price website.[38] While addressing the nature of authorship, Coetzee also makes collateral references to a previous, and possibly fictional, version of himself:

> Before I begin to read […] the piece called *He and His Man*, or *His Man and He*, I can't remember which comes first, he or his man, I want to say a word about a certain event that must have taken place in 1948 or 1949, when I, that is to say, the one I call 'I', not the one I call 'he', was a boy of eight or nine, reading for the first time the book called *Robinson Crusoe* […]. I was puzzled when some months later I came across a statement in the Children's Encyclopedia to the effect that someone else besides Robinson Crusoe and Friday was part of the island's story, a man with a wig named Daniel Defoe. […] The Encyclopedia referred to him as 'the author' of Robinson Crusoe, but this made no sense, since it said on the very first page of *Robinson Crusoe* that Robinson Crusoe told the story himself. Who was Daniel Defoe?

Attwell's conclusion is that Coetzee's ideas of selfhood and authorship are both composite, as well as complementary to one another. Truthfulness in self-writing results from their successful interplay, which for its part "depends on preserving the distance and tension between them" (2006: 172). The Nobel anecdote seems to confirm this theory: although ostensibly unable to remember "which comes first" between 'he' and 'his man', Coetzee

[37] See Antije Krog's classification in her essay "'I, me, me, mine!': Autobiographical fiction and the 'I'" (2005: 100).
[38] http://www.nobelprize.org/mediaplayer/?id=555&view=2, last accessed September 2018.

posits a clear-cut division between different parts of a manifold self: an I which is called *I*, an I which is called *he*, and possibly also an I that does the calling.

Although Attwell does not mention it, further confirmation of his stance is found in Coetzee's theoretical work on censorship. His 1996 monograph, *Giving Offense. Essays on Censorship*, comprises theoretical pieces as well as more specific studies on different authors and their responses to censorship in various historical contexts. In the introductory section of the volume Coetzee describes writing as a process that necessarily implies an addressee. While reflecting on how lamentable it is when the first addressee in the writer's mind must necessarily be a censor, Coetzee once again pictures the self as fragmented:

> The self [...] is multiple and multiply divided against itself. It is, to speak in figures, a zoo in which a multitude of beasts have residence, over which the anxious, overworked zookeeper of rationality exercises a rather limited control. [...] Some of the beasts have names, like figure-of-the-father or figure-of-the-mother, others are memories [...]; a whole subcolony are seminated by still treacherous earlier versions of the self, each with an inner zoo of its own over which it has less than complete control. (Coetzee 1996: 37)

As Coetzee goes on, we once again see him develop the argument that writing must necessarily arise out of interactions between different parts of a composite self. The self, for its part, is constantly recreated by such never-ending dialectical movement: "writing not only comes out of the zoo, but [it] goes back in again. That is to say, insofar as writing is transactional, the figures *for whom* and *to whom* it is done are also figures of the zoo". (Coetzee 1996: 38).

It may be argued that Coetzee's idea of the self and, more specifically, of the writing self, gained a more precise shape after *Doubling the Point*. However, it is not a fixed and definite form: provisionality clearly characterizes an ever-changing identity that emerges from the interplay of its various subparts. Coetzee's creative, pseudo-autobiographical work may have helped him construct such an image, and his inner dialogues with 'figures-of-the-other' may have proved as useful for his productivity as his real-life conversations with critics. The results, however, remain ambiguous. The idea gradually emerges that the self is depicted through dialogues between those fragments that compose it, but no clarification is ever given

as to whether selfhood is freely (re)created by, or truthfully (re)told in, such dialogues: truth in writing is still an unsolvable question when it comes to Coetzee's (auto)biographies. To explore the matter further, I therefore wish to proceed with an analysis of the fictional figures of Coetzee's self. Following the distinction Attwell makes in his commentary on the Nobel Lecture, I will analyse Coetzee's literary alter-ego, Elizabeth Costello, as a figure of his writing self and his *autre*biographical characters as figures of his historical self. Hopefully, investigating the way those characters have been created and, later on, the way they have shaped the image of their creator will be useful for a deeper understanding of the elusive distinction between creating and narrating the self.

2.2.2 His Woman

Elizabeth Costello is one of Coetzee's best-known characters; since 1996, she has appeared in a collection of short-stories (*Elizabeth Costello. Eight Lessons*, 2003), a novel (*Slow Man*, 2005), two short pieces of fiction ("As a Woman Grows Older", published in *The New York Review of Books* in 2004, and "The Old Woman and the Cats" that is part of *Cripplewood*, 2013), plus an unknown number of short pieces which Coetzee has presented at public readings but left unpublished.[39] The character of Costello has famously been met with puzzlement and critical controversy since its first appearances. Derek Attridge, who was part of the audience during Coetzee's 1997 Tanner Lectures, recalls the general sensation of bafflement it first provoked: "although I don't recall any audible reaction from the audience, there could be no doubt about the surprise produced by Coetzee's opening words [...]. [There had been] no preliminary explanation, no introduction to prepare us for [his] clearly fictional statement, couched in the third-person present tense" (2004: 193). The meta-fictional structure of Coetzee's reading, as well as the similarities between Costello and himself, obviously

[39] See note 23 in this chapter. Some further Costello pieces have been published in Spanish in a collection titled *Siete Cuentos Morales* (2018). At the time of writing this thesis, there is no indication that the collection will be published in English. Some extracts, however, have been divulged in English in public readings (see the third chapter in this work for some notes on "The Glass Abattoir").

contributed to the sense of uncertainty: "what made the event in which we were participating even more disquieting was our gradual realization that it was being mirrored, in a distorted representation, in the fiction itself: the central character was revealed to be a novelist from the Southern Hemisphere who had been asked to give a lecture at an American college" (193). The atmosphere became even more surreal, Attridge concludes, when questions from the audience were answered by Coetzee with introductory phrases like 'I think what Elizabeth Costello would say is that...' (193-194).

Academic norms were challenged even further in 2002 at a Nexus Conference in Tilburg, Netherlands. Once again, Coetzee presented a short work of fiction in which Elizabeth Costello travels to the Netherlands to deliver a conference paper on the same theme as the one of the real-life event: the problem of evil. Her paper, which takes up roughly half the space of the whole story, revolves entirely on a novel that exists in the real world as well as Costello's fictional one, *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg* (1980) by the British-born American novelist Paul West. Costello criticises West's work at length, and her negative opinion about it is expressed with such vehemence that her speech borders on irrationality and perhaps, by her own admission, even hysteria (*EC*, 175-6). The real-life Paul West was not amongst the actual attendees of the Nexus conference; his fictionalized version, however, appears as a character in Coetzee's narration. The fictional West always stays silent, even when Costello addresses him directly. Unsurprisingly, concern over the reaction of the real-life Paul West was expressed repeatedly, and a considerable amount of criticism was written on Coetzee's "startling transgression of literary protocol" (see Lodge 2003: 10).[40]

The anecdotes above are just two of many examples of the Costello *persona*'s peculiarity. It is easy to see why speculation on her has been so intense: issues of *genre*

[40] The real-life Paul West did in fact express his opinion on the matter in an essay for *Harper's Magazine*, "The Novelist and the Hangman: When Horror Invades the Protocol" (2004). His comments range, somehow contradictorily, from remarks addressing Costello as if she were a real-life literary critic to assumptions over what Coetzee's plans for the Costello character must have been ("I think he invented her to voice an opinion he despised […]. She's a sacrificial animal in that novel; she's carefully set up to be destroyed", 89). Surprisingly, his reaction was mostly ignored in literary criticism: to my knowledge, it is only – and briefly – documented on a few websites (e.g. <http://www.sobriquetmagazine.com/labels/Paul%20West.html> and <http://marksarvas.blogs.com/elegvar/2004/01/paul_west_respo.html>, last accessed September 2018) and one volume (see Ankersmit 2012: 236, footnote 25).

affiliation are obviously at stake,[41] and so is the character's inherent ambiguity and resistance to interpretation.[42] However, similarities between author and character are what criticism focuses on most frequently. In this respect, the enigma Costello supposedly epitomizes is rather nebulous to begin with: there is no reason why a character should not be similar to its author, however uncannily. Yet, more often than not, discussion of Elizabeth Costello is based on an assessment of the degree of overlapping between her identity and Coetzee's.[43]

There are indeed times when the temptation to equate author and character becomes strong, especially when remarks on the writing life seem to easily befit both the fictional and the flesh-and-blood writer. In Karen Dawn and Peter Singer's words, "the reader could hardly fail to notice that Elizabeth Costello, like Coetzee, is an acclaimed novelist from a former British colony" (2010: 470[44]). The British colony is Australia, which of course resonates in the reader's mind as Coetzee's chosen place of residence after his 2003 departure from South Africa. Moreover, both the real and the fictional writer have authored rewritings of classical works of literature (*Robinson Crusoe* and *Ulysses* respectively), they are in their old age, and they have reached the peak of their fame. There is a moment in the first Costello episode, "Realism", when the fictive author remembers her juvenile desire to have "[her] place on the shelves of the British Museum, rubbing shoulders with the other Cs, the great ones: Carlyle and Chaucer and Coleridge and Conrad". It is surely difficult for those who read this not to imagine that Coetzee is admitting to that same youthful ambition.

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[41] *Genre* attribution, in the case of *Elizabeth Costello*, ultimately amounts to necessarily imperfect labeling. While David Lodge assumes matter-of-factly that we are forced to call *Elizabeth Costello* a novel "for lack of a better word" (2003: 6), Patrick Flanery sums up various critical views in a series of questions: "is it performance art, or performance didacticism? Is it moral philosophy? Does its generic slipperiness constitute academic evasiveness? Is it fiction or non-fiction? […] Does this recycling signal a failure of imagination? Is it […] a work of indeterminate *genre*?" (2004: 61).

[42] Many elements contribute to shaping Elizabeth Costello's resistance to interpretation: her coexistence with fictionalized versions of real writers and philosophers (Paul West, Amos Tutuola, Thomas Nagel) as well as entirely fictive authors and critics (Emmanuel Egudu); her astonishingly idiosyncratic choices of lexicon (see chapter 4 in this work); the nameplay Coetzee clearly employs for some characters related to Elizabeth, which surely tempts readers with allegorical readings that may well be completely out of line (see the sixth chapter of Carrol Clarkson's *Countervoices*, "Etymologies" (153-175).

[43] A striking example of the critical attention on the Coetzee/Costello supposed justaxposition is the cartoon by James Wateridge published in *The Times Literary Supplement* along with Oliver Herford's 2003 review of *Elizabeth Costello.* In the sketch, a highly recognizable Coetzee is depicted as a lecturer wearing women's clothes and wailing his finger at the audience. (Herford 2003: 5)

[44] Dawn and Singer's essay is part of a 2010 collection edited by Anton Leist and Peter Singer himself, titled *J.M. Coetzee and Ethics. Philosophical Perspectives on Literature.*

The idea of a Coetzee/Costello convergence is perhaps taken to extreme extents by those who describe the whole *Elizabeth Costello* book as confessional: see, for example, James Wood's statement that "Coetzee is passionately confessing, and the whole book vibrates with confession" (2003: 16). An equally extreme, yet opposite theory depicts Costello as a mask Coetzee wears to keep a distance from his most extreme stands on controversial ethical issues (see Lodge 2003: 6 and Herford 2003: 6).[45] Attempts at assessing the position of the Costello character somewhere between these two poles continue to this day, as do Coetzee metafictional readings. Trying to find some ultimate critical interpretation would not be useful, especially in the context of this study. What matters instead – and what critics more or less unanimously highlight – is Costello's role as a writer, and, what is more, one that is inherently prone to self-questioning. If Costello is to be considered as a figure of Coetzee's writing self, what does her *persona* add to the discussion of self-writing and truth? Does Coetzee describe himself through her, or was she created as a dialectical counterpart for her author?

As Lucy Graham aptly states, "commentators who assume that […] Coetzee is confessing, and those who draw attention to his failure to confess, share an assumption that not only relies on a notion of the author as site of origin but also fails to take into account the splitting of selfhood that accompanies the writing enterprise" (2006: 218). Graham criticizes the polarized conceptions of Costello as either Coetzee's self-portrait or his shield against criticism, and in so doing she fruitfully reframes the debate on the Costello character within those same coordinates chosen by Attwell for his reading of *He and His Man*. *Elizabeth Costello* clearly stages the main character's feeling of self-division, which are often tied to her role as a writer. Evidence of this abounds throughout the collection: in the various pieces, Costello grows increasingly skeptical of her own arguments, and she struggles to back up her own statements during confrontations. She startles her counterparts in academic debates with statements of the like that she "do[es] not know what [she] think[s]" (*EC*, 90); she admits to being frightened by the intensity of her own opinions and feelings ("When I think of the

[45] Other critical views present Costello as a 'mere' character (Tremaine 2003: 587), as the embodiment of otherwise-too-abstract theories (Lynn 2005: 130 and Attwell 2008: 229), or as a literary device used by Coetzee to provoke discussion on ethical matters (Schillinsburg 2006: 13 and Attridge 2004: 205).

words, they seem so outrageous that they are best spoken into a pillow or into a hole in the ground, like King Midas", *EC,* 114); she realizes during a conference presentation that her perplexed audience is hearing a talk about "an obsession, an obsession that is hers alone and that she clearly does not understand" (*EC,* 177). Such state of detachment culminates in the last piece in the book.

"At the Gate" is the Kafkaesque closing episode in the Costello collection. In it, Costello finds herself in a dream-like, seemingly *post-mortem* situation. She knows she needs to pass through a gate, and to do so she is required to enunciate her beliefs. The whole story revolves around Costello's repeated attempts at rephrasing her statement of beliefs so that a court of judges finds it convincing. Her first impulse is to just say that her profession prevents her from holding any belief: "writers change them like they change clothes, according to their needs" (*EC,* 195). The explanation is rejected on the spot by the gatekeeper, and Costello starts working on her second statement. In it, she quotes Czeslaw Milosz and explains that writers are "secretar[ies] of the invisible" who hear words and stay open to the voices that pronounce them (*EC,* 199). They do not ask those voices any questions, but they simply respond to what they dictate. Beliefs would inevitably stand in the way of this process; they would constitute a form of resistance.

Some critics have been puzzled by Costello's declaration of un-belief, which seem to contrast with her typically strong views, especially when it comes to animal rights (see Lodge 2003: 10). Derek Attridge, however, believes that "there is no inconsistency between Costello's disclaimer […] and her passionate expressions of belief elsewhere; the former, she makes clear, refers to her existence as a novelist, whereas the latter arises out of her experience as a human being" (2004: 204). Attridge addresses the same human/artist division that seems as inescapable in Costello's mind as it is for the Defoe/Crusoe pair in *He and His Man*. In Costello's case, however, the dialogue between different parts of a fragmented self does not seem to result in a creative enterprise – in fact, it does not even seem possible.

When she tries again to pass through the gate, Costello introduces herself to the court "not as a writer but as an old woman who was once a child" (217). Even though she emphasizes her humanity over her profession, however, she cannot revoke her previous

declarations, nor does she seem to be rid of her tendency to always think in terms of literariness. A few minutes into the hearing, she starts experiencing self-doubt again; her immediate instinct is to try "a test that seems to work when she is writing: to send out a word into the darkness and listen for what kind of sound comes back. […] The answer: no tone at all" (*EC*, 219). The darkness she is trying to investigate is her own inner life, and even though Costello does try to initiate an inner dialogue, there is no counterpart that she can rely on, and her words seem to fall into an empty void. The old woman is exhausted and confused; as she proves unable to cope with the judges' objections, her identity appears utterly inconsistent:

> You ask me if I have changed my plea. But who am I, this I, this you? We change from day to day, and we also stay the same. No I, no you is more fundamental than any other. You might as well ask which is the true Elizabeth Costello: the one who made the first statement or the one who made the second. My answer is, both are true. Both. And neither. I am an other. (*EC*, 221)

The judges' impatient response is that Costello should state, simply and unequivocally, whether she is speaking for herself. She does not hesitate to reply: "Yes. No, emphatically no. Yes and no. Both." (*EC*, 221). It is not surprising at this point to learn that Costello's statement is rejected once again, and that whatever exists beyond the gate remains inaccessible to her: the self-division she experiences is too profound to overcome, and the incommensurability between her personal and professional self generates a hopeless lack of coherence.

The inability to access or regain a dimension of wholeness is the state in which we, as readers, leave Elizabeth Costello at the end of the 2003 collection. Although this is not her last appearance in the chronology of Coetzee's works, it does stage the fictional writer's death – or, at the very least, a seemingly inescapable moment of stagnation: Costello-the-writer proves unable to describe or even know Costello-the-human-being, ostensibly forgetful that they are, in fact, one and the same.

Costello's impasse contrasts with Coetzee's tentative openness to the possibility of self-knowledge and truthful self-writing. However, the dead end Costello faces is not necessarily her author's. "At the Gate" shows quite clearly that the Costello *persona* is not an

autobiographical instrument or a dialectical counterpart Coetzee has created for himself – but rather the representation of a writer's unsuccessful confessional enterprise. The reasons for such failure may be peculiar to the character's psychology and ultimately unfathomable. Still, the fact that Costello has no counterpart with whom to engage in an autobiographical exchange is not an inconspicuous detail. Of course Costello does have meaningful conversations throughout the collection, but they mostly address theoretical issues. Costello is often reluctant to share autobiographical details, as we know from "The Humanities in Africa" (Costello censors herself in a letter to her sister as soon as she is tempted to share some personal memories – see *EC*, 151) and "The Problem of Evil" (Costello realizes there is an episode from her youth that may be causing her hysterical reaction to Paul West's book; however, she has never discussed it with anyone, and she knows she never will: "For half a century the memory has rested inside her like an egg of stone, one that will never crack open, never give birth. She finds it good, it pleases her, this silence of hers, a silence she hopes to preserve to the grave" – *EC*, 166).

It is difficult to say whether Costello's failed confessional enterprise is at least partly due to her lack of a dialogical partner. What we do know is that her inability to know herself does not represent the end of Coetzee's engagement with life-writing. Indeed, his dealings with autobiography continued well past 2003, both in fiction and theory. Most notably, his third pseudo-autobiographical volume, *Summertime*, was published in 2009. Differently from the two previous instalments in the trilogy – and from *Elizabeth Costello* – *Summertime* has a strong dialogical component, as it is mostly written in interview format; the implications of this choice will be explored in the following section.

2.2.3 He

There are many moments in the Costello collection when the old woman ponders over her writing life. An especially poignant one occurs after Costello's second statement of belief is refused in "At the Gate". While Costello wonders whether she is still able to hold on to her

youthful faith in art, she is forced to recognize that she has grown skeptical of literature and its ethical/didactical value. The thought also applies to her own work:

> Her books teach nothing, preach nothing; they merely spell out, as clearly as they can, how people lived in a certain time and place. More modestly put, they spell out how one person lived, one among billions: the person whom she, to herself, calls *she*, and whom others call *Elizabeth Costello*. (*EC*, 207-8)

Interestingly enough, in spite of her resistance to self-knowledge, this statement seems to show that autobiography underlies Costello's whole artistic production – as well as Coetzee's. As expert readers would know, "the person whom she calls *she*" is a reference to Coetzee's own (pseudo-)autobiographical works, *Boyhood* and *Youth* – a reference that would later be echoed in the Nobel lecture, when Coetzee spoke of his childhood self as "the one I call I, not the one I call he".[46]

The main character in *Boyhood* and *Youth* has already been discussed in this work: he is the focalizer in a third-person, present-tense narrative that supposedly covers Coetzee's pre-teen and young adult years. Although we do learn that his name his John, the character's first name is only spelled out a handful of times; throughout the narration, he is normally referred to as *he*. Coetzee's choice never to comment on the identity of *he* has made it impossible to label *Boyhood* and *Youth* as autobiographies proper (a number of other definitions were preferred, including pseudo-autobiography, fictionalized autobiography or *autre*biography).

In his already-cited commentary on Coetzee's Nobel Lecture, Attwell described the main character in *Boyhood* and *Youth* as a figure of Coetzee's historical self, as opposed to the irreconcilable but complementary figure of his writing self. Derek Attridge, conversely, depicts both books as confessional narratives that exhibit an "essential truth [that] is not of the historical, factual kind" (2004: 149). In his discussion of the *he* character, Attridge goes back to "an extraordinary passage" (2004: 139) in the last of the interviews in *Doubling the Point*, in which Coetzee told the story of his life up to the early Eighties. For the first time on that occasion, Coetzee referred to himself in the third person: "as a teenager, this person, this

[46] See footnote 36 in this chapter.

subject, the subject of this story, this I, though more or less surreptitiously *writes*, decides to become, if at all possible, a scientist" (*DtP*, 393). As Coetzee goes on with the description of his younger self, we learn more about his feeling of self-estrangement:

> He merely feels alien. Let me ('me') trace this feeling […] further back in time. A sense of being alien goes back far in his memories. But to certain intensifications of that sense I, writing in 1991, can put a date. (*DtP*, 393)

Obviously, the fine lines between *he* and *I* are not as unambiguous as the distinction Coetzee posits in his Nobel lecture. When he spoke of the nine-year-old he once was as "the one I call 'I', not the one I call 'he'", Coetzee seemed to employ an artistic criterion to distinguish between two versions of himself: one was recognized as authentic, and the other was a third-person projection moving in a fictitious world. Fine-lines are much murkier in the quotation from *Doubling the Point*: on one hand, chronological distance seems to become ontological difference when Coetzee compares "he", his teenage self, to "I, writing in 1991." On the other hand, Coetzee's use of punctuation also undermines the solidity of the 1991 self when the pronoun *me* is repeated and placed between brackets and single quotation marks – "let me ('me')" – as if in a doubtful afterthought.

According to Attridge, a correlation exists between the confessional nature of *Boyhood* and *Youth* and the feeling of self-division experienced by the author. Not unsurprisingly, he identifies it in various passages from *Doubling the Point* where Coetzee depicts autobiography as the product of dialogical exchanges between parts of a fragmented self (Attridge 2005: 144). One is the famous assertion, which I already cited in this work, that "what you recognize or hope to recognize as the truth" (*DtP*, 18) emerges out of an internal interplay of voices; the other is Coetzee's description of his own engagement with the theory of autobiography as "a submerged dialogue between two persons. One is a person I desired to be and was feeling my way toward. The other is more shadowy: let us call him the person I then was, though he may be the person I still am." (*DtP*, 392)

In the conclusion of his discussion of *Boyhood* and *Youth*, Derek Attridge goes on quoting from the last interview in *Doubling the Point*, when Coetzee speaks of the moment when he moved to the US to pursue a PhD:

> This is the person who […] goes to Texas to resume his studies in literature. […] The discipline with which he (and *he* now begins to feel closer to *I*: *autre*biography shades back into autobiography) had trained himself/myself to think brought illuminations that I can't imagine him or me reaching by any other route. (*DtP*, 393-394)

According to Attridge, it is not coincidental that the moment Coetzee describes corresponds to the ending of *Youth*: as "*autre*biography shades into autobiography," different parts of the self are no longer in conversation with one another, "making it improbable that there will be a third volume of this kind." (Attridge 2005: 158).

As we now know, a third *autre*biographical book, *Summertime*, did appear in 2009. Still, Attridge was not proven wrong completely, seeing as how the narrative structure in *Summertime* is significantly different from what we see in the two previous instalments of Coetzee's trilogy. Self-fragmentation does not play out in terms of I/he only, and the narrative voice becomes irreducibly polyphonic. Significantly, the interview format also plays a prominent role.

Summertime reconstructs the first few years of Coetzee's life after he moved back to South Africa from the USA in 1971. Similarly to what happens in *Boyhood* and *Youth*, factual details are not always accurate, and major life events are plainly omitted: no mention of Coetzee's marriage or children is ever made in *Summertime*, where *he* is depicted as a single man living with his widower father. The whole narrative is framed by an opening and a closing section, both titled "Notebooks" and made up of fragments and notes from an unfinished autobiographical project. *He* appears to be the main character in those sections but, differently from *Boyhood* and *Youth*, the third-person, present-tense narrative flow is not uninterrupted. The narrative segments alternate with instructions and reminders written in italics by the fictional creator of *he*, who seems to be jotting down notes on how to best develop his drafts. The authorial voice usually prefers impersonal passives ("To be expanded on": *St*, 6 and 8; "To be explored": *St*, 9), and we do find the occasional imperative ("Caution: avoid pushing his interest in Jesus too far": *St*, 13), but the author-character never writes in the first person, nor does he ever address himself with the pronoun *you*.

The sections are seven in total. Aside from the opening and closing "Notebooks", five chapters form the bulk of the book. Each of them is an interview, and all are titled after the interviewees' names. The interviewer is a rather inconspicuous character; we know nothing about him but his name – Mr. Vincent – and the fact that he is an unauthorized biographer trying to write a book about a deceased, world-famous author named John Coetzee. To do so, he has selected and approached five people from Coetzee's life: Julia, a past fling and neighbour; Margot, a cousin; Adriana, the mother of two students of Coetzee's; a colleague named Martin and, finally, Sophie, a French professor with whom Coetzee was romantically involved with while co-teaching a course in Anglophone and Francophone literatures.[47] Many impeding elements hamper the flow of Mr. Vincent's conversations. The first interviewee, Julia Frankl, disappoints his expectations and only portrays John Coetzee like a minor character in her own story story ("I am perfectly aware that it is John you want to hear about, not me. But the only story […] I am prepared to tell is […] the story of my life and his part in it. […] Mark and I were the protagonists, John [a] member of the supporting cast" *St*, 43); Sophie Denoël objects to the lack of any authorization for the biography (*St*, 225), and Margot questions Mr. Vincent whole intent and methodology with words that echo Coetzee's own critique of the interview format in *Doubling the Point*:

> *When I spoke to you, I was under the impression you were simply going to transcribe our interview and leave it at that. I had no idea you were going to rewrite it completely.*
> That's not entirely fair. I have not rewritten it, I have simply recast it as a narrative. Changing the form should have no effect on the content. […]
> *I don't know. Something sounds wrong, but I can't put my finger on it.* (*St*, 91)

Martin's chapter is the second-to-last one in the book. Surprisingly, however, we learn through Martin's questions that the order in which we read the interviews is completely different from the chronology of Mr. Vincent's actions: "From here I'll be making another

[47] No certain information has been divulged about the identity of those characters, who may or may not be based on real people from Coetzee's past. We do know, however, that Kannemeyer believes Margot is a fictional version of Coetzee's cousin Agnes (2012: 207) and that Jonathan Crewe, former lecturer at the University of Cape Town and literary critics, self-identified as Martin (Crewe 2013: 13).

trip to South Africa to speak to Coetzee's cousin Margot […]. From there to Brazil to see a woman named Adriana Nascimento […]. And then […] I will go to Canada to see someone named Julia Frankl […]. I also plan to see Sophie Denoël in Paris." (*St* 216-217).

The difference between the chronology of events Mr. Vincent declares and the one that constitutes the reading experience is one last element of estrangement in a powerfully estranging work of fiction which, according to Kannemeyer, employs a "complex chain of narrative methods" (2012: 606). Not only does Coetzee kill off the (auto)biographical subject, but he also dissects its corpse: the Coetzee-character is a conglomerate of the same *he* we find in *Boyhood* and *Youth*, its author-turned-deceased-character, a plurality of opinions about him voiced by characters who may or may not be modeled on real-life acquaintances, and a narrative by an unauthorized biographer who has presumably manipulated those same opinions. The dialogical format does not help the biographical investigation in any way; on the contrary, it shows different monologic and conflicting narratives that fail to adjust to one another. The result is the precarious and provisional portrait of an elusive subject.

Precariousness and provisionality are precisely what Attridge highlights as the main features of *Boyhood* and *Youth* as confessional narratives. The reasons for such precarity, he argues, is to be found in the "structural interminability of confession in a secular context" (2005: 142): on one hand, there is no pre-determined ending to self-scrutiny; on the other hand, the process of self-examination is hindered by the linguistic code itself. If language requires an interlocutor, so does a linguistically-articulated confession, even though its objective has more to do with self-knowledge than self-presentation.

In *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee himself refers to religious discourse as the only possibility to put an end to the confessional enterprise. He does so explicitly when he discusses Dostoevsky and the sacred ("Against the endlessness of skepticism Dostoevsky poses the closure not of confession but of absolution and therefore intervention of grace in the world" *DtP*, 249), but also implicitly, with a reference to Martin Buber's 1923 essay *Ich und Du*. Paraphrasing Buber, Coetzee speaks of an "existential incompleteness of the *I*" and of a "primary word" that only exists in the *I-Thou* combination – a combination now lost after the objectification of *you* into *it* and the subsequent transformation of the *I* in something spectral

and alien to itself. (*DtP*, 72). Coetzee seems to endorse the idea that the I, as a part of a pair, can either be a secular I-it (transcendental and subject to the laws of time) or a religious I-you, a primal and authentically dialogical pair where identities merge, and the empirical fine-lines that distinguish *I* from *it* become impalpable.

The sole truly dialogical stance Coetzee describes in *Doubling the Point* is Buber's: "Buber point[s] to a transcendence of subjectivity through union with or reconstitution of the Word" (*DtP*, 72). The secular confession of Coetzee's autobiographical trilogy is therefore destined to remain unfinished because of the unbridgeable distance between *I* and *he* as well as the 'monological dialogues' of *Summertime*'s interviews. Completeness and wholeness are only possible in the realm of the sacred, which does not translate in human language, but only in an archetypal and inaccessible primal Word.

2.3 A Good Story?

With *Summertime* seemingly exhausting Coetzee's engagement with fictional autobiography, the publication of the 2015 volume *The Good Story: Exchanges on Truth, Fiction and Psychotherapy* was, perhaps, unexpected. Part of the reason is the inconspicuous beginning of Coetzee's collaboration with *The Good Story*'s co-author, Arabella Kurtz. The pair had had an e-mail correspondence in 2008, initiated by Kurtz and later published in *Salmagundi*,[48] in which they debated "what can be learned from [works of fiction] from a psychological point of view" (Coetzee/Kurtz 2010: 39). The exchange was not always smooth and productive because of a series of misunderstandings: in his very first e-mails, Coetzee questioned the scientific status of psychology (43), called Kurtz by the wrong first name (Amanda, rather than Arabella) (44), and, most importantly, recognized that he and Kurtz may have been using the same words – reason, invention, empathy (44-46) – to express different concepts. As the conversation continued, Kurtz recognized its rather aimless quality (64), and she asked

[48] Kurtz, Arabella and J.M. Coetzee (2010), "'Nevertheless, My Sympathies Are With The Karamazovs.' An Email Correspondence: May – December 2008," Salmagundi 166/167 (Spring-Summer): 39-72.

Coetzee whether he had something more to discuss beside "[his] concern […] with the limits of rational understanding," (*ibidem*) which she felt had been at the heart of their conversation. To that, Coetzee replied with uncertainty: he had deliberately avoided re-reading the correspondence, and he felt his views may have shifted since its beginning. (66)

The correspondence did not have much critical resonance, but Coetzee and Kurtz picked it up again in 2015 and turned their new, edited letters in a volume. *The Good Story* has a much clearer structure than the previous publication: it includes a Foreword, eleven thematic chapters, and a glossary of technical terms in the end. Coetzee and Kurtz's aims and interests are stated clearly in the Foreword: respectively, they want to understand "a post-religious form of therapeutic dialogue" and explore the way in which "internal processes are conveyed from a point of view that is radically different from a psychological one" – *GS*, viii).

Not unsurprisingly, the focus of the whole exchange is autobiographical discourse in its various forms and shapes. Some chapters in particular, however, have special relevance in the context of this work, as they take up the long-held preoccupations with autobiography that Coetzee had dealt with in *Doubling the Point* as well as in the works of fiction discussed in this chapter: the difference between narrating and creating memories, the possibility of truth in autobiography, and the role of the interlocutor in dialogue-based forms of self-representation, be them literary, religious or therapeutic in nature.

In Chapter One and Two, Coetzee questions the meaning of autobiographical truth and wonders whether it has more to do with historical factualness (*GS*, 2) or with internal, emotional, and even aesthetic coherence (5). Coetzee feels that neither form of truth can be fully attained without interminable analysis; and, he adds, "if interminable analysis is not practical, why not settle for a version of the truth that, in some sense, works?" (9). For the first time in his decade-long reflection on self-writing, Coetzee ponders over a utilitarian approach: are 'good stories' reliable, factual, coherent, or event aesthetically pleasant narratives – or are they "empowering fictions" that allow people to be at peace with themselves and "go out into the world better able to love and work?" (3).

In her reply, Kurtz validates Coetzee's unprecedented utilitarianism with her empirical observations: "my experience is that more often than not the truth IS what works – I can't

really go along with the opposition between practicality and truth set out in your account." (9) She then goes on to describe the role of the therapist, thereby addressing the other major concern we repeatedly find in Coetzee's work: if an autobiography is dialogically constructed, what role does the interlocutor play in the process? According to Kurtz,

> The truth which psychotherapy is based upon […] is always dynamic, provisional and intersubjective. It is contained within the terms of a relationship. […] It is also based, I think, on a belief that we can only know and understand ourselves fully through others – through the way we experience others and ourselves in relation to others, and the way others experience us. (*GS*, 11)

Coetzee is not entirely satisfied with Kurtz's answer, and he pushes the matter further. His long reflection touches subjects such as the nature of events (how to determine what really happened?) and the chance for memories to be "uncoloured by interpretation" (12). In Chapter Five, he comes to describe most human dialogues (including the psychotherapeutic one) as "fake": they are "exchanges between projected fictions" (50). True (as opposed to fake) dialogue has a spiritual quality to it:

> At a deeper level dialogue requires a power of projecting oneself, via a faculty of sympathy, into the life-view and ultimately the being of the other. This projection of oneself cannot be into some imagined version of the other: it has to be into the actual being of the other, no matter how difficult and unpleasant and even boring that may be. This power seems to me more than simply a professional one – a power that can be learned and passed on from one generation of the caste of healers to the next. In essence it seems to me spiritual. (*GS*, 52)

In this assertion we find the same idea Coetzee broached in *Doubling the Point* – that authentic dialogical communication has a sacred, salvific element to it. While Coetzee remains skeptical of an equally authentic dialogical exchange in the secular realm, however, he seems to have grown more and more convinced of the need for a dialogue with an actual interlocutor, rather than an inner interplay of the voices of a fragmented self:

> The sort of self-created and self-creating narrative I wrote about, within which one insulates oneself from what to an outside observer looks overwhelmingly like the truth about oneself, is hard to break out of insolation: the abstract imperative to face up to the truth is simply too painful to implement. One has to be helped; and no machine – no routine therapeutic pattern that might be as well the output of a machine – can do the helping. (*GS*, 52)

This kind of communication is obviously hindered by a number of obstacles which regard speakers, listeners, and the code they share: speakers may feel doubtful of their identities and motives; listeners may not be empathetic or attentive; and, most importantly, human language may not be a good enough vehicle for authentic communication: "the code [they share] may be the very heart of what is wrong" (*GS*, 56). Coetzee posits two ways around these communicational drawbacks. One is entirely non-verbal, or even pre-verbal:

> Instead of communicating, then, I would stay with a more primitive notion of speaking – speaking by itself, not even speaking-to – with the reservation that at times speaking may turn into something more primitive, like tears: I am looking for someone before whom I can cry, or, in a metaphor that might cover both words and tears, before whom I can pour myself out. (*GS*, 57).

The other is what Coetzee describes as "a paradox: [a] dialogue that may take the form of monologue," a confessional-like narrative where a silent interlocutor listens impassively and eventually offers a word of absolution – a necessarily external intervention that allows the (otherwise interminable) motion of self-scrutiny to stop. There is no need for knowledge of the other, but rather a "sympathetic reaching out" that allows autobiographical processes to truly end. (*GS*, 58).

At the moment of writing this thesis, *The Good Story* is the latest of Coetzee's theoretical and fictional works dealing with autobiography; it is difficult to say whether it is also its culmination. An evolution in his thought, however, is clearly detectable. While Coetzee's stance on the fragmentariness of the writer's ego is consistent throughout his fictional and non-fictional production, his tentativeness concerning truth in autobiography changes through the years. His decreasing skepticism allows him to recognize possibilities of authentic communication, although oftentimes not verbal, and/or to settle for versions of

autobiographical truth that allow for well-being, rather than maximum historical or aesthetic coherence. *The Good Story* itself, as a book, may be thought of in similar terms: it looks like the ending of Coetzee's year-long reflection on autobiography; it was developed with the help and cooperation of an imperfect, but sympathetic listener and responder; and, most importantly, it presents readers with a *good*, or *good enough* account of what autobiographical truth it. In this case too *good story* may either be taken to mean 'true narrative' or 'true enough, empowering fiction which allows self-scrutiny to come to a halting point'. The decision is left to the reader.

Chapter Three

"And say the animal responded".

A Journey to *Cripplewood*

A cat isn't a set of questions. The cat in the culvert made an appeal to me, and I responded. I responded without question.
The Old Woman and the Cats

3.1 Coetzee's Animals in Theory and Fiction

"Rare is the work in animal studies that does not contend with Coetzee": this is what Una Chaudhuri appropriately states in her 2009 essay on the artistic representation of animals (318). Chaudhuri is the author of two books (*Animal Acts: Performing Species Today*, 2014, and *The Stage Lives of Animals: Zooësis and Performance*, 2017) on zooësis, a term she coined to refer to the representation of animal in media, culture and performance. Her 2009 essay maps concisely, and yet quite accurately, the main currents of thought and state-of-the-art developments in the field of animal studies: Chaudhuri discusses Temple Grandin's "embodied investigation of animal life" and Gilles Deleuze's famous *becoming animal*, which she describes as an attempt to elevate liminality over identity in ontology as well as process over product in the representation of living creatures (521); she obviously highlights the pivotal importance of Jacques Derrida's reflection on the encounter with the animal other, its

singularity, and its philosophical consequences (*ibidem*); she explores Cora Diamond and Matthew Calarco's philosophical outlook on sympathy and creative imagination, she sketches John Berger's analysis of animal symbolism in modern and post-modern times (522), she endorses Giorgio Agamben's definition of language as the most important – but ultimately arbitrary – item in the "ever-changing repertoire of symbolic, discursive, and material means by which the category of the human is produced" (523), and she finally closes her essay with an acknowledgement of Donna Haraway's theory of animals and humans as 'companion species' (524).

Animal studies are a comprehensive, fertile, and ever-expanding field. While it is not unusual to come across essays that appreciate its multifariousness, Chaudhuri's premises are especially significant. The quotation that opens this chapter – "rare is the work in animal studies that does not contend with Coetzee" – is the running thread in her argument, as Coetzee's fictional works are used as the benchmark against which currents of thought are examined; however, this is also the exemplification of a broader tendency in animal studies, where fictional works are often used as illustrations of existing theories or, conversely, to prompt the development of new ones.[49] This is especially true in the case of Coetzee. Criticism on animals in his fiction is abundant to say the least – some of it even appears in *The Lives of Animals*, which famously includes a non-fictional closing section titled "Reflections" with pieces by Peter Singer, Marjorie Garber, Wendy Doniger and Barbara Smuts.

Listing all the famous monographs and countless essays that Coetzee's writing on animals has inspired would only be redundant; massive volumes such as Stephen Mulhall's *The Wounded Animal* (2008), or Leist and Singer's collection *J.M. Coetzee and Ethics* (2010) are now canonical texts in Coetzee studies, and so are a number of famous essays on animals in his novels. Most of them adopt the approach typified by Chaudhuri – and, in so doing, highlight the singular contribution of Coetzee's writing to philosophical and critical debate on animal ethics and representation; however, they generally lack a much simpler investigation

[49] This kind of relationship between works of art and theoretical developments in animals studies is discussed by Cary Wolfe in his monograph *What is Poshthumanism?* (2010): see pages 145-6 and 152-3.

of the representation of animals in Coetzee's works. The reason for this seemingly surprising gap in criticism is perhaps best highlighted in Paul Barret's 2014 essay "Animals Track in the Margin", where Barret employs Carol Adam's notion of animals as absent referents to describe their role in Coetzee's early fiction:

> Animals have become absent referents, whose fate is transmuted into a metaphor for someone else's existence or fate. Metaphorically, the absent referent can be anything whose original meaning is undercut as it is absorbed into a different hierarchy of meaning; in this case the original meaning of animals' fates is absorbed into a human-centered hierarchy. . . . The absent referent is both there and not there. (Adams 1990: 53)

It is undoubtedly true that animals are rarely depicted *as such* in fictional works,[50] and even Coetzee's writing features animals as symbols, or representations of human qualities and feelings. The examples are countless: in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) a small fox briefly appears in the Magistrate's life that he equates in his mind to the Barbarian girl he has taken to live with him. It appears quite clearly that the animal otherness of the fox is nothing but a symbol of the girl's state of captivity:

> "It's a very pretty little creature," I say. She shrugs. "Animals belong outdoors." […] So the fox cub stays. Sometimes I see its sharp snout peeking out from a dark corner. Otherwise it is only a noise in the night and a pervasive tang of urine as I wait for it to grow big enough to be disposed of.
> "People will say I keep two wild animals in my room, a fox and a girl."
> "She does not see the joke, or she does not like it." (*WtfB*, 37).

Disgrace (1999) presents us with much more nuanced metaphors. While dogs do figure in the novel as creatures in their own right who elicit empathetic responses and are capable of establishing a connection with humans, they also stand for a number of anthropological concepts: humility, acceptance, compassion, and, most notably, the importance of ideas over concreteness. When Lurie goes to extreme lengths to dispose of the dogs' corpses in a way that he deems dignified, he does so to spare himself an unbearable sight – he acts to preserve

[50] See Berger 1980: "Why look at animals?" 3-28.

"his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing" (*D*, 145-146).

The Lives of Animals (1999), with its rich and complex debate on animal ethics and vegetarianism, presents us with similar issues. As Luis Tremaine notices, "Coetzee's personal interest in and respect for the conscious lives of animals are quite genuine, but the insight these passages hold for a reader of Coetzee's novels bears more importantly on human experience" (2003: 598); Marjorie Garber, whose commentary on Coetzee's work is included in the published version of *The Lives of Animals*, also expresses concerns of the same kind: "we thought John Coetzee was talking about animals. Could it be, however, that all along he was really asking, 'What is the value of literature?'" (*LoA*, 84).

An isolated hint of change in Coetzee's representation of animals is perhaps to be found in *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), when the character of Dostoevsky, yearning for the voice of his lost step-son, hears a dog howling in the silence of the night:

> It is the dead of night, the whole house is still. […] At last it comes. It has the same pitch, the same length, the same inflection as the word that still echoes in his ears, but it is not a human call at all. It is the unhappy wail of a dog. Not Pavel, then, calling to be fetched in – only a thing that does not concern him, a dog howling for its father. Well, let the dog-father, whoever he is, go out in the cold and dark and gather in his arms his gross, smelly child. […] The dog howls again […]: a dog, not a wolf; a dog, not his son. (*MoP*, 79-80).

The Dostoevsky-character recognizes his tendency to read animals in anthropological terms, but he is quick to shrug this feeling off and even ridicule it. For the first time, animals are presented as creatures of irreducible otherness – and even though they may stimulate artistic creativity and theoretical reflection on their ontological status, they also are voiceless creatures that are often represented in anthropological terms. Coetzee's challenge to find new representational routes of animal otherness is the object of the last part this Chapter. Its theoretical background will be the theory of posthumanism and, most specifically, Derrida's discussion of the elusive fine lines between animal and human identity. Seeing as how language and logos are traditionally conceived as the mark of the human/animal divide,

Derrida famously focused on the animal point of view on the human and evocatively described animal gaze as an answer to humans. His famously provocative hypothesis, "And Say the Animal Responded" is the title I have chosen for this Chapter.

3.2 Replying in the Dark: *Cripplewood*

Robert Kusek, editor of the 2014 collection Travelling Texts: J.M. Coetzee and Other Writers, has been among the first critics to write about J.M. Coetzee's recent collaboration with Belgian sculptress Berlinde De Bruyckere. The two artists are described as an "unlikely pair" in the very title of his 2015 essay, and a number of times afterwards (Kusek 2015: 10, 15, 20, 28). Kusek's skepticism is about Coetzee and De Bruyckere's joint authorship as well as the works stemming from it: a presentation in the Belgian Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale, where De Bruyckere and Coetzee acted as artist and curator respectively; the exhibition's catalogue, titled *Cripplewood/Kreupelhout* (2013), and a lesser-known book project from the previous year, titled *We Are All Flesh*.

In a letter to De Bruyckere from the early days of 2013 – a letter that would later be published in *Cripplewood* – Coetzee thanks the sculptress for the Belgian edition of *All Flesh*, which he had just received from her: "Thank you for Allen Flees, which has become quite a dark and powerful book (if 'book' is what it is)" (42). His words show his uncertainty as to the nature of his and De Bruyckere's joint project. This ambiguity, along with the book's peculiar structure, does indeed posit many questions about Coetzee's cooperation with De Bruyckere and their shared authorial responsibility. This section aims at framing their cooperation and exchanges in a number of different contexts: the landscape of contemporary hybrid art, a theoretical reflection on authorial authority in works that are built on exchanges

rather than only one voice, and Coetzee's own attempts at depicting animal physicality in his oeuvre.

A description of the architecture of *All Flesh* and *Cripplewood* is a necessary starting point. As far as *All Flesh* is considered, the task is not challenging. Coetzee and De Bruyckere's first joint work presents itself in book format; quotes from various novels by Coetzee and photographic details of De Bruyckere's sculptures alternate in between blank spaces. The sources are never credited in the body of the text, and there are no footnotes. We only find an index in the last pages, which list separately the sources of the texts (a selection of ten works of fiction dating between 1990 and 2009) and the subjects of the photographs (seventeen sculptures displayed in public exhibitions between 2007 and 2012). A colophon with information on the other contributors (photographers, book designers and editors) appears immediately afterwards, and a two-page pictorial closes the book.

The cover picture of *All Flesh* is the close-up of a bundle of bones displayed in a glass case and placed against the backdrop of an out-of-focus library. The image matches the title, as both seem to privilege bodily materiality over the realm of the word. Of course, this is no surprise for either Coetzee's or De Bruyckere's audience, since both artists are known for placing the body – more often than not, wounded and suffering bodies – at the heart of their creative effort.

Even to the untrained eye, it is readily visible that the body is a pervasive element in De Bruyckere's oeuvre, and that it is usually pictured as wounded or dead flesh. However broad and unspecific, this statement does match shared critical assumptions on the artist's work. The presentation video by the University of Ghent celebrating De Bruyckere's 2015 honorary doctorate is straightforward in that respect: "De Bruyckere's work revolves around the human body; her work portrays the transience of the human body in a very moving and powerful way, as well as human suffering and vulnerability"[51]. Rober Kusek is equally clear when he describes her "visual language" as "highly idiosyncratic and idiomatic" and characterized by "the abject, fragmentedness, corporality, [and] affect" (2015: 16-17).

[51] Dies Natalis 2015 - honorary doctorate to Berlinde De Bruyckere <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VxQck9CCm0k> (0'42''- 0'57''), last accessed July 2018.

The kinship between De Bruyckere's work and Coetzee's is obviously strong. Years before their collaboration, Coetzee himself stated in Doubling the Point that the suffering body is a pivotal part of his poetics:

> If I look back over my own fiction, I see a simple […] standard erected. That standard is the body. Whatever else, the body is not 'that which is not,' and the proof that it is is the pain it feels. The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt. […] And let me again be unambiguous: it is not that one grants the authority of the suffering body: the suffering body takes this authority: that is its power. To use other words: its power is undeniable. (*DtP*: 248)

This is a widely quoted fragment in critical literature on Coetzee, and many critics have pointed to his South African origins as the main reason for his attention towards wounded or tortured bodies. As María López states, "in its concern with the suffering body, Coetzee's narrative is quintessentially South African […]. For obvious historical and political reasons, the tortured, imprisoned, suffering, raped body is omnipresent in South African literature" (2010: 104). However, after The Lives of Animals and Disgrace were both published in 1999, it became clear that Coetzee's idea of corporeality did not just include human corporeality. His well-known interest in bioethics and animal rights suddenly become a major theme in Coetzee studies. A statement Coetzee made in the same interview I quoted above – a statement that was previously overlooked by critics and that Coetzee himself had described as "parenthetic" (DtP, 248) – was suddenly brought to critical attention, quoted repeatedly, and described as an "extraordinary admission" (Bradshaw 2010: 198). Coetzee's remarked closed a trail of thought on physical pain with a brief note to the effect that pain is not exclusively human:

> Let me add, entirely parenthetically, that I, as a person, as a personality, am overwhelmed, that my thinking is thrown into confusion and helplessness, by the fact of suffering in the world, and not only human suffering. (*DtP*, 248).

In hindsight, it is not at all surprising that Coetzee felt the need to make this seemingly small clarification; however, it is equally unsurprising that mentions of the body were usually

understood in terms of human corporeality, and human corporeality alone, in both common discourse as well as high criticism. An example of such common generalization clearly occurs in the presentation video of De Bruyckere I already mentioned above, which states that "her work revolves around the human body; her work portrays the transience of the human body in a very moving and powerful way, as well as human suffering and vulnerability."

The emphasis on humanity soon proves contradictory, as the presentation goes on to say that "[De Bruyckere] works very closely with the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, where she literally receives inspiration and materials". All the while the video shows sculptures that clearly resemble ox-like and horse-like shapes (1'23''-1'30'').

Even after a few remarks on De Bruyckere's work, it is not difficult to imagine that the 'we' in *We Are All Flesh* is a more inclusive kind of 'we' than what one may assume at first. It is a 'we' that privileges the shared bodily reality of the human and animal experience over the differences between the two groups and the criteria that establish them. However, while nothing in *All Flesh* contradicts this hypothesis, nothing explicitly validates it either. Moreover, critical attention is drawn away from theoretical speculation on animality as more immediate questions arise on the book's peculiar format. Readers/spectators instinctively suppose that the alternating verbal and visual fragments create a narrative, and the authors' choice to have *All Flesh* published in book format obviously strengthens such interpretation. It is equally easy to make the assumption that the fragments from the novels are some sort of caption to the photographs – or, conversely, that the photographs simply illustrate the texts. Neither of those hypothesis, however – *All Flesh* as an illustrated story vs. *All Flesh* as a series of captioned pictures – is actually appropriate. The textual fragments do not seem to follow any logical nor consequential order, nor do they usually include lexicon one could easily link to the images they are placed next to. Indeed, the work is so fragmentary that giving a systematic description of it is problematic. Its nature is elusive, and whichever theoretical reflection it may elicit on the human/animal divide is overshadowed by the audience's instinctive need for satisfying interpretations. The lack of information on a number of issues such as authorial intent, the project's genesis, and the role each co-author played in the creative process adds to the uncertainty, which readers are bound to face with no critical

aid other than a few remarks made by one of the editors. Hugo Bousset, whose words are printed on the back cover of the book, describes *All Flesh* as an intermedial, dialogical work:

> The sculptural work of Berlinde De Bruyckere […] imperiously demands a response from whoever faces it. […] In the spaces of resonance carved out by De Bruyckere writers can practice their art of creation, not by writing about the objects, but by placing creative texts next to them. The writer does not appropriate any of the artwork's meanings by explaining it, but rather adds significance by answering art with art. […] J.M. Coetzee accepts this challenge. In concert with the author, De Bruyckere selects fragments bespeaking exceptional beauty from his impassioned and unsettling novels. This way they craft a five-part composition of image and word which illuminates the dark world of their works from the inside out.

Bousset makes it clear that *All Flesh* is not a work where two different media coexist next to one another, or much less become supplementary to one another. On the contrary, emphasis is placed on the fruitful merging of different arts. This kind of hybridization, however, is the issue that still solicits unanswered questions. What is the reason behind the intermedial choice? And how can we define *All Flesh* as a work of intermedial art if the co-authors are only responsible for different, monomedial sections of it that were developed before their joint project was even in the works? And finally, is the pervasive theme of the materiality of the body in any way linked to the choice of intermediality? Nothing in *All Flesh* answers these questions; luckily enough, however, important information becomes accessible to the public when *Cripplewood* is published.

In spite of the complex questions it elicits and its inherent ambiguity, *All Flesh* is characterized by a simple structure. Quite the opposite is true for *Cripplewood*, whose complex structure is counterbalanced by remarkable clarity regarding the nature of the work and the genesis of the project. Differently from *All Flesh*, *Cripplewood* is more than the eponymous book. It is also a massive installation developed by De Bruyckere under Coetzee's curatorship and displayed in the Belgian Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale.

Cripplewood, the book, is the exhibition's catalogue. It includes several sections. The first is a letter sent to De Bruyckere by Philippe Van Cauteren, the artistic director of the

SMAK Museum of Contemporary Art (Ghent), followed by some of his comments on the sculptress's work. After that we find two longer sections: a short story by Coetzee, previously unpublished, and a collection of letters he and De Bruyckere exchanged. The series of letters is interrupted twice: first by a short piece by Coetzee on the different meanings one may link to the title, *Cripplewood*, and later by a poem (Apollo and Marsyas, by Polish author Zbigniew Herbert, in English translation). Finally, the work closes with a short essay on the relationship between *Cripplewood* and the aesthetics of Venice, authored by philosopher Herman Parret. Once again, text sections and photographs of De Bruyckere's sculptures alternate; this time, however, the photographs only depict the installation in the Belgian Pavilion.

The body's centrality is as evident in the *Cripplewood* installation as it was in previous works by De Bruyckere. The shapes we can identify are either human, animal, or ambiguously hybrid; they are clearly similar to the photographic details we see in *All Flesh*, and so are the materials of the sculptures: wax, horsehair, cotton and wood, with an overcoat of either flesh-coloured or dark red paint. According to Robert Kusek, the work's aim is to evoke "fleshiness, decay and decomposition, woundedness, […] a dead and tortured body" (2015: 18). Kusek recognizes the central role played by the bodily dimension in De Bruyckere's work and, more specifically, in *Cripplewood*. Similarly to what happens when facing *All Flesh*, however, his attention soon shifts away from it and focuses on the form and structure of the work instead. Indeed, Kusek moves on to discuss matters of authorial responsibility. In his description, no direct relationship is ever posited between such theoretical problems and the bodily reality the installation represents:

> De Bruyckere's installation problematises (in a very general way) the place of man in the world and inquires about human responsibility for it; consequently, it becomes part of the discourse of ecology and posthumanism which has been powerfully present in the global production and circulation of visual art over the last few years. However, this short discussion of *Cripplewood*/*Kreupelhout* had another objective in mind […]: to prepare the ground for addressing […] the nature of J.M. Coetzee's participation in the project. (2015: 19-20)

Kusek's curiosity is easily satisfied. While *All Flesh* did not offer any clues as to Coetzee's role in the project or its origins, *Cripplewood* provides us with very explicit information. The letters between the co-authors take up most of the catalogue, and they detail the development of the project since its very beginning. We actually get to read De Bruyckere's proposal to Coetzee as she asked him to cooperate with her as a curator in a letter from September 2012; as we can see, the sculptress offered her thoughts on what the curatorship should imply:

> I received the official news that I have been selected to represent my country at the Belgian Pavillion for the Venice Biennal of 2013. The traditional approach for the artist that has been chosen […] is that he or she chooses a curator to assist them during the working process and help them make artistic decisions. I would prefer a different approach. The last few months I buried myself in your work, and I drew so much from it. So many thoughts that need to be translated into sculptures. […] That is why I would like to ask you to be my curator. Not to assist me during the working process or to help make any decisions, but as a source of inspiration. (*Cw*, 29)

De Bruyckere goes on to explain that her work is strongly and evidently tied to the physicality of bodies, and that this is a reason why she believes Coetzee's work can inspire her:

> Maybe there is something […] that you feel can be related to my work. A text, a story, and essay maybe, something I can feed on, that I can digest for a while and spit out afterwards. As a parallel text, not as a contemplation of my work, as is usually the case […]. Just two separate words put next to each other that are somehow visibly connected. (*Cw*, 19-20).

Coetzee replied to De Bruyckere's invitation with a previously unpublished short story, The Old Woman and the Cats; like the letters, the short story will later become a section in *Cripplewood*. Thus, the correspondence was born. De Bruyckere wrote back with some drafts of her project for the Belgian Pavilion, its provisional title, and a variety of notes on topics ranging from the architecture of Venice to the short story Coetzee had sent her. When it came to the story, she stated evocatively that while she was reading it she felt like "a spectator in a theatre" where "the work of a soulmate, a parallel world" is being staged (*Cw*, 30).

Subsequent letters detail the development of the project. De Bruyckere writes that she has chosen to build the installation around a gigantic elm tree trunk arranged horizontally on the floor. She had found the trunk herself, by mere chance, during a holiday in France, and she had taken it back to Belgium in order to work on its "extreme corporality" (41), which reminded her of a "limbless body forced in the straightjacket of other people's needs and expectations" (42). After the decision was made of working around the elm trunk, the guidelines for the development of the project were set; the correspondence between Coetzee and De Bruyckere became an exchange of intellectual stimuli which influenced the construction of the installation. The two artists exchanged thoughts about a series of characters who are traditionally linked to the ideas of wounded and/or metamorphic bodies: Marsyas, Daphne, and, most notably, Saint Sebastian. After investigating the saint's cult in Venice ("Saint Sebastian has a strong link with Venice. As a protector of possible plague victims, he became one of the most portrayed saints in a city that was severely hit by the Black Death", 31), De Bruyckere decided that she wanted to include his portrayal in the installation. On one hand, he linked the work of art to the city of Venice; on the other hand, he was an excellent example of the woundedness she was so strongly fascinated by:

> It's a historical icon that appeals to me very strongly, and that I would like to take with me in my story. […] His body has a very dual attractive force. There is a pleasure to this pain of the penetrating arrows. […] The pleasure of the forbidden, of the inaccessible. (31)

The correspondence goes on, and it continues to document the development of the installation. One letter attests to De Bruyckere's success in incorporating the figure of Saint Sebastian in her work:

> In my search for a way to integrate the character of Saint Sebastian into this work, I recognised a similarity between Saint Sebastian and the shape of the tree. The mutilated trunk, all outstanding branches removed, stripped of its limbs. […] You can still see where the branches once were. The wounds have become scars. In some spots the bark has been damaged; this leaves open spots that have a very delicate, sensual character – naked skin almost. In a way it feels like Saint Sebastian has become the tree, instead of being tortured against it. (41)

The artistic choices regarding the figure of Saint Sebastian, however, do not come from De Bruyckere's mind alone; on the contrary, they originate from a shared intellectual route. On more than one occasion, De Bruyckere illustrated her ideas and projects; Coetzee replied with comments, questions, short pieces of creative writing, and reading tips. De Bruyckere then explained how she would integrate those tips and suggestions in her own work, thus opening new spaces for confrontation. As the quotations show, however, the final decisions were always left to De Bruyckere, and De Bruyckere alone. This is the reason why Robert Kusek is so critical of Coetzee and De Bruyckere's choice to label themselves as co-authors and to describe the results of their efforts as hybrid works of art:

> The individual sections [of *Cripplewood*] remain fully autonomous and, despite their singular referentiality, they do not engage in any form of dialogue with one another; at best, they reproduce and comment on communication between Coetzee and De Bruyckere, which […] is profoundly anti-dialogic. Already at the level of genre, the volume *Cripplewood*/*Kreupelhout* […] suggests an uneven distribution of roles and false cooperation between Coetzee and De Bruyckere. (2015: 18)

According to Kusek, reading about the origins and development of *Cripplewood* – and about the degree of autonomy De Bruyckere and Coetzee have chosen to keep from one another – only adds to the theoretical perplexities generated by the ambiguous nature of *All Flesh*:

> It seems hardly possible to deny that J.M. Coetzee and Berlinde De Bruyckere are, indeed, an unlikely pair. A detailed analysis of the correspondence between the two artists […] clearly proves that Coetzee's contribution to the installation was negligible and, in fact, inconsequential. […] Even though his name was put on the cover of the catalogue on a par with De Bruyckere's, he cannot be considered its co-author. (2015: 28-29)

His ensuing conclusion is that we are dealing with a cooperation that meets opportunistic rather than artistic needs – that De Bruyckere's work has become more

desirable in the art market after being "thematised and, in a sense, immortalised by literature" (2015: 29).

As I said at the beginning of this section, Kusek's is one of the first critical studies to be published about the still recent *All Flesh* and *Cripplewood*, and his perspective will certainly shed interpretative light on the enigmatic nature of both works. However, there are also aspects of both works that Kusek, much like other critics, does not take into account. It is, in fact, Kusek himself who speaks of the possibility of different critical outlooks when he states that *Cripplewood* "problematises […] the place of man in the world" and therefore "becomes part of the discourse of ecology and posthumanism which has been powerfully present in the global production and circulation of visual art over the last few years" (2015: 19).

Kusek does point to a different kind of criticism, but he does not explore the options it offers – namely, the possibility to investigate what his own analysis excluded: the corporeal dimension which clearly defines the installation and which also seems to elude critical attention. A posthumanist reading of *All Flesh* and *Cripplewood* must necessarily focus on the corporeality humans and animals share, rather than what customarily divides the two categories in Western thought. The very title of *We Are All Flesh* validates such view, and so does the cover picture: a close-up of bones (it is impossible, and perhaps irrelevant, to determine whether they are human or animal bones, or both) against the backdrop of an out-of-focus library: the exclusively human realm of logos. Indeed, humanity, reason and logos do appear, but the traditional hierarchy is inverted, and they now look secondary to the body.

Cripplewood lends itself to an entirely similar interpretation: many elements show the co-author's interest in what is not verbal, starting from the epigraph: "consider it a birth. A birth where horror was carved into beauty, down to the bone, to become *Cripplewood* – Kreupelhout». *Cripplewood* is not described with the kind of language that is usually reserved to abstract artistic creations and concepts such as authorial paternity; conversely, it is a birth – physical, material, corporeal, and thus not entirely metaphorical. If this is the perspective we adopt to observe the cooperation between the two artists – a male muse who gives inspiration, and a female creator who deals with the materiality of the work throughout its development – the idea of co-authorship dismissed by Kusek gains immediate credibility. It is not without

reason that Kusek describes the correspondence between Coetzee and De Bruyckere as "profoundly anti-dialogic" (2015: 22). If we concentrate on the entirely verbal dimension of statements and replies, however, we are forced to ignore various elements that hint to a different kind of communication between the co-authors and, consequently, of artistic hybridization. Coetzee, for example, describes his own outlook on the installation as an instinctual approach that distances itself from interpretative grids and appreciates the work of art as an autonomous, living body: "I am glad to hear the work is going well. I can't wait to see it – or rather, can't wait to stand before it and let it breath on me» (letter to De Bruyckere; *Cripplewood*, 51). De Bruyckere's attitude towards Coetzee's work is entirely similar: "I took my time to read your story. When reading, I felt like a spectator sitting in a theatre" (*Cripplewood*, 31). The Old Woman and the Cats – the story (or show) De Bruyckere read (or watched) – is a dialogue between two recurrent characters in Coetzee's literary production: Elizabeth Costello and her son John. Mother and son are discussing their different opinions about the ontological status of animals. Typically, their confrontation does not lead to any kind of resolution; on the contrary, it seems to exacerbate the conflict between mother and son. De Bruyckere comments thus:

> I enjoyed being a spectator. An observer. I feel very personally related to this meeting between mother and son. Two people who do their best to speak about the unspeakable and are left with a sense of dissatisfaction, a lack of closure. But in the end, when looking back on this conversation, must realize that they discussed something more profound than cats. There probably is no other way to discuss these things. Our language often fails us on this level. The unspeakable, however, can be translated into the language of the writer, or the work of the artist. (*Cw*, 32)

De Bruyckere questions the insufficiency of language, and to do so she uses the ambiguous word 'unspeakable'. Two interpretations are possible at once: 'unspeakable' is something that cannot be verbalized – but it may also be something that should not be verbalized because it is frightening, disquieting or downright taboo. It is difficult not to think back about the straightforwardness of those critics who described De Bruyckere's works as a depiction of human bodies and human suffering, in spite of all evidence; and it is equally

difficult not to posit a link between that kind of criticism and those who frame *All Flesh* and *Cripplewood* in a theoretical discussion on authorship but ignore the more corporeal aspects of those works.

While he analyzes "The Old Woman and the Cats", Kusek focuses on the textual dimension of the short story: he examines its literariness and its intertextual and philosophical references (2015: 24-25). Even though his reading raises many important issues, however, the analysis does not take into account any posthumanist subtext. According to Kusek, the short story is a mere section is the series of unrelated fragments that compose *Cripplewood*. The influence it exerts on the installation is not recognized, and as a result Kusek questions Coetzee's contribution to the work and even the hybridity of its very nature. Ironically, a passage in "The Old Woman and the Cats" stages an similar situation when a character briefly experiences an empathetic connection with non-human animals – only to quickly dismiss the disquieting implications of such feeling immediately afterwards. The character is John, Elizabeth Costello's son. Contrarily to his mother, he firmly believes in a rigid distinction between species and he excludes any possibility of understanding non-human creatures. When John meets the eye of a stray cat, he realizes that he is not just watching, but also being watched by the animal; the feeling of recognition he experiences and the condition of reciprocity he unexpectedly finds himself in, generate a vertigo-like feeling in him that he is very quick to brush off.

What John represses is the same idea of a shared human and animal corporeality that Kusek mentions, but later excludes from his own criticism on *Cripplewood* and *All Flesh*:

> He dips a finger in the bean soup and stretches out his hand. The kitten with the white blaze pauses in its game, smells the finger cautiously, licks it. He looks the kitten in the eye, and for a moment the kitten looks back at him. Behind the eye, behind the black slit of the pupil, behind and beyond, what does he see? Is there a momentary flash, light glancing off the invisible soul hiding there? He cannot be sure. If there was indeed a flash, more likely than not it was his own reflection in the pupil. (*Cw*, 11)

This quotation is meaningful in more than one way. On one hand, it shows Coetzee's choice to represent the uneasiness humans experience when they recognize their own

similarities to animals as well as the instinct not to trust such feelings and resort to self-referentiality instead: John ends up thinking he has seen his own reflection in the cat's eye, rather than the gaze of an alien creature that he can relate to. At the same time, however, the quote obviously shows an analogy between Coetzee's short story and Jacques Derrida's famous speech-turned-essay on animal/human liminality: *L'Animal Que Donc Je Suis*, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*.

Coetzee's obvious reference to Derrida's pivotal text in the theory of posthumanism shows the development of an arc of thought about the animal condition that began early on in his literary career, as the previous sections of this chapter detail. Animals are still voiceless, alien creatures which humans cannot truly comprehend. Humans cannot find answers to their questions about them, nor can they represent animals in non-anthropologic terms if they only take into account the logos-centered dimension of dialogue that intermedial works such as *All Flesh* and *Cripplewood* set off to transcend. Their hybrid narratives challenge the traditional idea of humans as creatures that are separate from other animals; they stage the uneasiness related to a shared corporeal dimension that is – and stays – unspeakable and, according to posthumanist critic Cary Wolfe, uses hybrid means of representation to stage the partial self-referentiality of language.

Chapter Four

Plato as Pluto and God as a Dog: Coetzee's Intertextual Plato-Christianity

God is another dog in another maze. I smell God and God smells me. I am the bitch in her time, God the male. God smells me, he can think of nothing else but finding me and taking me. Up and down the branches he bounds, scratching at the mesh. But he is lost as I am lost.
Age of Iron

4.1 Paola Cavalieri's *The Death of the Animal*: Posthumanism and the Socratic Form

A few years before his collaboration with Berlinde De Bruyckere, Coetzee engaged in another joint project in the field of animal studies. After pushing the boundaries of philosophical discourse on animals with his fictionalized lectures, Coetzee accepted to take part in a collective project led by Paola Cavalieri, who had selected a group of contributors to comment on her work *The Death of the Animal. A Dialogue on Perfectionism.* Cavalieri's work was later published along with that of the other participants in the written roundtable, all of whom are prominent names in the field of animal studies. Coetzee is the only creative author in the group; the others – Matthew Calarco, Harlan Miller, Cary Wolfe and Peter Singer – are philosophers and/or critical theorists. The collection comprises Cavalieri's piece

and two extensive sections of theoretical commentary by the contributors; it was published in 2009 under the slightly revised title *The Death of the Animal. A Dialogue*.

Cavalieri's piece is clearly Socratic in form – it is even set on an unnamed Greek island – and it addresses the ontological status of animals from the two different points of view of Theo Glucksman and Alexandra Warnock, who respectively express views related to analytic and continental philosophy. According to Singer, Cavalieri chooses to present her main argument in dialogue format "to develop a position while forestalling possible misunderstandings and dealing with likely objections" (*DotA*, IX). Whereas Singer's account presents us with a clear and straightforward explanation of the use dialogical formats serve in the development of philosophical arguments, Coetzee's contribution is much more nuanced. In his brief contribution to the book, he proposes a reflection on the two interlocutors in Cavalieri's piece as well as the format she has chosen. He says that the Socratic form is not just to be found in their reasoning, but also in the "bloodless" and "sexless" (*DotA*, 85) relationship they have with each other. Alexandra and Theo seem to have "transcended those passions and appetites that we might call animal or, equally well, human" and in so doing they have become "godlike" (*ibidem*).

Coetzee concludes that it is hard "not to take [Cavalieri's] dialogue as an affirmation of a life of reason as a higher life, higher than a life of passion and appetite, but also higher than the life of beings to whom flights of reason are unavailable and perhaps even impossible" (86). By positing an insurmountable distance between the object of the dialogue and its format, Coetzee first addresses the Socratic form and its limits in terms of communication and representative value. As Jan Wilm states, "communication [between Coetzee's characters] is hardly phatic or expressive […]. Rather, his characters exchange positions and ideas either directly to make their dialogue philosophical, or implicitly to prompt a philosophical dialogue between the text and the reader" (2016: 153). The different way Coetzee uses pseudo-Socratic formats in his fictions, along with his preoccupation with the use of dialogical formats in order to develop philosophical arguments, will be the object of this chapter.

4.2 Ideas and Embodied Souls

Coetzee's contribution to *The Death of the Animal* is, of course, a work of criticism, albeit an untypical one. In fact, doubts as to the genre affiliation of many works by Coetzee arise easily, and the uncertainty becomes even more remarkable when his collections of fictionalized lectures and essays – *Elizabeth Costello* and *Diary of a Bad Year* – are taken into account.[52] The same happens with one of his most recent narrative works, which is more 'traditional', at least as far as format is concerned. *The Childhood of Jesus* was described in various reviews as an "unfathomable metafictional firecracker" (Farago 2013: online), a "work of philosophy as much as a work of fiction" (Garner 2013: online), and a "confounding work of political philosophy wrapped in a less compelling, even seemingly intentionally flat, work of fiction, one that falls somewhere between episodic and plotless" (Bellin 2013: online). In spite of the critical controversy *The Childhood of Jesus* and the collections caused (and in spite of Coetzee's own desire not to have them published as "novels", but under the more generic label of 'fiction' instead[53]), it is obviously agreed upon that all three books are defined by Coetzee's engagement with philosophy. A widely shared opinion is that they are 'novels of ideas', philosophical debates staged in fiction. Before *The Childhood of Jesus* was published, Martin Puchner wrote that "the novel of ideas has received a new advocate in J. M. Coetzee, who has come forward, quite unapologetically, with two novels that can barely contain the ideas presented with such relentless determination by their protagonists: *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2008)" (2011: 1). A few years later, various reviewers echo his words while writing about *The Childhood of Jesus* – most notably, Joyce Carol Oates and Leo Robson, writing for *The New York Times* and *New Statement*

[52] See Section 2.2.2.

[53] Like all of Coetzee's most recent works, *The Childhood of Jesus* has not been published as a 'novel', but as 'fiction' instead. Rumour has it that the choice was deliberate, and that it was made out of Coetzee's growing unease with the so-called 'traditional novel'. For more details about this, see once again Roger Bellin's review of *The Childhood of Jesus*, published for the *Los Angeles Review of Books* on November 6th, 2013.

respectively.[54] A dialogical, Platonic mode does, indeed, inform *The Childhood of Jesus*: the setting blatantly evokes the *Republic*, philosophic disputes take up space – sometimes all the space – in nearly every chapter, and almost word-for-word references to the dialogues are easily detected throughout the book. Whereas specific references to Plato are not as easily detected in *Elizabeth Costello*, my argument is that a closer look at it reveals features similar, in terms of intertextual references, format, and setting, to those that we find in *The Childhood of Jesus*. My aim is to deal with the more or less explicit intertextual Platonism these two works display, to show the way in which it intertwines with Christian references, and to address the theoretical questions that ensue from this intertwining: if Coetzee's fictionalized philosophical arguments – like Plato's dialogues – are not mere 'display cases' for ideas and opinions, but rather artistic forms in their own right, can any truth at all be found in them, or in the polyphony they stage? Is one to derive any authorial or authoritative voice from them, and, if so, how? And, finally, how do lexical choices that are heavy with Christian references – *The Childhood of Jesus*, as a title, being just one blatant example – fit into the discourse of logos?

It should be noted again before moving forward that the arguments I am presenting here are by no means confined to the two books which I analyze. Boundaries between literary genres, fiction, literary theory and philosophical arguments are blurred throughout Coetzee's production; format and narrative structure are much more unconventional in *Diary of a Bad Year* and *Summertime* than in *The Childhood of Jesus*; and religious discourse is surprisingly pervasive also in novels from the seventies and eighties, such as *In the Heart of the Country* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*[55]. Of course Platonism and Christianity play an overtly

[54] Oates, J. C. (2013). 'Saving Grace', *The New York Times*, online http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/01/books/review/j-m-coetzees-childhood-of-jesus.html?_r=0 (last accessed June 2015) and Robson, L. (2013). 'Reviewed: *The Childhood of Jesus* by J. M. Coetzee and *Harvest* by Jim Crace'. *New Statesman*, online http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2013/03/reviewed-childhood-jesus-j-m-coetzee-and-harvest-jim-crace (last accessed June 2015).

[55] See Attridge, 2004: 180-1. While primarily discussing the use of the word "grace" in *Disgrace*, Attridge traces the appearances of other religious lexemes ("soul", "God", "salvation") in Coetzee's works, most notably *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life and Times of Michael K*, *Age of Iron*, and *In the Heart of the Country*. As for the Platonic tradition, signs of Coetzee's engagement are found in his fiction starting from the late Eighties. We find an explicit reference in *Age of Iron* (1990), when Mr Thabane pushes Mrs Curren for answers she clearly does not have about the apartheid and her own responsibilities as a white woman. As she finds herself uncapable of a satisfactory exchange, Mrs Curren thinks back to her formation as a teacher of classics: "Ventriloquism, the legacy of Socrates, as oppressive in Africa as it was in Athens." (*AoI*, 97-98).

significant role in *Elizabeth Costello* and *The Childhood of Jesus*. However, there reasons why I have chosen them as my main focus is that these two works are kindred books in many ways – which, I hope, I will be able to illustrate here. After these introductory notes, I shall concentrate on references to Platonism and Christianity separately. My conclusions will tie up whatever provisional answer I can give to the questions that arise.

Much has been written on Coetzee's somewhat detached attitude towards physical spaces.[56] He himself expresses some dissatisfaction with his own lack of "visual imagination" – both as a writer and as a reader – in two letters to Paul Auster. While Coetzee feels that his writings simply exhibit "an inadequate response to the beauty and generosity of the world" (Auster/Coetzee, 2011: 213), his readerly response to fictional settings is more difficult for him to pinpoint:

> In the normal process of reading, I don't believe I 'see' anything at all. […] What I do seem to have, in place of visual imagery, is what I vaguely call aura or tonality. When my mind goes back to a particular book that I know, I seem to summon up a unique aura, which of course I cannot put into words without in effect rewriting the book. (Auster/Coetzee, 2011: 201).

It does not seem at all far-fetched to argue that an aura of rewriting is also what permeates two Coetzeean settings that are very similar to one another: Novilla, where *The Childhood of Jesus* takes place, and the unnamed town where Elizabeth Costello finds herself in the closing chapter of the eponymous book. The latter is very clearly Kafkaesque: Costello unexplainably finds herself in an unknown town; she is somehow *supposed* to find a way out, but she fails repeatedly to do so, just as she fails to establish any form of connection with those around her and, ultimately, to make sense of the whole experience of being there. Although much in the setting – the gate Costello is expected to open, the trial she is forced to undergo – is familiar and recognizable as Kafkaesque, it is so in a sketchy, generic-yet-distorted way. At the end of the book, Coetzee's fictitious writer and alleged alter-ego is still entrapped. She has come to think of her new place of residence as a "purgatory of clichés"

[56] See Attwell 2008 and Dooley 2010 (Chapter Three).

(*EC*, 206), "a literary theme park" (*EC*, 208) where intertextual innuendoes are nothing more than artificial and grotesque simulacra of literary greatness:

> There [is] something familiar about the square itself, the whole town. It is as though she has been transported to the set of a dimly remembered film. […] But if so, why is the make-up so poor? Why is the whole thing not done better? That is, finally, what is so eerie about this place […]: the gap between the actors and the parts they play, between the world it is given her to see and what that world stands for. […] Why does the simulation fail so consistently, not just by a hair's breadth – one could forgive that – but by a hand's breadth? (Coetzee, 2003: 208-9)

As a woman of letters, Costello is well aware she is living in a town that is "straight out of Kafka" (*EC*, 209). However, she also realizes that the aura of uncanniness that permeates it is primarily caused by the poverty of its intertextual quality: what she sees in front of her is "Kafka, but only the superficies of Kafka; Kafka reduced and flattened to a parody" (*ibidem*).

My immediate feeling upon reading the first paragraphs in *The Childhood of Jesus* was that it takes up where *Elizabeth Costello* ends: at "the gate" (*EC*, 193; *CoJ*, 1), a place so dreamlike that the idea of wondering where one is, and why, does not even occur. "The man at the gate points them toward a low, sprawling building in the middle distance" is the incipit of *The Childhood of Jesus*. We soon learn that the action takes place in a town named Novilla; the narration starts when Simón, the main character and focaliser in the story, arrives there with a child, David. Like everyone else in Novilla, Simón has no recollection of what his own life was like before arriving in his new town. He does not know what kind of education he has had (if any), and even his own mother tongue is forgotten. This may be the reason why, unlike Elizabeth Costello, Simón fails to detect the echoes of Platonism and Christianity that define Novilla just as much (and as grotesquely) as the Kafkaesque permeates Costello's unnamed town.

Of course, what Simón ignores is plain for the readers to see. In the year after its publication, *The Childhood of Jesus* was reviewed extensively. Any basic Internet research will prove that the echoes of Plato have been discussed by most of its reviewers, and that none of them failed to notice the similarities between Novilla – a place where everyone seems to have expunged any desire and surge of passion in order to live a life dominated by principles

of justice, measure, goodwill, and rationality – and the ideal town Plato describes in *The Republic*. Word-for-word references to some of the Platonic dialogues are equally easy to detect[57] and to make sense of as blatantly parodic: inconclusive debates on "the chairness of chairs" between Simón and his co-workers (*CoJ*, 122) are followed soon afterwards by an even more inconclusive (and disquietingly funny) dialogue Simón has with David about the ontology of poo ('"There are certain things that are not just themselves, not all the time. Poo is one of them"', *CoJ*, 132), poo and ownership rights ('"It's my poo," […] "I want to stay!" / "It was your poo. But you evacuated it. You got rid of it. It's not yours anymore. You no longer have a right to it. […] Once it gets into the sewer pipes it is no one's poo. […] In the sewers it joins all the other people's poo and becomes general poo"', *ibidem*), and the difference between poo and ideas ('"What are we [human beings] like if we are not like poo? We are like ideas. Ideas never die. You will learn that at school." / "But we make poo." / "That is true. We partake of the ideal but we also make poo. That is because we have a double nature", *CoJ*, 133). Were all of this not enough in terms of ironic intertextuality, Plato makes one last parodic appearance a few chapters later as the main character in an animation movie David is watching (*CoJ*, 183). The movie is about Mickey Mouse's dog: a bloodhound famously known as Pluto, but renamed Plato in Coetzee's mysterious Novilla.

Whereas any commentator would be able to identify irony in Coetzee's (mis)quotations from Plato, few have done the same when discussing the dialogical format he has chosen for his work. There are forms of intertextuality I want to focus on that have more to do with format and lexicon than 'content proper', and indeed the Platonic mode in *The Childhood of Jesus* permeates the book's format even more than it pervades its content. Once again, this happens in a way that defies expectations, as Roger Bellin states in his review: "the bulk of the story is taken up not with psychology or plot, but with Simón's dialogues with the

[57] Just one example: when Simón and his co-workers discuss the concept of "the thing itself", his words clearly echo those of Plato's Socrates in *Cratylus*. Simón: '"Listen to yourself, Álvaro," he says. "*The thing itself*. Do you think the thing remains forever itself, unchanging? No. Everything flows. Did you forget that when you crossed the ocean to come here? The waters of the ocean flow and in flowing they change. You cannot step twice into the same waters"'. (*The Childhood of Jesus*, 114). Socrates: '"Heracleitus says, you know, that all things move and nothing remains still, and he likens the universe to the current of a river, saying that you cannot step twice into the same stream"' (*Cratylus* 402a, pp. 344-45).

Novillians. These are a series of frustrating encounters, riddled by mutual misunderstanding, perhaps Socratic in form but not in outcome" (2013: online). Simón's conversations do indeed fail on a variety of grounds, both intra- and extra-textual: clearly, they are very far from originating the hermeneutical truths readers would expect from a philosophical dialogue; at the same time, they do not seem to facilitate any form of mutual understanding between the characters – on the contrary, Coetzee's version of the Platonic dialogue only seems to result in communicative dead-ends. On more than one occasion, addressing philosophical and/or interpersonal conflicts dialogically results only in these being exacerbated; relationships between characters end, and sometimes whole narrative lines halt correspondingly, thus affecting the overall structure of the book[58]. Something to this effect happens repeatedly during Simón's mysterious quest for David's mother – a very explicit quest that takes up the first half of the narrative. In Simón's opinion, the first two women he meets, Ana and Elena, are unfit for the task of mothering David. Simón engages in fruitless philosophical disputes with both women, and the resulting dialogues fail in terms of communication as well as empathy:

> 'You find me attractive, I can see that. Perhaps you even find me beautiful. And because you find me beautiful, your appetite, your impulse, is to embrace me. […] The more beautiful you find me, the more urgent becomes your appetite. […] Now reflect. What – pray tell me – has beauty to do with the embrace you want me to submit to? What is the connection between the one and the other? Explain.' (*CoJ*, 27)

Simón is puzzled when upon hearing Ana's forceful invitation to explain himself, but nonetheless he complies:

> 'Between a man and a woman there sometimes springs up a natural attraction […]. The two find each other attractive or even, to use the other word, beautiful. […] Why the one should follow the other, the attraction and the desire to embrace from the beauty, is a mystery which I cannot explain except to say that being drawn to a woman is the only tribute that I, my physical self, know how to pay to the woman beauty. I call it a tribute because I feel it to be an offering, not an insult.' […]

[58] See Section 1.3.

> ‘And as a tribute to me – an offering, not an insult – you want to grip me tight and push part of your body into me. […] I am baffled. To me the whole business seems absurd […].’ (*CoJ*, 28-29)

Once again, Simón’s commonsensical attitude contrasts with Ana’s vehement inquisiveness:

> ‘[…] It cannot be absurd, since it is a natural desire of the natural body. It is nature speaking in us. It is the way things are. The way things are cannot be absurd.’
> ‘Really? What if I were to say that to me it seems not just absurd but ugly too? […] Nature can partake of the beautiful but nature can partake of the ugly too. Those parts of our bodies that you modestly do not name […]: do you find them beautiful?’
> ‘In themselves? No, in themselves they are not beautiful. It is the whole that is beautiful, not the parts.’
> ‘And these parts that are not beautiful – you want to push them inside me! […] If you found me to be an incarnation of the good, you would not want to perform such an act on me. So why wish to do so if I am an incarnation of the beautiful? Is the beautiful inferior to the good? Explain.’ (*CoJ*, 30-32)

This conversation is only the empty shell – the mocking simulacrum – of a Platonic dialogue, both in terms of the themes it addresses and of its outcome. It may well remind many readers of the roots of Western culture and of the logos-based nature of Greek philosophy, but it certainly does so in a parodic way that only exposes their failures, both in terms of knowledge and communication. This exchange – like many others that follow – has not brought either of the characters to comprehend or accept the other, since Simón refuses to keep the conversation going and storms off.

Communicative failures often translate into narrative ones: instances of incommunicability between Simón and other characters seem to stop the narration again and again. While Simón wanders around Novilla and engages in sterile conversations with its inhabitants, Coetzee’s readers are left facing a narrative that lacks finality, and they are bound to wonder which direction the story is taking – if any. Ironically, the one character who finally allows the plot to progress is that of Inés, the woman Simón instinctively recognizes as David’s mother and who accepts to take on full parental responsibility for a boy she does not even know. Her acceptance is thoroughly (and surprisingly) un-dialectical, as we can see from the words Simón successfully uses to persuade her: “if you will simply say Yes, without

forethought, without afterthought, all will become clear to you, as clear as day, or so I believe" (*CoJ*: 75); as for Inés's positive response, it is not even expressed verbally.

Inés's 'quality of acceptance' is a sort of Christian/Levinasian form of responsibility towards the other, and it is depicted as something that *founds* her being, rather than emerging from conscious decisions. Such a quality is the first example I am mentioning of Christian intertexts that are displayed – some may say, surprisingly – in Coetzee's narratives about the limits of consequential, logical, and philosophical discourse. However, it most certainly is not the only one. Before moving on to analyzing other similar occurrences, though, I would like to go back to *Elizabeth Costello* and show that something entirely similar – a sudden and puzzling irruption of religious intertextual elements in arguments that normally play out within the realm of secularity – happens in that book too.

While detecting echoes of Plato in *The Childhood of Jesus* is a straightforward task, the same cannot be said for *Elizabeth Costello*. In spite of its much earlier publication date, and of the huge critical attention it received, little research has been done on its relationship with the Platonic dialogues. To my knowledge, only one essay explores this issue extensively: "Elizabeth Costello as a Socratic Figure" (R. A. Northover, 2012). Northover is the first to suggest[59] that the famous "Costello-persona" critical controversy situates itself within a broader debate on the relationship between authors of "philosophical fictions" (in this case, Plato and Coetzee) and their characters (in this case, Socrates and Costello) – a suggestion that new developments in Plato studies seem to validate.

Comparisons between Costello and Socrates had only been made very rarely and briefly before Northover explored the issue in 2012. Northover indeed argues that before Jane Poyner's *J. M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual* (2006), critical appraisals of Costello were not very "considerate" nor "thoughtful" (2012: 38), and although both Plato and Socrates were briefly dealt with in some critical works on Coetzee (most notably by Lucy Graham, Carrol Clarkson, David Lodge, and Jane Poyner herself), none had gone on to

[59] Or, at least, to do so explicitly: Northover is stating directly something that many critics seem to have been unknowingly influenced by (see Northover 2012: 2).

identify Costello as a Socratic figure (*ibidem*). Northover, on the contrary, resorts to a number of references to describe her as such. In the opening part of his essay (40) he relies on Nietzsche and J. P. Hamlyn's characterization of the 'Socratic artist' as someone who delineates a realm of wisdom that excludes logic but needs art as the necessary complement of rational discourse. Of course Costello's distrust of reason, and even of her own rationality, is well known; moreover, Northover states,

> For all Socrates's emphasis on reason and knowledge, the results of his reasoning in the early Platonic dialogues were entirely negative, the destruction of false assumptions rather than the establishment of certain truths. It is also important to keep in mind the Socratic paradox that he alone is wise since he alone knows that he knows nothing. Elizabeth Costello shares these essentially negative Socratic characteristics. (40)

Further considerations follow to the effect that the multiple levels of reflexivity in the so-called 'Costello pieces' make it impossible to distinguish between the aesthetic and the ethical dimension in Coetzee's writing. His art does not conform to the postmodern mode of playfulness; on the contrary, Northover says, the ethical seriousness it displays reminds more of an inherent inconclusiveness that is "opposed to the authoritarianism of moral certainty [and] basically Socratic" (41). After discussing these first similarities, Northover addresses the Bakhtinian concepts of 'dialogism' and 'polyphony', which he sees as the key to explaining Costello's analogy to Socrates: "Costello and Coetzee are novelists, and the Socratic dialogue is, according to Bahktin, one of the precursors of the novel. Thus, while Socrates may have been opposed to poetry, he was one of the founders of the novel" (42). The Bakhtinian theory of the Socratic dialogue as a literary genre in its own right (and not as the vehicle for Plato's philosophical doctrines) is discussed at length in the following pages. As Northover demonstrates, many of its main points apply to *Elizabeth Costello* as well: Coetzee's work is indeed a dialogised story with a "wise fool" as its main character (43); irony does permeate it and question every form of authority (44). Most readers would also agree that Costello really is some kind of "Socratic midwife to ideas who, without having any final answer of her own, provokes others to think about an important issue and to form their own opinions" (46), and, finally, there is no doubt that *Elizabeth Costello* stages the

impossibility to separate an idea from the character who presents it and, to an extent, embodies it (46).

What Northover does not say in his study is that the dialogical theory of the Platonic dialogue is not confined to Bakhtin's writings alone. On the contrary, it is part of a broader theoretical approach that changed Plato studies, and that has slowly been gaining critical attention since its foundation was provided by Friedrich Schleiermacher,[60] who claimed in 1836 that no philosopher had ever been "as severely misunderstood, or even not understood at all" as Plato (4). Schleiermacher's introduction to the dialogues inscribes Plato's writings into a far more literary framework than ever before. He compares Plato's doctrines to dissected body parts that have been studied carefully and scientifically but singularly, and whose function in the body as a whole remains unknown as a result. It is his intention to break the pattern and look at the dialogues as whole 'bodies of work': studying the ideas they convey separately from the format they use to do so would not just be constrictive, but also counterproductive, since "form and subject are inseparable, and no proposition is to be rightly understood, except in his own place, and with the combinations and limitations which Plato has assigned to it" (14).

According to Julia Lamm, historian of religion and Schleiermacher scholar, Northover's ignorance is not surprising:

> It is […] remarkable […] that the English-speaking world remains in a relative state of ignorance concerning one of Schleiermacher's greatest achievements. […] His introduction to *Platos Werken* marked a 'geological fault' in the philological world. Schleiermacher 'created a Platonic question', and, in doing so, he changed our assumptions on Plato (2000: 207).[61]

[60] 'An identifiable mode of interpretation of Plato has prevailed, with rare exception, since antiquity. It is determined by two mutually reinforcing assumptions that have been little discussed before our century. The first is that Plato's philosophy is a matter of doctrines or dogmas. [...] The second is that the dramatic dialogue is merely the form in which these doctrines are presented. [...] Since Schleiermacher, however, a new mode of interpretation has been slowly developing' (Press, 1993: 107-8).

[61] The quotations are from Heinrich von Stein's 1862 study *Sieben Bucher zur Geschichte der Platonismus* (1965 edition, pages 409 and 375). Lamm translates the quotes herself, and reports them along with further supporting comments by Holger Thesleff: 'Outside the German sphere of influence there was no "Platonic Question". Plato and Platonism were as a rule interpreted along inherited lines' (1982, *Studies in Platonic Chronology*, p. 3).

It is indeed difficult to find critical work in English whose main focus is the approach to Plato Schleiermacher and Bakhtin promoted. Even though the occasional reference is easier and easier to come across, exhaustive accounts are only to be found in a few studies.[62] Among those studies we find Richard Hart and Victorino Tejera's *Plato's Dialogues. The Dialogical Approach* (1997), an essay collection whose introduction, written by Gerald Press, summarizes very effectively the main points of this newly-developed theory. Aside from the impossibility to distinguish between form and content (2), Plato's readers are also confronted with the ultimate uncertainty about the figure of Socrates, a literary character who is also a historical figure. As a consequence, of course, doubts arise about Plato's authority over the doctrines we find in his writings: to what extent is he an author, and to what extent a chronicler? Press goes on to discuss the fictional dimension of the characters, settings, and speeches that make up the dialogues, a set of features he describes as a unitary whole embodying Plato's doctrines (5-6); moreover, Press argues, there is some inherent dramatic and literary quality to a philosophical dialogue, which is first perceived as a performance, and only later (if ever) as a learning tool (6).

Although Northover does not mention any theoretical study on the dialogical approach to Plato in his account of Elizabeth Costello as a Socratic figure, it is impossible for those who are familiar with the famous controversy over Costello's identity not to notice that Press's arguments invariably apply to Coetzee's work as much as they do to Plato's. When Press states that "the character of Socrates himself poses the problem of deciding whether Plato presents the doctrines that the dialogues supposedly contain as those of the historical Socrates or of himself" (1997: 1), it is difficult not to think of the puzzlement provoked by Costello's strong opinions on the slaughters of animals, and of the temptation to attribute them to the famously vegetarian Coetzee; Press's following statement that "the aporetical conclusion of many dialogues might seem to finally contradict the hypothesis of doctrinal character or intent" (*ivi*, 2) equally reminds of the dissatisfaction some have felt with such a self-questioning and irresolute character as Costello.[63] Press's theory that the dialogues as

[62] See Griswold, 1988: 52-58 on the history of Plato studies in English.
[63] See, for example, Lodge, 2003.

literary works 'embody' (1997: 6) Plato's doctrines is entirely comparable to the critical assumption that Coetzee's fictionalized lectures are, in D. H. Lynn's words, "what his art allows: the embodiment of an idea – and necessarily its critique – through dramatic realization" (2005: 130). Even Coetzee's well known attempt to relinquish authorial authority over his works finds a match in the theory of the literariness of Plato's dialogues: "Plato has carefully maintained his anonymity. […] [The dialogues] present a world dominated by the figure of Socrates, who both is and is not the dialogical Socrates, who is interrogative (not assertive), ironic (distanced, self-effaced), and aporetic (troubled, doubtful)" (Press 1997: 7). As a result of the literariness and open-endedness, readerly involvement and responsibility are clearly much higher than they would be if the dialogues were just seen as theories readers are supposed to comprehend and learn. Of course, this cannot fail to ring a bell with Coetzee's readers, and readers of *Elizabeth Costello* in particular; as Derek Attridge summarizes, "[*Elizabeth Costello*] leaves us strongly aware that what has mattered, for Elizabeth Costello and for the reader, is the event – literary and ethical at the same time – of storytelling, of testing, of self-questioning, and not the outcome" (2004: 205).

There is one last point Northover makes in his portrayal of Costello as Socratic in character; it concerns her famously controversial statement that her vegetarianism "comes out of a desire to save [her] soul" (Coetzee, 2003: 89). Northover seems to link this to the Socratic motto 'know thyself': virtue is knowledge and self-knowledge, and knowing oneself also means to take care of one's soul (2012: 40). Little explanation is provided for this connection, even though Northover goes back to it in his conclusions: "both [Socrates and Costello] function as prophet of inwardness, reminding people to take care of their souls, and both appear to be wise fools" (*ivi*: 53). In spite of Northover's claim, however, it is difficult to think that Costello's use of the term 'soul' is coherent with the Socratic tradition. Evidence can be found in the dialogues, where souls are described as clearly connected to reason and logos: the soul is what "perceives, understands, and is radiance with intelligence" (*Republic*, VI, 508); it is divine (*Laws*, V, 726), immortal (*Timaeus*, 69), rational (*Philebus*, 30), and

clearly separate from the body (*Phaedo*, 79).[64] Costello, on the contrary, "oppose[s] fullness and embodiedness" (Coetzee, 2003: 78) to the abstract idea of a soul: "to be full of being is to live as a body-soul. […] To be alive is to be a living soul. An animal – and we are all animals – is an embodied soul" (*ivi*: 77-78). One may argue that the intertextual reference to the Socratic tradition is, once again, heavily ironic. Costello, however, mentions her soul *and its salvation*; it is difficult not to see any religious undertone in this. In fact, it is difficult not to detect any religious undertone in the collection as a whole. As far as content is taken into account, this is relatively easy to see: some short stories in *Elizabeth Costello* – for instance, "The Humanities in Africa" and "Eros" – are entirely played out on the problematic coexistence of Hellenism and Christianity. However, I stated more than once that there are instances of intertextuality that I want to focus on that do not necessarily have to do with 'stories proper'. David Lodge says that "[*Elizabeth Costello*] is progressively permeated by the language of religion, by a dread of evil, and by a desire for personal salvation. Its key words are 'belief' and 'soul'" (2003: 10). It is, indeed, on those lexical choices that I want to focus on in my conclusions.

4.3 The Artificial Light of Grace

Recurring references to the *Gospels* obviously constitute a biblical intertext of (often ironic) allusions for *The Childhood of Jesus* to rely on – for instance, it is difficult for the reader not to laugh when, upon learning of the strict dietary customs followed by Novillians, Simón laments that "one cannot live on bread alone" (Coetzee, 2013: 36). What interests me most, though, is a less obvious intertext to be found in *The Childhood of Jesus* and *Elizabeth Costello* alike: religious lexicon that seems to pop up unexpectedly, albeit repeatedly, whenever entirely rational and secular arguments and exchanges fail to produce consensus – or even comprehension. The examples are countless. One of them links back to Simón

[64] All the quotes are taken from Stockhammer, 1963: 242-243.

dissatisfaction with his diet: contrarily to what he says, nourishing food is provided in Novilla. Rational criteria of distribution actually make it accessible to everybody. What Simón protests against is just its plain taste, the one thing that is not relevant in the rational system of Novilla. Many analogous occurrences are to be found in *Elizabeth Costello*. Her quest for salvation through vegetarianism, for example, is mentioned during a very long, heady, and often dialogical discussion on animal rights that ultimately turns out to be inconclusive and fails to produce any form of consensus. Religious terminology becomes more pervasive later in the book, when Costello finds herself at a loss while discussing 'the problem of evil' (Coetzee, 2003: 157) at a conference in Amsterdam: 'she should never have come. Not because she has nothing to say about evil, the problem of evil, the problem of calling evil a problem, […] but because a limit has been reached, the limit of what can be achieved with a body of balanced, well-informed modern folk in a clean, well-lit lecture venue in a well-ordered, well-run European city in the dawn of the twenty-first century' (*ivi*: 175). Indeed, there is little rational coherence in Costello's speech on the problem of evil. Perhaps it is no surprise, by now, to learn that it is precisely while working on it that Costello contemplates the existence of a 'committee of angels that watches impassively over all that passes' (*ivi*: 158 and 166), and later comes to think of other people as 'brothers and sisters' (*ivi*: 178-79), and of the twentieth century as 'Satan's century' (*ivi*: 180). Distrust of reason is mentioned explicitly in *The Childhood of Jesus* as well, and once again a religious lexeme pops up for no apparent reason: Simón is astonished to hear his co-workers mention 'salvation' (Coetzee, 2013: 113) while discussing progress, capitalism, and common-versus-individual good in one of the mock-Platonic dialogues we find throughout the book:

> 'What do you think would become of us all, Simón, if the grain were pumped en masse as you propose? What would become of the horses?' […]
> 'There would no longer be work for us here at the docks. That I concede. […] We would all have work, just as before, only it would be a different kind of work, requiring intelligence, not just brute strength.'
> 'So you would like to liberate us from a life of bestial labour. You want us to find some other kind of work, […] where we would lose touch with the thing itself – with the food that feeds us and gives us life. We are you so sure we need to be saved, Simon? […] If we had needed to be saved, we would have saved ourselves by now. No, it is not we who are stupid, it is the clever

> reasoning that you rely on that is stupid. […] There is no place for cleverness here, only for the thing itself' (*CoJ*, 113-114).

Many more examples could be made of puzzling lexical choices and the sense of estrangement they induce in the readers. Trying to make sense of them is much more challenging. Derek Attridge remarks that many among Coetzee's characters, although explicitly non-Christian, "cannot talk about the lives they lead without [religious] language", and tentatively argues that Coetzee as an author has often turned to religious discourse "in his searching for a register that escapes the terminology of the administered society" (2004: 180).

When trying to make sense of Coetzee's lexical choices, Attridge's tentative explanation can be supported … tentatively. Undoubtedly, the drawbacks and limits of logocentrism are recurrent tropes in Coetzee's fiction. David, the boy who may or may not be Coetzee's intertextual Jesus, constantly challenges logocentric cultural conventions such as those of ownership, authorship, numbers, letters, and logic (which, as we learn at the end of the book, he masters nonetheless); poignantly, numerical orders scare him: he is afraid of falling in the 'cracks' (Coetzee, 2013: 177) between numbers. Religious lexicon does seem to come in through the "cracks" of logocentrism; yet, it does not bring along any form of answer, resolution, or salvation – just like Simón's non-dialectical relationship with Inés, which turns out to be the only possible one, but mundane and ultimately unsuccessful nonetheless. Christian references do intertwine with Platonic format in Coetzee's fiction; they may provide an alternative to logocentric discourse whenever it proves faulty – but they may also be a mocking simulacrum of a form of salvation that cannot be achieved within the rational and linguistic realm. Elizabeth Costello's afterlife is a literary construct she cannot escape, since the only means she has to do so are linguistic ones. At the end of the 2003 collection, Costello is given the chance to glance through the gate she is so desperately trying to pass through. She expects to take a glimpse at wholeness, freedom from the constraint of words and, ultimately, salvation. But the gate-keeper opens the door to yet another literary cliché: Costello sees a light, *the light*. However, it is not the light of hope or grace:

> Despite her unbelief, she had expected that what lay beyond this door fashioned of teek and brass but also no doubt of the tissue of allegory would be unimaginable: a light so blinding that earthly senses would be stunned by it. But the light is not unimaginable at all. It is merely brilliant, more brilliant perhaps than the varieties of light she has known hitherto, but not of another order, not more brilliant than, say, a magnesium flash sustained endlessly. (*EC*, 196)

When the book ends, she is still entrapped in a linguistic tautology – something that not even faith in the "thing itself" will save her from, since the light of grace, 'the thing itself', is not itself anymore when thought of – or, even worse, represented – in the only, artificial way humans are capable of: linguistically.

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