

The Ethics of Reading J. M. Coetzee

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Abstract: This essay situates J. M. Coetzee's fiction within a recent philosophical attempt to reintroduce the poets into the philosophical republic. In particular, I develop an ethical reading of Coetzee's novelistic project that is grounded in an understanding of the literary work as an *event*. The idea was first applied to Coetzee's oeuvre by Derek Attridge and supports the singularity of the encounter with the literary piece as a transformative, self-questioning moment. I apply this model to a reading of *Diary of a Bad Year*, and, after addressing issues of conventional taxonomy proposed by philosophers, I give the final word to Coetzee himself *qua* commentator of his own work. Finally, I suggest that we view Coetzee's use of irony as a vehicle for both convention disruption and ethical responsibility.

The presentation scene itself we skip. It is not a good idea to interrupt the narrative too often, since storytelling works by lulling the reader or listener into a dreamlike state in which the time and space of the real world fade away, superseded by the time and space of the fiction. Breaking into the dream draws attention to the constructedness of the story, and plays havoc with the realist illusion. However, unless certain scenes are skipped over, we will be here all afternoon. The skips are not part of the text, they are part of the performance

J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*

Introduction

Moral philosophers and philosophers of aesthetics have long relied on examples from literature. Indeed, an ongoing conversation between a cluster of contemporary philosophers and writers seems to indicate a modern lifting of the millennia-old ban, sanctioned by Plato, on the inclusion of literary writers in the philosophical republic. Relatively recent endeavors in philosophy and literature alike would seem to suggest that the two traditions have finally initiated a process of reconciliation. As philosophers, though, we call for further support for this claim, as well as further clarification on how this reconciliation might be achieved. Hence the importance of tracking the moves of a new gathering of writers and philosophers, who transition between the two strands of this dialogue—from philosophy to literature, and then back again. Work in both fields illustrates the point: Stephen Mulhall's *The Wounded Animal* (2009) discusses both J. M. Coetzee's and (the fictional) Elizabeth Costello's projects, describing them as manifestations of long-standing modernistic reflection on the conditions of literary formal realism; Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013) neatly returns to the ancient philosophical dispute over the existence of universals. The intrinsic value of the dialogical form itself—a formal device Plato seems less willing to

do without—has been further reassessed and rendered more nuanced in recent philosophical work that uses dialogue as a means of resuming the interrupted conversation. In his response to Coetzee’s lectures on *The Lives of Animals*, for example, Peter Singer produced a philosophical dialogue, held between a philosopher called Peter and his daughter Naomi (see Singer). More recently, Paola Cavalieri has also used dialogue to discuss animal rights and to refute a form of moral perfectionism according to which moral status depends on the extent to which a being possesses certain hierarchically ordered “perfections” (e.g. consciousness, rationality, conceptual-linguistic abilities). Cavalieri uses dialogue to both reveal and challenge the way in which nonhuman animals, supposedly lacking these relevant “perfections” and thus neither moral agents nor moral subjects, are excluded from the moral realm altogether (see Cavalieri).

What, then, is fueling this conversation? This essay will try to answer this question by entering the dialogue, and it will do so on different fronts. I begin by tracing the main steps of an approach to reading Coetzee developed by Derek Attridge in *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*. As the title suggests, Attridge argues at length that there is a strong ethical core at the heart of the aesthetics of Coetzee’s novels. Following Attridge’s lead, and engaging heavily with Jonathan Lear’s essay on *Diary of a Bad Year*, I focus my analysis on the alleged ethical motives behind Coetzee’s experimental upending of canonical literary conventions in *Diary*. In particular, I explore the motives behind Coetzee’s departure from standard novelistic form in this text and his use of the split page. I then closely consider Mulhall’s main thesis on the ethical import of Coetzee’s work, which I compare with an alternative explanatory model developed by Terry Eagleton. A provisional last word is then handed to Coetzee himself.

Entering the age-old conversation from multiple angles, I aim to consider the implications of this reassessment for the practice of philosophical writing more generally. In this way, the following does not merely identify significant points of intersection between philosophy and literature but also *performs* a transformative shift in self-understanding, made possible by the ethical motive that lies at the heart of Coetzee’s novel.

Anticipating Dialectics without Closure

Since the publication of *Dusklands* in 1974, J. M. Coetzee has made a virtue of ambiguity at the level of style and classification. Puzzles concerning the association of his work with canonical movements—realism, modernism, postmodernism—can be found in critical discussions by literary scholars and philosophers, in Coetzee’s own essays and interviews, and in the metareflective texts of the persona Elizabeth Costello. Costello’s meditations on and engagement with the Western literary canon are prolific. Not only does she recreate the life of Molly Bloom in her book *The House on Eccles Street*, but her first lecture at Appleton College (under the title “Realism”) opens as follows:¹

There is first of all the problem of the opening, namely, how to get us from where we are, which is, as yet, nowhere, to the far bank. It is a simple bridging problem, a problem of knocking together a bridge. People solve such problems every day. They solve them, and having solved them push on. Let us assume that, however it may have been done, it is done. Let us take it that the bridge is built and crossed, that we can put it out of our mind. We left behind the territory in which we were. We are in the far territory, where we want to be. (Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 1)

The image of a bridge that seemingly precedes the crossing from the blank page to the beginning of the story by both writer and reader is already part and parcel of that story, making the very naturalness of realistic prose an issue that is addressed by its being pointed at.

Derek Attridge and others have been keen to stress the high artistic costs that came with Coetzee’s departure from politically effective realistic conventions in the first phase of his career, during the apartheid years that roughly covered the period between the publication of *Dusklands* and *Age of Iron* (1990) (Attridge 1–2). In an extremely helpful essay from 2010, Peter McDonald reveals the equivocality of Coetzee’s “eminently readable” prose when compared, for instance, with the jigsaw fragmentariness that constitutes the opening lines of Beckett’s *The Unnamable*—Beckett himself being a key reference point for Coetzee, a debt he extensively acknowledges in *Doubling the Point* (See *Doubling* 25).

The inner tension arising from Coetzee’s combination of apparently linear, realistic plot structures, on the one hand (“the principal difficulty,” McDonald notes, “often seems to lie in the apparent accessibility of his writing” (483)), and first-personal allusiveness, non-realist scenarios, and unreliable descriptions, on the other, undermines a reception of the text as essentially representational. Furthermore, this dialectical clash at the level of narrative structure has been interpreted as a device

charged with an ethical purpose. In *J. M. Coetzee and The Ethics of Reading*, Attridge, following Coetzee's lead from the 1987 text "The Novel Today,"² insists that even the ethical purpose of the stylistic oppositions and plot contradictions in Coetzee's fictional prose is far from straightforward. As he writes, "ethics concerns persons and not texts"; consequently, this claim about the ethical significance of the rhetorical devices in question must be qualified.

Attridge introduces an explanatory model to account for the "ethical dimension" of acts of literary meaning production that unsettle the reader, alienating her from the text and thus rendering the act of reading an exercise of mediated access to the claims of Otherness. He makes his case for this idea by linking the act of reading Coetzee's novels to an experience of the literary piece as an "event." If one abandons the rather commonplace notion of the literary work as a "finished block," a self-contained cultural product ready for consumption, one can begin to see it as an unfinished recipient and conveyer (for both writer and reader) of an experience of meaning, the acceptance of which has transformative potential. And this disruptive power—with regard to both the reader's settled views and prejudices and her stance toward the literary work as a finished cultural and historical product—is precisely what makes reading literature an ethical act. As Attridge puts it:

[T]he singular inventiveness of the work is what constitutes its *otherness*—not as an absolute quality, but one that is meaningful only in relation to a given context; otherness is always otherness *to* a particular self or situation. In order to be readable at all, otherness must turn into sameness, and it is this experience of transformation (which is a transformation of the reader's habits, expectations, ways of understanding the world) that constitutes the event of the literary work. (Attridge 11)

Attridge wants to say that this is both the effect produced by Coetzee's novels—at the level of the reader's experience—and what Coetzee himself intends for them to achieve, especially through his insistence on constructing literary characters that are "figures of alterity" or that represent the voice and the demands of Otherness (examples of which include Magda's servants in *In the Heart of the Country*; the barbarians (especially the barbarian girl) in *Waiting for the Barbarians*; Vercueil in *Age of Iron*; and Anya in *Diary of a Bad Year*). I would add that our encounters with these figures of alterity and the disruption of our expectations regarding plot linearity and linguistic immediacy (to which McDonald so forcefully alludes) work in parallel to disrupt and unsettle us in our experience of the work—an unsettling that is best achieved when these devices are combined with the similarly disruptive depiction

of scenes of physical and psychological violence. This intricate dialectic does not resolve itself in an artificial harmonization of stylistic tension or in the reconciliation of viewpoints; rather, it works to bring the reader to an autonomous response *precisely via* her immersion in the paradox.

Diary of a Soul's Journey

Despite the vastness of the South African author's corpus, I have chosen to focus on *Diary of a Bad Year* as a means of illustrating the significance of these stylistic tensions and clashes of viewpoint. Although it stands out for a number of reasons, *Diary* is especially distinctive to the degree that it works to destabilize conceptions of genre. Indeed, the appropriateness of classifying this text as a novel has come under severe pressure; McDonald and Hayes, for example, portray the book as a further instance of Coetzee's Beckettian anti-novelistic project (McDonald 493; Hayes 2, 224).

Novel or anti-novel, what Coetzee primarily deploys here is an unusual formal technique: each page is divided into two or three separate sections, each representing a different character's perspective—a device that has an initially destabilizing effect on the reader. The top section of the page consists of a series of “opinion chronicles” (a collection originally entitled “Strong Opinions”) by an experienced South African author, JC. The middle layer of the page corresponds to JC's private voice and offers raw accounts of his daily encounters with his Filipino typist, the young and beautiful Anya, who is assisting him in the composition of his collection (commissioned by a German publisher). The lower layer of the page corresponds to the private voices of both Anya and Alan (Anya's misogynistic partner). In the two lower layers of the text, Coetzee reveals the extent to which JC is both haunted by his impending death and somehow comforted by daily contact with a beautiful woman. A first encounter with this text thus brings the reader into contact with three private narrative voices (corresponding to JC, Anya and Alan), along with what might initially seem to be a fourth, public, “quasi-technical” narrative voice, represented by JC's political opinions. This multiple structure provides a modernistic framing for “Strong Opinions” (we shall return to this idea in what follows).

Questions about the relationship between stylistic devices—such as the split page—and the ethical ideas conveyed by a given novel can, of course, be situated within more general philosophical accounts of the impact of literary style (how a given position is articulated) on the statements being

expressed. In this context, we encounter philosophers—many of whom mirror the history of tensions within their own discipline—who struggle theoretically with (what is apparently) the same issue. A classic example of philosophical reflection on the significance of the style-content dichotomy, both in literature and philosophy, is Martha Nussbaum’s *Love’s Knowledge*, the introduction to which contains the following:

The “ancient quarrel between the Poets and the Philosophers”, as Plato’s *Republic* . . . calls it, could be called a quarrel only because it was about a single subject. The subject was human life and how to live it. And the quarrel was a quarrel about literary form, as well as about ethical content, about literary forms understood as committed to certain ethical priorities. . . . Forms of writing were not seen as vessels into which different contents could be indifferently poured; form was itself a statement, a content. (15)

On deeper analysis, Nussbaum’s claim reveals itself to be twofold: both in the philosophical text or essay (where literary style, the way content is conveyed, is often sacrificed in favor of substantial theoretical claims) and in the literary piece (where concern with form can reach such heights that content becomes impenetrable—arguably more so when one turns to modernist projects), style is an “assertion of content” in itself. But, as we shall see below, Nussbaum is far from being alone in maintaining this position in the current philosophical landscape.

Because I have chosen to begin with a literary text, I will first concentrate on the second part of the claim quoted above and say that *Diary*’s prose, and *in particular its formal structure*, is a remarkable example of how the successful expression of propositional content is genuinely inseparable from matters of form. Coetzee’s text reveals that “[literary] form is itself a statement, a content,” such that formal composition is really a means of asserting—of putting forward—propositional claims. But the content conveyed by the literary form of *Diary* isn’t merely “rightly-shaped matter,” a casually well-accomplished combination of compositional technique and the thought expressed by that literary framing. Rather, I will claim, Coetzee manages to convey ethical thought by staging a direct *simulation* of ethical thought, precisely because this simulation is presented in a register very close to his own. The result of the simulation is a collection of opinions (JC’s “Strong Opinions”) that is aesthetically maimed, theoretically convincing, and completely *sterile, from a practical point of view*—notions that will be developed in what follows.

At this point, two questions present themselves as interrelated: (1) What does it mean to argue that the structure of *Diary* conveys ethical thought? (2) How does the novel do this without slipping into what I will refer to as “ersatz ethical thought,” precisely by staging a version of this kind of displacement?³

Some philosophers (e.g. Jonathan Lear, “Ethical Thought”) have argued that it is easier for a well-trained novelist to notice and prevent the communication of ersatz ethical thought than for a philosopher to do so, practiced as the latter is both in compressing philosophical questions into abstract, deductive systems of reasoning and in crafting the ordered, linear texts characteristic of the discipline. For the sake of better understanding the notion of ersatz ethical thought, then, consider the following thought experiment, centered on the figure of a philosopher who is trying to put forth an ethical claim. (In light of what has already been said, you might further conceive of JC as just such a philosopher.)

Imagine that our philosopher wishes to communicate a certain idea: namely, that the most important truths about human psychology cannot be communicated or grasped by intellectual activity alone, since powerful emotions play an irreducible cognitive role in self-understanding. If he states this view in a written form that expresses only intellectual activity and addresses itself only to the reader’s intellect—as is usually the case in philosophical essays, and is surely the case in “Strong Opinions”—we face the following questions: Does the author really believe what his words seem to state? How can he *avoid* the charge of inconsistency? The philosopher may believe that the psychological thesis itself is not among the truths that must be grasped through emotional activity. Or he may believe that the thesis is among those truths but remain indifferent as to whether or not the reader grasps it. Whatever the case, our example demonstrates how easily and intuitively the paradox arises. By contrast, a writer aiming to convey the same idea can avoid the charge of inconsistency to the degree that he expresses its (merely) propositional content *through* the text’s formal features, such that the relevant claim about self-knowledge is revealed to the reader precisely via formal devices that allow for emotional engagement (which is certainly not the case with regard to JC’s work). Such a writer can even directly *display* this conflict to the reader by incorporating philosophical discussion of the relevant idea into a broader literary work that ultimately illuminates the inconsistencies associated with its purely intellectual expression taken in isolation. We shall see that Coetzee (unlike JC) performs both moves in *Diary*.

Modern literary works like Coetzee's *Diary* seem to make this complicated unfolding possible: in allowing for the combination of emotive and reflective material, they reveal the truth of claims such as the one outlined above, where an appeal to intellect alone is clearly insufficient. Crucially, they are able to reveal the inconsistency of claims like this by incorporating their philosophical formulation. Thus attention to the specific kind of storytelling at work in a text like *Diary* both helps us to overcome the difficulties affecting these sorts of claims and reveals a strategy for answering questions (1) and (2). If conveying ethical thought via writing involves providing some kind of practical guidance as to how one should live, as well as guidance on how to read the text in question and appreciate its message, then we can say that *Diary* does both by incorporating a vision of how one can fail in both regards, i.e. by calling the reader's attention to how the expression of genuine ethical thought in such a text can slip easily into the communication of *ersatz* ethical thought, and by isolating and thus revealing a layer of interpretation (a way of reading the text) that is both tempting and inadequate. Ersatz ethical thought is the mere simulation of ethical thought: a substitute for genuine ethical thought which, although intellectually graspable, does not actually make a *practical* difference in terms of how we shape the world and behave. As Coetzee seems to imply, this is the form of thought expressed in "Strong Opinions" and in JC's stance towards his book and its readership.

With this brief sketch of the problem in hand, we can now begin to turn to another question raised by Coetzee's method in *Diary*: How can a text convey genuine ethical thought as opposed to mere ersatz ethical thought? Is this at all possible? We shall see more clearly how, in *Diary of a Bad Year*, Coetzee's answer to this question hinges on the triadic structure of the page and our confrontation with the book within the book, i.e. "Strong Opinions," situated as it is within *Diary*.

The writer's writer and substitute ethical thought

It may be tempting to identify the author of "Strong Opinions" with the author of *Diary of a Bad Year*. The ostensibly straightforward identification of JC with John Coetzee is only partially accurate, however, and more must be said on this point. In truth, the connection between JC and John Coetzee has highly elusive (and not merely stylistic) implications; it is no mere curiosity, reducible to self-

indulgent vanity on Coetzee's part. Indeed, the temptation to merge their identities is a result of our having succumbed, in part, to ersatz ethical thought.

JC is an elderly South African writer who has recently relocated to Australia. When asked by a German publisher, he agrees to record his opinions on some of the most pressing issues of global society (terrorism, ethnic conflicts, global warming, animal rights, genetic experiments) in a collection of essays. As JC confesses, the prospect is a welcome one: "An opportunity to grumble in public, an opportunity to take magic revenge on the world for declining to conform to my fantasies: how could I refuse?" (33). As tempting as it may be for readers to conflate JC and John Coetzee, however, there is something that sets the two apart unmistakably. JC is willing to publish his strong opinions on contemporary social issues precisely as they stand: parched theoretical fruits from a stage of life of decreasing vitality. John Coetzee is not willing to do so. The latter published a set of strong opinions alongside "soft opinions": a "Second Diary" of intimate notes on the everyday life of a man sinking steadily toward decrepitude—some erotic, but most representing an almost always dull routine involving a series of nuisances. This second diary is the text that occupies the lower layers of *Diary's* pages. John Coetzee tells us about JC, and it is only in doing so that he gives us access to his opinion essays. The formal technique employed by Coetzee in *Diary of a Bad Year* can be interpreted as a rhetorical maneuver that confronts the reader with a challenge (a difficulty, one might say) and thereby manages to convey disparate contents, graspable only by "different parts of the soul" (Lear, "Ethical Thought" 70). The book "Strong Opinions" is embedded in *Diary of a Bad Year*; were it published in isolation, it would require a different kind of focus from that which the reader brings to the latter.

The disparity between the type of content articulated at the top of the page in "Strong Opinions," on the one hand, and JC's, Anya's and Alan's notes on daily life, on the other, is sufficiently striking to induce a conflict for the reader, particularly when it comes to how she ought to assimilate what she reads. The following passages, for instance, reveal how and to what extent this is so:

["Strong Opinions"] One would like to retain some respect for any person who chooses death over dishonor, but in the case of Islamist suicide bombers respect does not come easily when one sees how many of them there are, and therefore (by a logical step that may be *badly* flawed, that may simply express the old Western prejudice against the mass mentality of the Other) how cheaply they must value life. In such a quandary, it may help to think of suicide bombings as a response, of a somehow despairing nature, against American (and Israeli) achievements in guiding technology far beyond the capacities of their opponents.

[*Private dialogue between Anya and JC*] Nothing like the feel of words coming into the world, he says, it is enough to make you shiver. I draw myself up, make a prune mouth. You shouldn't say things like that to a nice girl, Señor, I say. And I turn my back and off I go with a waggle of the bum, his eyes avid upon me. I picked it up from the ducks, I think: a shake of the tail so quick it is almost a shiver. Quick-quack. (39–40)

Were we to read JC's "Strong Opinions" on its own, approaching the broader work in which it is situated only horizontally, as it were, we would encounter a space of argumentation. JC's book, which John Coetzee refuses to present to us separately, addresses the rational part of the soul almost exclusively. This approach relies on the *affinity* between sender and receiver, insofar as the rational part of JC's soul addresses the rational part of the reader's soul. (Obviously, this is an oversimplification; it is useful, however, when it comes to the issue of methodology in interpreting *Diary* and Coetzee's therapeutic role as writer and creator of JC.)

If we instead adopt a vertical reading of the pages of *Diary of a Bad Year*, we come across what Jonathan Lear calls "a spectacle of embedding" ("Ethical Thought" 70). Relying on the plasticity of this expression, Lear describes the heart of the connection between the book's page structure and Coetzee's handling of the stories of his main characters. If we read the book vertically, we see how the compilation of JC's strong opinions is embedded in the presentation of the fantasies and daily lives of the three main characters. As we read down the page, we also move further into the lower part of the soul (and even to the presentation of lower parts of the body: Anya's body, JC's body and Alan's body). This "inferior" display of aspects of daily life is the separable (because useless) part of a book of strong opinions on contemporary social and political issues from an ethical perspective. With this said, however, this lower part is undoubtedly pivotal to (and inseparable from) the book's capacity to prompt the complicated dialectic of reading that *Diary* demands of us. "Strong Opinions" is thus a realistic (pseudo) book written in the form and under the influence of argument, but this form is only one aspect of the organic unity of form and matter embodied by JC's collection, embedded as it is in the episodes that make up his daily life. JC's authority as a character influences the fundamental structure of *Diary*; Coetzee has us actually read "Strong Opinions" and does not merely tell us about the process of its composition (which would detract considerably from the novel's effectiveness).

We must examine things in more detail and finally move beyond the more or less methodological and associative elements discussed until now if we want to make clear how embedding

JC's strong moral opinions in descriptions of private daily life prevents the communication of substitute ethical thought and instead promotes authentic ethical thought through the text's destabilizing form. To do so, I will proceed as follows: (a) I will examine how the compositional form of *Diary of a Bad Year* precludes what I have been calling ersatz ethical thought by incorporating a simulation of the latter; and (b) I will analyze one of the opinions in "Strong Opinions," as a case study of sorts, in order to obtain confirmation of (a).

The Substitution of Ersatz Ethical Thought

Let us look more closely at the notion of "ersatz ethical thought." Once again, the underlying idea can most easily be expressed via consideration of a thought experiment. Let us imagine that a respectable academic—a professor of ethics at Yale, for instance—spends one semester at Yale and another semester each year at a foreign university. Let us also imagine that our distinguished academic has a teaching commitment that makes it necessary for him to commute between Europe and the United States. This distinguished figure dedicates his professional life to writing technical articles, opinion columns and conference presentations on "contemporary ethical issues" (we can easily imagine that one of these articles bears the title "The Ethics of Reading J. M. Coetzee"). University professors are usually well paid, both in Europe and in America, and our notable academic is no exception. Committed to writing specialized articles, opinion columns and encyclopedia entries on subjects such as global warming, animal rights, gender-based violence, the Middle East, pedophilia, the sale of nuclear weapons to Iran, and ersatz ethical thought, our distinguished academic has grown accustomed to accepting things as they stand in a globalized world and in the social contexts in which he engages, whilst also taking advantage of his prestige and intellectual influence. The sort of work carried out by our notable academic—who is surely too realistic to have been made up—could be considered *one* instance of ersatz ethical thought, especially insofar as its (alleged) ethical content is conveyed as mere information (just like "Strong Opinions" and, possibly, this essay) without any need for emotional involvement.

With this example at hand, let us return to *Diary*. When narrating first-hand experiences of barbaric situations, the tone displayed by Coetzee's narrators tends to be unsettlingly apathetic (this apathy is often both sharpened and problematized by the intrusion of an ironic overtone).⁴ Here, of

course, the existence of a uniform “narrative tone” is undermined at the outset by the layering of different characters’ voices. It is not only that each character displays different, more or less identifiable tonalities or moods; with the exception of Alan, these tones tend to evolve with the unfolding of the plot(s). Whereas the “mood” detectable in JC’s first round of essays is dry and dispassionate, these features progressively vanish in the second diary. This is acknowledged by JC himself, who attributes the change to his daily conversations with Anya. Toward the end of “Strong Opinions,” JC explicitly acknowledges this debt: “What has begun to change since I moved into the orbit of Anya is not my opinions themselves so much as my opinion of my opinions” (136). Anya also becomes more compassionate, and her tone of voice softens by the end of the novel.

As we shall see, however, it is precisely Coetzee’s unwillingness to settle on a single, authoritative, positional narrative voice that provides an antidote to any conceivable form of substitute ethical thought. *Diary* portrays something that is itself an ethical issue: the intrusion of forms of ersatz ethical thought into a literary work that aims to convey ethical content. Mostly by way of the inclusion of “Strong Opinions,” Coetzee’s technique allows him to show how difficult it is for a literary text—one meant to convey ethical thought—to avoid becoming a vehicle for ersatz ethical thought (such as an opinion chronicle, for instance). JC falls into this very trap, and he is “a prestigious South African writer.” What guarantee do we have that John Coetzee will not do the same?

Coetzee’s work has always incorporated a heavily self-referential component. In *Dusklands*, Coetzee presents us with two novellas: “The Vietnam Project” and “The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee.” The second deals with the adventures of a Dutch frontier dweller in eighteenth-century South Africa—a racist explorer, who treats the native inhabitants of the country as totally subordinate to the white conqueror, often punishing them physically. Jacobus Coetzee’s manuscript is allegedly discovered and translated from Dutch and Afrikaans by one J. M. Coetzee.

In more recent books, and in addition to *Diary*, we again encounter remarkable self-referential strategies. Whereas the technique for preventing ersatz ethical thought in *Diary* is mostly based on the triadic narrative voice—with the nuances and degrees of formality I have analyzed thus far—the relevant technique in *Summertime* (2009), for example, is its post-mortem structure. The writer John Coetzee has recently passed away, and the whole book, whose starting point is this very fact, is a collection of

personal accounts of his life, as related by different narrators (including a former lover, a neighbor, and the mother of a former student in Cape Town).

Insofar as the (potentially dangerous) self-referential literary techniques vastly and variously employed in his books are one of Coetzee's assets in defeating ersatz ethical thought, and insofar as defeating it matters at least as much to us as finding out how such a defeat might be accomplished in both literature and philosophy, I shall concentrate on the details of these techniques in Coetzee's novels, later applying the results to my own philosophical inquiries. Having already explored one such maneuver—the complex overlapping of the personal identities of Coetzee and JC—we shall now turn to another: JC's commitment to specific political views that are easily attributable to John Coetzee.

The Dialectic of Responsibility

In the “spectacle of embedding” that is *Diary of a Bad Year*, a reflection entitled “On National Shame” is included as a section of JC's “Strong Opinions.” In this section, JC is credited with having written the following:

An article in a recent *New Yorker* makes it plain as day that the US administration, with the lead taken by Richard Cheney, not only sanctions the torture of prisoners taken in the so-called war on terror but is active in every way to subvert laws and conventions proscribing torture. . . . Their shamelessness is quite extraordinary. Their denials are less than half-hearted. The distinction their hired lawyers draw between torture and coercion is patently insincere, *pro forma*. In the new dispensation we have created, they implicitly say, the old powers of shame have been abolished. Whatever abhorrence you may feel counts for nothing. You cannot touch us, we are too powerful.

Demosthenes: Whereas the slave fears only pain, what the free man fears most is shame. If we grant the truth of what the *New Yorker* claims, then the issue for individual Americans *becomes a moral one*: how, in the face of this shame to which I am subjected, do I behave? *How do I save my honour?* . . . Dishonour is no respecter of fine distinctions. Dishonour descends upon one's shoulders, and once it has descended no amount of clever pleading will dispel it. (48–59)

The aim of this reflection (both JC's and my own in this paper) is to inquire into how the relevant “moral issue” can be articulated by means of what I, following Jonathan Lear, have called the “dialectic of responsibility.” Within JC's *Strong Opinions* itself, there is a sort of “division of explanatory labor” at work between a broader theoretical position (a view on national shame) and the illustration of that position (examples of torture) in “On National Shame.” Furthermore, to the extent that we are familiar with Coetzee's work (his fiction and his essays) and are thus acquainted with some of his own public

views on international politics, we could easily ascribe this stance on American governmental decrees related to the so-called post-9/11 “war on terror,” here apparently held by JC, to Coetzee himself.

In the preceding section of “Strong Opinions,” JC analyses a moral-political position held by Machiavelli in *The Prince*: the *Necessità*.

Necessity, *Necessità*, is Machiavelli’s guiding principle. The old, pre-Machiavellian position was that the moral law was supreme. If it so happened that the moral law was sometimes broken, that was unfortunate, but rulers were merely human, after all. The new, Machiavellian position is that infringing the moral law is justified when it is necessary. Thus is inaugurated the dualism of modern political culture, which simultaneously upholds absolute and relative standards of value. The modern state appeals to morality, to religion, and to natural law as the ideological foundation of its existence. At the same time it is prepared to infringe any or all of these in the interest of self-preservation.

Machiavelli does not deny that the claims morality makes on us are absolute. *At the same time he asserts that in the interest of the state the ruler “is often obliged [necessitato] to act without loyalty, without mercy, without humanity, and without religion.”*⁵ (26)

A suitable adaptation of Machiavelli’s idea, here, is the notion that there is no such thing as national shame, let alone “shame assimilated by mere citizenship,” because one must do whatever one must in order to protect and preserve the state (this is contrary to what JC contends, even though Coetzee portrays JC as including a quotation from *The Prince* in “Strong Opinions”). Yet an important social group, which JC calls “liberal intellectuals,” rejects *both* Machiavelli’s *Necessità* and the “assimilation of shame by citizenship” argued for by JC. Here, JC refers specifically to the Bush administration and to the behavior and political views held by liberal intellectuals in post-9/11 American society, where these intellectuals aimed to distance themselves from both positions by means of rational self-justification. This specific example represents a more generalizable ethical posture, however, in which personal responsibility is denied and blame shifted to another. The dialectic of responsibility, aimed at deconstructing this posture for the reader of both the book and the pseudo-book (*Diary* and “Strong Opinions”), will operate through my own interpretation of JC’s argument for national shame in this section of “Strong Opinions,” to which we now turn. This stance is easily attributable to Coetzee himself, and the following analysis aims in part to reveal the role that JC—himself a fictional creation—plays with regard to the author of *Diary*.

JC describes the mechanism of a self-justifying denial of national shame as involving three steps: (1) the ascription of shameful guilt to the political leaders of the relevant country—i.e. US post-9/11 political leaders; (2) a massive distancing from the positions adopted and the actions carried out by

these leaders; and (3) a rejection of both moral dualism *and* the divide between theory and practice inherent in Machiavelli's *Necessità*. Liberal intellectuals actively want to distance themselves from both the central idea of *Necessità* and the attribution of national shame, precisely because such positions implicate *them*. However, there is something the liberal intellectual doesn't see—mostly because he cannot see it—and this is the fact that shameful guilt descends like a curse and cannot be removed by argument. Liberal intellectuals cannot recognize this phenomenon because they want to deny their involvement in national shame by way of logical justification. At this point in JC's strong opinion on national shame, the astute reader of *Diary* gradually realizes that JC is talking about and to the reader *herself* whenever he writes about "liberal intellectuals," describing their behavior and the structure of their stance in view of this specific moral and political issue. And, at the same time that this maneuver is acknowledged, the reader is further reminded that JC is no more than a product of Coetzee's literary imagination. Although Coetzee gives us *more* than "Strong Opinions," he nonetheless offers it to us, and so must be held accountable for whatever positions are defended therein,⁶ even if he sometimes feels tempted to decry JC's decrepitude and misogyny and never completely identifies himself with his character-writer (thus making things easier for him and harder for us). In spite of the likely frustration caused by this device, the dialectic of responsibility extends to the reader herself, who, after all, chose to take up the novel in the first place.

The dialectic of responsibility can therefore be said to act upon the reader of *Diary of a Bad Year* via a mechanism of identification. At the moment in *Diary* where the above quotation occurs, it is most likely Coetzee who wants to make us understand that there is something extremely inconsistent about the stance of these "liberal intellectuals." More specifically: how can "they" be opposed to both Machiavelli's *Necessità*, as a positive stance, and the assimilation of shame by citizenship, when both positions represent contradictory yet complementary ideas that "exhaustively cover a domain of intelligible positions"? The problem arises precisely because one must choose between the following options: (a) either there is no such thing as national shame, because one must do whatever is needed to protect the interests of the state (*Necessità*); or (b) national shame exists and does not pertain exclusively to political leaders; insofar as it spreads via non-rational mechanisms, its removal cannot be effected by rational justification, and these leaders were elected by the public. To accuse political leaders of

“shameful behavior” *is already to experience the curse of this shame*. This inconsistency, however, belongs also to *me*: an astute, well-informed reader of *Diary of a Bad Year*. I am perfectly capable of understanding the structural paths of this inconsistency, and I can even detect the responsibility-divesting cynicism inherent in it, so long as I am able to rely on the scapegoat of the third person. *It is “them” of which we speak, the so-called “liberal intellectuals.”* Only by means of the formal use of the third person to refer to this social group does Coetzee manage to convey his intended content in an effective way, removing the veil of blindness that risks shielding the eyes of the liberal intellectual reader. The dialectic of responsibility is the reading process by which we achieve the lifting of this veil.

It is more than plausible to suppose that, upon finishing *Diary*, one might come to view this formal strategy as a “formal subterfuge” and thus be left feeling naked and doubly deceived—for we do not like the position held by the liberal intellectuals, which isn’t actually “their” position, but rather *ours*, and we do not like the way Coetzee’s text pretends to tell us about an abstract group of people who can only stand for strong positions by being blind to their own point of view, when actually it describes us. The dialectic of responsibility—this whole process—functions as a bridge between the *formal method of writing* and *the act of conveying ethical content* (both as a “material” posture towards human action and as a strategy for reading the book). It is by means of this dialectic that the reader manages not only to understand her place on the plane of reasons embodied by *Diary of a Bad Year*—becoming aware that she is an integral part of this space and not a mere spectator—but also to replace substitute ethical thought (the only kind available to any reader who merely occupies the position of spectator) with a straightforward but difficult ethical attitude: a commitment to decide how she should live and behave, given the shame that is hers *ab initio*—maybe because she is American, most likely because she is human. But why did Coetzee feel compelled to use JC to morally educate *his* readers while refusing to reveal his precise relation to this character and to his views? Isn’t this, after all, sheer abuse of well-known rhetorical devices? In other words, isn’t he as shameless as any liberal intellectual?

Partially Unveiled Methodology

Admittedly, we may not settle on the interpretation of *Diary* I have been offering here; it is, after all, just one of many possible approaches to Coetzee’s work, with its own potential shortcomings (for which

I alone am responsible). With this said, however, two points in particular have thus far become apparent. Both in the sections Coetzee wants to attribute to JC and in the lower sections of the page that we readers are at least allowed to suppose are Coetzee's, the writing style is extremely clear, descriptive and neat. Indeed, in a text with a graphic structure as reader-unfriendly as *Diary's*, Coetzee must avoid obscurity and linguistic excess if he wants the narrative to progress through the different sections of the book's pages, to preserve the important connections between them, and still to hold the reader's attention. On the other hand, the narrative device of a split in different characters' voices instantiates a gap with regard to the identity of the novel's author at the very outset. The structure of the book's page is of course highly unconventional, and both it and the related identity split between JC and John Coetzee are features that the reader confronts from the moment she takes up the novel. Philosophers are drawn to Coetzee's texts in part because of their complexity and the hard stylistic puzzles they contain. My reading of *Diary*, whether or not it is ultimately helpful, can also be viewed as a response to its ostensibly puzzling rhetorical features. The complexity of this interpretation directly reflects the complexity of the book's structure—an enticement with which Coetzee subtly provokes philosophical engagement.

Stephen Mulhall has also commented extensively on key features of Coetzee's "dialectical" prose in terms of period aesthetics. On Mulhall's view, Coetzee's work is best described as "realist modernist" (*Wounded* 162), both because of its systematic formal features and because so much of his fictional writing contains careful metareflection on the historical evolution of literary realism and modernism. There is much that is right about this description. In truth, however, even the realistic effects in Coetzeean prose are both framed by distinct mechanisms of self-awareness and accompanied by Coetzee's intentional interference with the transparency of discourse. Still, Mulhall's argument is highly relevant to my reflections here, particularly to the extent that he argues that a parallel struggle between realism and modernism, in terms of both technique and the corresponding impact on thematic issues, is intrinsic *both* to the imaginatively mimetic design of the modern novel since its inception (be it the nostalgic parable of *Don Quixote* or the pioneering realistic reportage of Daniel Defoe) and to the realistic efforts of modern philosophical projects that historically coincide with the emergence of the new literary genre. Here, Mulhall refers specifically to the anti-authoritarian arguments of modern philosophers and scientists such as Bacon, Descartes, Locke and Hume, who systematically rebelled

against Aristotelianism and religious restrictions on the announcement of scientific breakthroughs. In

The Wounded Animal, we find the following comments on both traditions:

The history of the novel since Defoe, Richardson and Sterne might therefore be written entirely in terms of the ways in which novelists repeatedly subject their inheritance of realistic conventions to critical questioning in order to recreate the impression of reality in their readers (in large part by encouraging those readers to see prior uses of convention to represent the real as merely conventional in contrast with their own, far more convincing ones). . . . [I]t is not simply that the novel has a cannibalistic relation to other literary genres; from the outset, its practitioners had a similarly Oedipal relation to prior examples within the genre of the novel, and so to the prior conventions within which they necessarily operated. (145)

The cannibalistic threat to former projects of both traditions extends itself further as the fundamental hermeneutic principle of the dialectical reading I will be developing here—a reading which, as we shall see, also incorporates an element of self-overcoming regarding its own methodological inheritance.

The crucial issue at this point may be put as follows: recent philosophical projects—such as Mulhall’s reading of *Elizabeth Costello* or Lear’s reading of *Diary of a Bad Year*—have turned to the work of a great contemporary novelist and found that they have such-and-such to say about it, showing an openness to literature and literary criticism that surpasses the Socratic prejudices against artists and thus allows for the reintegration of writers into the philosophical citadel. But who in turn examines these philosophical commentaries? Coetzee himself tends to be extremely critical when engaging in reflection of this sort—as occurs, for instance, in his dismissal of the single-minded philosophical voice of JC within the overall framework of *Diary*, which leads him to write a book that is utterly different from JC’s realistic set of chronicles on contemporary ethical and political issues. And JC’s ultimately single-minded voice is in very good company within Coetzee’s work as a whole. Other examples of staged dialogues with philosophers that don’t favor the latter include Elizabeth Costello’s acrid reactions to both her professional (and unemployed) philosopher daughter-in-law, Norma Bernard, and the philosophical community at Appleton College; her alternative accounts of animal ethics; and the strong opposition faced by David, the main character in *The Childhood of Jesus*, when he attempts to “play Socrates” and lead abstract discussions on virtues and vices with his co-workers at the grain warehouse. Is there perhaps a more genial approach to philosophy available to us?

A Further Contributor

I began by considering Attridge's and McDonald's direct arguments for explaining the inner tensions found in Coetzee's fiction, thereby introducing a further voice in this complex dialogue between (contemporary) literature and (contemporary) philosophy: the voice of the literary critic. I now wish to return to this contribution in a way that allows me to show a) that the realism-modernism dialectic that Mulhall detects in Coetzee's work is not resolved in a clear-cut synthesis, and b) that for Coetzee, *irony* plays a crucial role in undermining all neat distinctions.

Alongside Mulhall's attempt to explain the realist-modernist dynamic, which looks specifically at Coetzee's novels (even more specifically, at *Elizabeth Costello*), Terry Eagleton offers his own (recognizably Marxist) explanatory model in the 2005 monograph *The English Novel: An Introduction*.⁷ Without discussing Coetzee, Eagleton insists that it was the distinctive rise of the middle class throughout eighteenth-century Europe that, via a narrative mirroring of its social structures and aspirations, paved the way for the realist novel. He grounds his critical reading of canonical English-language novels, reaching from the work of Daniel Defoe to that of Virginia Woolf (the book not only develops a historical model for interpreting the evolution of the genre but also follows the historical evolution of the canon), on an essentially sociological model, arguing that the ascending middle class can be characterized as the great protagonist of the liberal values of individual self-determination and prosperity, unwilling to stand for romantic myths and general abstractions, and that its most representative writers projected the main values defended by the class to which they belong. For Eagleton, then, the realistic prose of most eighteenth-century literature both mirrors and embodies the pragmatic values of a new social order. If we accept that the purpose of the realistic novel is to do justice to the facts, to life as it stands in this new social configuration, we must also assume that this social mirroring, arguably accomplished through an inevitably conventional medium—a natural language—is the true purpose of realistic prose. The linguistic convention that makes narrative possible is thus an essentially phenomenal device, in the sense that it allows for the linguistic manifestation of the (socially relevant) facts as they stand. Both in the introduction to his study, "What is a Novel," and in his critical discussion of the canon, Eagleton relies on a socio-dialectical model to explain literary formal realism. According to this stance, the realistic, self-effacing style of the eighteenth-century English novel was as much a product of the contemporary liberal social order as the modernistic turn of the early twentieth

century was a product of the social and political disasters that resulted in the Holocaust. To Eagleton, if the novel does indeed have representative potential, so does the social order whose essentially evolutionary dialectic can also be depicted by conventional linguistic means.

By contrast, Stephen Mulhall (in two chapters in *The Wounded Animal* and two essays in *The Self and Its Shadows*)⁸ considers the tension between realism and modernism in Coetzee's work, detecting in the latter's working out of the realist-modernist tension we've analyzed above what I will term a "conventionalist" pattern of self-overcoming with regard to inherited literary styles. At the risk of oversimplifying Mulhall's dense account of realist modernism in the contemporary novel, I want to present his proposal as follows. He insists on the presence of an inner and inevitably doomed struggle within novelistic literary prose itself, in place since the very inception of the genre, and argues that the novel has been dialectically fighting its own conventional status as an artistic genre in the name of fidelity to the facts. However, since these supposed facts are themselves a product of the literary imagination (and since, as linguistic creations, they are particularly "conventional"), the realistic novel is logically doomed to inflict on its descendants the same Oedipal tension it inherited from its ancestors (this is the material point of his quotation above). This dialectic of self-overcoming is made all the more acute by a progressive awareness within the modernist tradition of the fact that the methodological design of formal realism can only be accomplished through a means of expression that is highly conventional or non-natural—a means *that must be acknowledged as such*. (According to this proposal, Coetzee's literary project, not least because he is also an outstanding critic, inherits this self-conscious historical design.)

The potential for reflection afforded by the insurmountable barrier separating the realistic writer from the factual world that his prose intends to represent provides a path for awareness of the facticity of the prose itself and for reflection, through that very prose, on both its representative potential and its representative limits. This in turn calls for a reflective fold within the prose itself in what concerns the conditions of its own possibility as a (conventional) representative device—something we've seen exemplified in Coetzee's modernistic approach to his own literary project, e.g. by reflecting on the conditions of the composition of "Strong Opinions" as an element within *Diary*. (The quotation in the

epigraph to this paper is an even more explicit example of the metareflection on the conventions of the genre that is so often performed in Coetzee's novels.)

Having contrasted Eagleton's materialistic account of the historical birth of modernist literature with Mulhall's conventionalist model, we should perhaps be satisfied with the explanatory clarity with which both critically resume the conversation that Plato had so forcefully discouraged. But can we really settle the matter with philosophy? Is this not, perhaps, a modern echo of the *Republic*?

Breaking the Spell of Reality, Ironically

What have we accomplished thus far? I began by mentioning an ongoing conversation between philosophers and writers (especially novelists) that seems to rescue the latter from Plato's exile. (It is also important to stress here that this is mainly a worry for philosophy, since the poets were never greatly concerned about their ostracism from philosophy.) As it happens, John Coetzee (in *Diary of a Bad Year* and elsewhere) seems to turn Plato's worries upside down. Plato complained that poetry, due to its idolatrous character, leads us away from virtue, and that an excessive focus on images addresses only the appetitive part of the soul, leaving our rational faculty hungry for argument. In a subversive move, Coetzee directs these charges to the philosopher him- or herself. What is more, he carefully avoids falling prey to the pitfalls (outlined above) associated with presenting ethical views via mere argument by paying close attention to form. Indeed, the presentation of JC's arguments and the performance of their ultimate inadequacy serve to free Coetzee, JC, and the reader from the bonds of mere argument.

In the preceding section, I presented a two-pronged (philosophical) reading of the evolution of realism and modernism in the history of the novel, thereby generating a fiction of my own about the sort of literary prose that aims to represent invented stories about made up characters whilst doing justice to social and psychological reality. I gave names to the two explanatory models that account for the realism-modernism dialectic in the history of the novel, arguing that, whereas Eagleton's model is essentially socio-dialectical, Mulhall's account emphasizes a conscious self-overcoming of the constraints provided by literary conventions. I now want to say that, in truth, neither of the two models succeeds in satisfactorily accommodating another significant feature of Coetzee's prose, which upends the neatly polarized tensions I've been discussing. Put broadly, this noteworthy feature is *irony* (we'll

come to examples in a moment). But to start seeing why neither of the two models accommodates the irony that so characterizes Coetzeean prose, we must add to my own analysis of the split page a consideration of the remarkable methodological differences between the voices of JC and (presumably) John Coetzee in *Diary of a Bad Year*—a device by which the reader, for whom engagement with the text has ethical-therapeutic consequences, is brought face to face both with the instability of authorial identity and with the inadequacy of uncritically assimilating the two voices. The passages in both “Strong Opinions” and the lower sections that Anya encourages JC to call “soft opinions” cited above attest to a genuine difference at the level of tone. Moreover, we’ve seen that there are no enduring, fixed tones ascribable to Coetzee’s characters: they evolve throughout the story. Still, there is no denying that JC’s writing is as informative and opinionated as a thematic essay can be, and he never allows his reasoning to deviate from a clear argumentative pattern. “Strong Opinions” is rightly described as a realistic report on contemporary ethical and political issues. In the lower sections of the page—where we are also told about how the upper sections were produced—Coetzee departs from straightforward reasoning, allowing for suspensions, onomatopoeia and markedly emotive language. It seems likely that Coetzee wants his readers to realize *that* and *how* a maximally comprehensive literary achievement cannot rely merely on the politically realistic prose characteristic of JC’s voice. Coetzee shows us this, as we’ve seen, via his modernistic locating of “Strong Opinions” literally at the top of the larger book.

If this embedding is one of the key features of Coetzee’s literary project at this stage of its evolution (a project that we know has evolved further in the meantime), and if one of the practical—*ethical*, in the sense developed by Attridge—outcomes of this maneuver is the dialectic of responsibility, how can an explanatory essay on *Diary of a Bad Year* and its modernistic refinement possibly escape the fate of ersatz ethical thought? What I want to say is: how can a plausible theory of ersatz ethical thought avoid collapsing into mere ersatz thought itself, where such failure is attributable in part to its very plausibility and persuasiveness? After all, the discovery of a good explanatory model usually provides us with a grounded excuse to stop thinking about the topic it explains. We assume that we know, and we proceed from there. As we’ve seen, by Coetzee’s lights, both the theory and our acceptance of it are forms of substitution ethical thought. Thus we might suspect that this paper, to the degree that its aim is to prevent ersatz ethical thought, should itself have been written in three layers.

But then, what would have been the point of writing it, other than to rephrase *Diary of a Bad Year*, recomposing it in other words and perhaps doing harm to the original's reputation?

Is there anything left for us to do when the target of our inquiry, with which we are directly confronted, throws itself back upon us? Might Coetzee himself give us something of a clue about how to address this worry? What I want to suggest, in fact, is that this essay opened with precisely such a clue. In the middle of (reading) an essay on realism, Coetzee puts the following words in the mouth of Elizabeth Costello: “[U]nless certain scenes are skipped over, we will be here all afternoon” (Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 16). From *Dusklands* onward, he uses disruptive tricks of this sort—tricks that both highlight the unreliability of unselfconsciously following prescribed literary conventions and (modernistically) undermine those conventions by explicitly calling attention to their presence. In *Dusklands*, and alongside the darkly humorous effect produced by Jacobus Coetzee's racist and patronizing comments on his “faithful servant” Klawer, we encounter the following: “A convention allows me to record these details. I have missed certain words” (42). (These details, meta-narratively alluded to via a present-tense, first-person utterance by the supposed narrator and agent of the act in question, Eugene Dawn, concern his crazed stabbing of his own son.) Both in the novels, through ironical metafictional gestures of the sort just quoted, and in the essays on literary criticism, Coetzee acknowledges that our attempts to transcend realism may have in fact been unsuccessful. In a telling passage from “The First Sentence of Yvonne Burgess' *The Strike*,” he writes:

Having accepted that transcendence of the illusionism of Realism is an illusory hope, that to get behind (*aufheben*) fiction by incorporating into fiction a critical consciousness of the procedures of fiction is only to climb another spiral of illusionistic Realism, one may be taking refuge, like John Barth⁹, in Nietzschean gaiety. (*Doubling* 92)

But what can gaiety or any of the forms of ironical exercise we've analyzed thus far—forms of irony that reflect on the constraints of convention and at the same time enact the omnipotence of the writer who claims to be so constrained—do for our persistent attempt to understand where to position Coetzee's work in terms of the polarizing aesthetic/historical categories on which we so often rely? Or for the ethical thrust of his literary project as whole? A conversation with David Attwell might provide a clue here. In the interview on Kafka, Attwell confronts Coetzee with this question: “My question, then, is an attempt to trace the outer limit of your interest in Kafka: to what extent are you able to see

yourself—and perhaps aspects of contemporary white South African writing more generally, as an ethical and marginal enterprise—as inhabiting a form of late modernism?” (*Doubling* 198). After detailing the grounds of his artistic indebtedness to Kafka, Coetzee gets to the bulk of the question on late modernism:

The direction of your question is undoubtedly interesting: does serious contemporary writing by whites in South Africa not inhabit a position we can call late-modernism? (Do I detect the qualifier *merely* late-modernist hanging in the air?) But before I respond I want to position *myself*. For I do not wish to respond from the marked or negative position, to embrace ethicalism or anything else from a position in the dialogue that is already marked as the position of the negative, the position of the *mere*. So, for instance, the last thing I want to do is to *defiantly* embrace the ethical as against the political. I don't want to contribute, in that way, toward marking the ethical as the pole with the lack. I neither claim nor fail to claim that my reservations open up for me a third position. I neither claim nor fail to claim that there can be a third position. I do say that if I speak from a pole-position, from the negative pole, it is because I am drawn or pushed there by a force, even a violence, operating over the whole of the discursive field that at this moment (April 1990) we inhabit, you and I. (200)

Here, of course, the effect produced is not straightforwardly ironic. Coetzee's *refusal* to position his own work within the boundaries of a “school” or a familiarly labeled artistic movement (with the added twist that he is being pushed in that direction by a violence that operates on discourse) might be said to provoke a similar disruptive effect on the critic, however—a disruption noticed by the reader (in fact, Attwell feels the need to assure him, further along in the conversation, that he did not mean to invoke the idea of “mere late-modernism”). What both irony and refusal (as undermining strategies) do in fact have in common is the ability to disabuse us of a certain taxonomic fetishism that aims at either clear-cut or gentler (or mixed) polarizations. In a way, we are back to Attridge's insight on the singularity of the encounter with the literary work as an event that is ethical to the core—ethical in the sense that, “being an event of human signification,” the literary text does indeed make specific demands on us to respect its individuality and avoid (simple or complex) reductions to, for instance, aesthetic categorization. But we are also within the field of a Wittgensteinian understanding of ethics and language: you have to throw away the ladder once you've climbed it (once you've understood; in this specific case, once you've understood how the realism-modernism-postmodernism dynamic might plausibly be accounted for). We are also within the more familiar dialectic of responsibility that underlines both the multilayered composition of *Diary* and a faithful, multilayered interpretation of the liberal intellectual's (read: *our own*) position.

Textual evidence for Coetzee's theoretical endorsement and literary use of irony is, as we've seen thus far, abundant. In particular, however, two further significant instances of ironic speech and self-conscious appraisal of irony as a method (linked with the dialogical project framed in this discussion) deserve mention. In a two-page reply to Cavalieri's highly structured philosophical dialogue on perfectionism, Coetzee picks up on the dialogue by asking: "Question: To whom is the lifestyle, and perhaps even the life, of A[lexandra] and T[heo] available? Is it available to a horse?—Answer (*Pace* Jonathan Swift): No, not as far as we know. . . . Question: Is it compatible with a life, off the page, devoted to brawling and guzzling and fucking? Answer: Perhaps, but only with a measure of psychic dislocation" (Cavalieri 85). Further, when invited to comment on Jonathan Lear's treatment of the topic in *A Case for Irony*, the main tenet of which concerns the strangeness of and estrangement from the familiar that (Socratic and Kierkegaardian) irony subtly provokes (i.e. the condition of finding oneself unable to understand, in any familiar way, the practical identity one assumed one had mastered or inhabited), Coetzee writes the following: "Before we can claim to live a truly examined life, says Jonathan Lear, we need to pass the test of ironic self-scrutiny at something approaching the level set by Socrates and Kierkegaard. Following the contours of the subtle case for radical irony made by Lear turns out to be an intellectual adventure in its own right." In the present analysis, Coetzee himself employs a kindred ironical self-scrutiny to address the question of the affiliation between his work and traditional aesthetic/historical categories (reflected on both in the novels and in interview comments). This self-scrutiny undermines any attempt to identify Coetzee's work with realism, modernism or postmodernism directly—a body of work that nonetheless pays extremely close attention to the historical and ethical significance of these legacies.

As we know all too well, classification brings with it the risk of illicitly erasing everything and everyone inhabiting the margins. These margins may be geographic (with the further dangers of catch-all regionalizations, which, as Coetzee himself acknowledges, have prevailed in South African literature and in views on South African literature), but they may also be emergent islands of meaning, deeply idiosyncratic exercises in resisting resistance to paradox—not least, the paradox of classification. The latter, I suggest, is what John Coetzee's novels, including *Diary of a Bad Year*, challenge us to accomplish.

¹ This lecture was delivered by Coetzee under the title “What is Realism” as part of the Ben Belitt lectureship series at Bennington College in November 1996.

² The claim Attridge alludes to is part of a talk given by Coetzee at the University of Cape Town in 1986. Coetzee said: “In times of intense ideological pressure like the present, when the space in which the novel and history normally coexist like two cows on the same pasture, each minding his own business, is squeezed to almost nothing, the novel, it seems to me, has only two options, supplementarity or rivalry.” He then goes on to advocate rivalry.

³ For the phrase “ersatz ethical thought” I am indebted to Jonathan Lear (“Ethical Thought” 74).

⁴ The destabilization of authority at work in *Diary* (and throughout Coetzee’s fiction) finds an interesting parallel in his essay “Confession and Double Thoughts” (1985). Here, he considers examples of secular confession in the work of Tolstoy, Rousseau, and Dostoevsky; in particular, he considers how these authors “confront or evade the problem of how to know the truth about the self without being self-deceived, and of how to bring the confession to an end in the spirit of [...] absolutism” (194). The confessing consciousness is revealed as being involved in an infinite regress—unable to locate a self-contained ground for the desire to “tell the truth about the self” that does not itself give rise to further doubts about sincerity, and thus to further grounds for confession. Coetzee closes the essay by articulating the strategy employed by Tolstoy in the latter’s puzzling Afterword to *The Kreutzer Sonata*, itself a response to letters from his readers asking for clarification, and thus for authority, in which he provides a list of mundane ethical prescriptions (lessons to be learned from the text). For one who recognizes that the regress of self-doubt “has proved itself merely an endless treadmill,” Coetzee writes, “what potential for the attainment of truth can there be in the self-interrogation of a confessing consciousness?” Tolstoy’s strategy, as Coetzee presents it, constitutes an understandable response to the reality of this endless treadmill: “[W]e see (I speculate now) disillusionment, boredom with this particular mill for cranking truth out of lies, impatience with the novelistic motions that must be gone through before truth may emerge (a truth that anyhow always emerges as provisional, tainted with doubt from the processes it has gone through), and a (rash?) decision to set down the truth, finally, as though after a lifetime of exploring one had acquired the credentials, amassed the authority, to do so” (232). Tolstoy’s endorsement of and identification with a particular vantage is a response to a text that very subtly and cleverly stirs up doubt in the reader regarding authoritative truth about the self, as disclosed by Pozdnyshev’s confession to a mute narrator. In his essay, Coetzee appreciates how Tolstoy’s lack of authorial commentary on Pozdnyshev’s dogmatic assumptions about himself left his readers with uncomfortable doubts about what *he* (Tolstoy) *truly meant*. “Confession and Double Thoughts” is thus instructive for readers of *Diary*, which is likewise a text in which our hankering for truth and identification is continually frustrated. Where Tolstoy, in his Afterword, apparently gives in to disillusionment with the supposed utilitarian benefits of late-nineteenth-century amorality, Coetzee refuses to “set down the truth,” leaving it to his reader to engage fully with the uncomfortable regress of authority and identity. Such engagement, as I argue here, is precisely what the dialectic of responsibility depends on.

⁵ The passage in italics is from Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, Chap. XVIII.

⁶ As a reviewer pointed out to me, this claim for accountability on Coetzee’s part is again problematic. In a strict legal sense, Coetzee’s publishers are partly responsible (so, accountable) for the existence of *Diary* as a cultural item on the market. But so is Coetzee, since in asserting his moral rights he is bound to be morally responsible (so, accountable) for the text. The trouble is, on an understanding of morality that reaches beyond the limits of legality Coetzee is toying with these categories, and his effort to disrupt these formal rules is backed up by a long tradition of modernist writing where the issue of accountability is raised and dealt with precisely via formal experimentation. What is more, formal experimentation in the modernist tradition has explicitly (and often ironically) addressed issues of *personal* (here I feel like saying “civilian”) authorship for its own sake; already in the Victorian golden age of the novel, however, the issue was inadvertently posed by the fact that female writers like Jane Austen and George Eliot were only able to publish their work under (male) pseudonyms.

⁷ Eagleton’s inspiration is clearly Ian Watt’s classic study from 1957, *The Rise of the Novel*. There, Watt forcefully argues that the most important influences exercised on the novel by main trends of thought in modern philosophy, from Defoe onwards, are *methodological* in nature. That is to say: the modern novel, whilst not itself philosophical, mirrors and embodies in its narrative form the methodological commitments common to both empiricism and rationalism. Watt elaborates on several strands of that method: one of them is the experience-based construction of character. The deep character of the realist novel is, for Watt, the character that displays accrued and assimilated experience in its individuation. Curiously enough, Coetzee himself said that, when conducting research to support *Foe*’s form and storyline, he was particularly inspired by Watt’s claim about the *decline of irony* in popular democracies and public discourse, adding that it impacted on the general tone of *Foe* (*Doubling* 146). In line with what will be defended in the last point of this paper, we might well speculate that it is indeed an urge to rehabilitate irony at the level of narrative and character- and plot-construction that at the same time explains (in part) *Foe*’s indebtedness to Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and safeguards its distinctively modernistic ironic elements. Chiefly

concerned with explaining the birth of the genre in English, through a detailed analysis of the projects of Defoe, Richardson and Fielding, Watt does not have a story to tell about modernism's evolution out of realism.

⁸ See esp. Mulhall, *The Wounded Animal* chs. 9 and 10, and Mulhall, "The Melodramatic Reality of Film and Philosophy" and "Countering the Ballad of Co-Dependency" in *The Self and Its Shadows*.

⁹ Although I cannot here pursue a thorough comparison between Coetzee's ultimate refusal to submit his literary project to aesthetic categorization and John Barth's own view on what, having inherited the traditions of realism and modernism, postmodernist fiction and a postmodernist writer can aspire to be, a brief mention of what sets them apart is in order. In "The Literature of Replenishment," Barth, also using a recognizable Hegelian metaphor, suggests a model for the postmodernist author to follow. He writes: "A worthy program for post-modernist fiction, I believe, is the synthesis or transcension of these antitheses, which may be summed up as pre-modernist and modernist modes of writing. My ideal postmodernist author neither merely repudiates nor merely imitates either his twentieth-century modernist parents or his nineteenth-century premodernist grandparents. He has the first half of our century under his belt, but not on his back. . . . He may not hope to reach and move the devotees of James Michener and Irving Wallace—not to mention the great mass of television addicted non-readers. But he *should* hope to reach and delight, at least part of the time, beyond the circle of what Mann used to call the Early Christians: professional devotees of high art" (203). Barth counts himself as fitting this model. Coetzee, by contrast, when pushed to categorically circumscribe his own novelistic project, and although speaking of a similar Hegelian structure, refuses such a balanced synthesis and the urge to associate his work with a particular category, including postmodernism.

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