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Of All the Places

A Life in Search of a Narrative:

The Construction of Narrative Identity in the Autobiographical Fiction of J.M. Coetzee

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PhD in Creative Writing
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I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where states otherwise by reference or acknowledgment, the work presented is entirely my own.

Signed,

Ryan A. Licata

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Abstracts

A novel – *Of All the Places* (word count: 79128)

Drawing on parallels between apartheid South Africa and the present far-right politics of Italy, *Of All the Places* explores matters of race, nationalism, and language, and the inevitable impact these aspects have on the forging of personal identity and community with others.

Synopsis: To his surprise, Marcello Zamboni, a young clerk for a Milanese life insurance firm, is urged by his bosses to investigate the circumstances behind the death of a man whose claim could result in a large pay-out to the beneficiary. Marcello's surprise turns to reluctance when he learns that not only must he return to his hometown of Malé, deep in the mountainous valleys of northern Italy, but also that the deceased is Steyn Gela, the South African man responsible for stealing the affections of his first love, Rachele, who happens to be the sole beneficiary. Marcello's return to Malé means confronting his past and all that he purposefully left behind: the town's small-minded ways, his alcoholic mother, his boyhood foes the Bonetti brothers, and the memories of Steyn and Rachele. When Marcello finds Steyn's diary, what begins as a routine inquiry into the cause of Steyn's death turns into a calamitous uncovering of personal, criminal, and political intrigues. In his search for the truth behind one man's death, Marcello becomes involved in discovering the truth behind the lives of others who knew him. He must not only contend with the needs of his girlfriend Francesca, intent on having a baby, and the ever-urgent demands of his Milanese bosses, but also unravel the conspiracies of an underground crime ring, political revolutionaries, and, worst of all, his own heart.

Critical Essay – A Life in Search of a Narrative: The Construction of Narrative Identity in the Autobiographical Fiction of J.M. Coetzee (word count: 27381)

J.M. Coetzee's autobiographical novels – *Boyhood; Youth; Summertime* – depict the author's life refigured in three distinct periods in the life of a protagonist. By adopting Paul Ricoeur's theory of *narrative identity,* as per his work *Oneself as Another* (1992), the essay attempts to show that the protagonist, as revealed through a continuity of identity over time, is the same person across the three books, and illustrates a connectivity across the lives of the author, protagonist, and narrator.

Narrated in third person, present tense mode, the novels lend a degree of psychological distance to the focalization, despite a sense of temporal immediacy. Fictional interventions are presented – most notably in *Summertime*, where the reader is told that Coetzee is, in fact, dead. Despite the fictional qualities of the three narratives, an undeniable consistency of *character* exists through the sequences of time which the books follow.

The Ricoeurian idea of *permanence in time* is categorised by two models: firstly, by *character*, formed by the *lasting dispositions* seen in one's *habits* and *acquired identifications*; and, secondly, by a sense of *keeping one's word*, that is, by faithfulness to oneself and perseverance to maintain one's identity. These two conceptual models are applied to a close textual analysis of each of Coetzee's three autobiographical novels. For the first model, examining the protagonist's *lasting dispositions*, the essay focuses on recurring themes in the oeuvre: language, race politics, place, family, sexuality, vocation. For the second model, the essay explores the idea of faithfulness as it relates to the notions of truth and ethics and, in particular, to how these terms are developed in Coetzee's writing in confessional mode.

In closing, the essay examines why Coetzee's autobiographical novels are not so much a revelation of his true self, but rather a study of himself through the creation of a *narrative identity,* that is, a fictional reimagining of his identity as seen by himself and by others. Between the two poles of historical fact and fiction, in the medium that is *narrative identity*, there we find J.M. Coetzee. Finally, I argue that Coetzee's exposure of himself in the polemical context of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa is also an exposure of the culture's own racial and social transgressions; and thus, by offering forth a form of confession, and inviting others to see his personal shame, he invites others to see their own, and to take action.

Lay Abstracts

A novel – *Of All the Places*

Synopsis: To his surprise, Marcello Zamboni, a young clerk for a Milanese insurance firm, is urged by his bosses to investigate the circumstances behind the death of a man whose claim could result in a large pay-out to the beneficiary. Marcello's surprise turns to reluctance when he learns that not only must he return to his hometown of Malé, deep in the mountainous valleys of northern Italy, but also that the deceased is Steyn Gela, the man responsible for stealing the affections of his first love, Rachele, who happens to be the sole beneficiary. Marcello's return to Malé means confronting his past and all that he purposefully left behind: the town's small-minded ways, his alcoholic mother, his boyhood foes the Bonetti brothers, and the memories of Steyn and Rachele. When Marcello finds Steyn's diary, what begins as a routine inquiry into the cause of Steyn's death turns into a calamitous uncovering of personal, criminal, and political intrigues. In his search for the truth behind one man's death, Marcello becomes involved in discovering the truth behind the lives of others who knew him. He must not only contend with the needs of his girlfriend, Francesca, intent on having a baby, and the ever-urgent demands of his Milanese bosses, but also unravel the conspiracies of an underground crime ring, political revolutionaries, and, worst of all, his own heart.

Critical Essay - A Life in Search of a Narrative: The Construction of Narrative Identity in the Autobiographical Fiction of J.M. Coetzee

J.M. Coetzee's autobiographical novels – *Boyhood; Youth; Summertime* – depict the author's life refigured in three distinct periods in the life of a protagonist. By adopting Paul Ricoeur's theory of *narrative identity,* as per his work *Oneself as Another* (1992), the essay attempts to show that the protagonist, as revealed through a continuity of identity over time, is the same person across the three books, and illustrates a connectivity across the lives of the author, protagonist, and narrator.

Also, the essay examines why Coetzee's autobiographical novels are a study of himself through the creation of a *narrative identity,* that is, a fictional reimagining of his identity as seen by himself and by others, the narrative between the two poles of historical fact and fiction.

Finally, I argue that Coetzee's exposure of himself in the polemical context of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa is also an exposure of the culture's own racial and social transgressions; and thus, by offering forth a form of confession, and inviting others to see his personal shame, he invites others to see their own, and to take action.

Of All the Places

ONE

Day one, Tuesday

It had to happen to him.

Marcello, Marcello.

How he hates his mother for giving him that name. If only the voice now calling him were the sultry voice of that sexy blonde in *La Dolce Vita* instead of Signor Spinelli, dressed in his blue-grey suit with clip-on tie, a man who demands the respect of a boss while shuffling about the office like *un coglione*.

Marcello, there you are, says Spinelli. Something's come up.

From the archives?

No, it's a new case.

Marcello shifts in his chair. New cases belong to the second floor: the forensic accountants, the investigators of suspicious claims, the fraud detectives. While he is an archivist. A librarian of case files. Good at ordering. That is, keeping things in order.

What's that to do with me?

This job's tailored for you, Zamboni. You know the area.

His brow tightens. Why does the man insist on speaking in riddles?

I don't know what you mean.

Malé. We understand you grew up there.

Yes, but I left years ago.

But your family still live there, no?

My mother. We're not close.

Sorry to hear that, he says, the corner of his mouth turning up, as if genuinely bereaved. He places a thin, mustard-brown folder on Marcello's desk. Here's the deceased's file. It includes a copy of the police report.

Marcello stares at it. But this is a second-floor operation, he says.

Then see it as a test. The possibility of a promotion.

I don't have the expertise.

Our other agents are all occupied. And frankly, you know Malé better than any of them. They're your people.

Marcello fails to see how they could be his people.

It's all in the file, Spinelli says. The deceased, Steyn Gela, born outside the country but held residency in Malé for over ten years.

Steyn Gela? he asks, quickly opening the folder.

Odd name, isn't it? I thought so, too. Italian lineage, apparently. Not much else to go on. That's why we need you out there.

How soon? Marcello skims through the police report, a single paragraph neatly typed, signed by a Carabinieri official, Malé headquarters.

Tomorrow. We require evidence to deny the claim.

Says here Gela drowned.

An accident, says Spinelli, lowering his voice. That means the full claim. It would cost the firm.

Who's the beneficiary?

It's in the policy. Not pleasant reading. A local woman, but she doesn't even live in Italy. Emigrated to Scotland some years ago.

Scotland, did you say?

Yes, the money goes to her. That's if the claim is approved, which Giacometti hopes it won't be.

Giacometti. The name seems to reverberate through the office like a shout in a vacuum. Bold. Direct. Commanding. Giacometti. Hardly real, like the *Mago di Oz*.

Spinelli places an A5 manila envelope on the desk. Inside is a key. You'll have access to Gela's property, he says. It's a little out of town, an old stationhouse apparently, place called Roncogno. You must know it.

Marcello nods. What exactly do you expect me to find?

The man lived alone out there in the woods, a recluse, *santo cielo*. The Malé police searched the house for signs of foul play, but no luck. What we want is evidence of Gela's, well, let's call it, ill-intent.

Suicide? says Marcello, quietly, bending the corner of the envelope. Have his family been contacted?

Spinelli shakes his head. No next of kin, as far as we know. Parents deceased. No siblings. Giacometti is very concerned. You need to get these people, your people, to speak. Best get to it.

Alone at his desk, Marcello goes through the file again. Its only contents are the original documents: the policy with its terms and conditions and a copy of Steyn's birth certificate. Born 1978, Benoni, Transvaal, the Republic of South Africa. He scans the document for the name of Steyn's beneficiary. It's as he fears.

Rachele Manara.

Why does it have to be her? And why *him*?

He makes photocopies of everything and collects them in a new file marked:

Steyn Gela, Claim Under Investigation

He glances at the wall clock. Only four o'clock. Why not chance it? Considering what they're asking of him. *Vaffanculo*. What is he going to tell Francesca? She's looking forward to some time away from the frenetic pace of Milano, far from the coolness of the Milanese – to the warmth, the *accoglienza* of San Vito Lo Capo. She's been planning it for weeks.

Heading out the back, he leaves the office, cuts down via Lomazzo, then catches the tram outside the Chinese quarter. The carriage is full. People push up against him. The scent of an Asian man leaning into him reeks of unfamiliar spices, a cuisine that couldn't be more different from the dishes he grew up on – crauti, lucanica, black breads. He hasn't returned to Malé in five years. His relationship with Francesca has made it easier for him to come up with passable excuses around the holidays. So far without reproach.

He gets off the tram and picks up a bottle of merlot from the store. There is a good chance that he will be in Malé for more than a day, so telling Francesca requires the right approach. Some wine, dinner at Al Ficodindia, which she loves… Then he'll tell her, *oh by the way*, soft and casual. *Vaffanculo*.

TWO

At the apartment, he finds Francesca busy in the kitchen stirring a bubbling pot.

You're home early, she says. What happened? Did Spinelli die?

He laughs. Unlikely. Nothing'll kill that old goat.

So why are you home?

I finished up early.

On a Tuesday?

He puts down the wine and his attaché case, loosens his tie.

What are you cooking? I thought maybe you'd like to go to dinner at Al Ficodindia. We haven't been there in a while.

She sets down the wooden spoon. She suspects something, he knows it, knows how her mind works, knows what's constantly buzzing around in her busy head.

What are you up to? she says, wiping her hands.

Just a thought, that's all. But if you've gone to the trouble of cooking –

No, Al Ficodindia will be wonderful, she says, removing her apron. This spezzatino needs to stand for a while anyway. Give me a moment to fix myself up. Why don't you pour us a glass of that wine?

She comes around the counter and kisses him. You're full of surprises, she says, then disappears into the bedroom.

Sí, ragazzo, he thinks, grabbing the bottle by the neck, *un gran sorpresa.*

By the time they arrive at the restaurant, Francesca is giddy from the wine, while his mood has soured. He is trying to be pleasant, smiling at her anecdotes about her colleagues.

Can you imagine? she says. Isn't that just like her?

These absurd questions about people he has never met irk him. How could he possibly know? Well, no, he can't imagine. He's an archivist, not a clairvoyant. A man who sees before he believes.

It is always busy along the Navigli, but Al Ficodindia is especially crowded for a Tuesday night. As they're led by a waiter, Marcello observes Francesca closely, walking just ahead, weaving through the tables, her eyes moving about the room, flashing across to every woman in the restaurant, sizing up their outfits, the style of each skirt, dress, blouse, down to the accessories, with her clinical, expert eye. When she sits down her dark eyes are cut with a spiteful irony, a smirk rises to her face, and she seems eager for the waiter to leave them alone. Marcello waits for what he knows is coming.

Did you see that woman's dress? she says. She's over at the bar with a man. No, don't look now. *Dio mio*, he must be twice her age.

Marcello glances back, raises his eyebrows.

What? she says.

What? he says, picking up the menu.

I know you, when you say nothing, it usually means that you have something to say, something I'm not going to like.

He wants to tell her he doesn't care, but she's right; there's already enough that needs to be said, enough she's not going to like.

Her dress is a little inappropriate, he says.

She raps her nails on the edge of the table. Is something wrong?

No, nothing. Not really.

Not really?

Maybe I was hoping for a quieter evening.

We're here now, she says.

Have you looked at the menu? The specials sound like your thing.

My thing?

She's cagey. Everything he says falling under her knife.

Pasta alla Norma, one of your favourites, isn't it? Shall we order some wine?

Lowering her eyes to her lap, she unfolds her napkin. Selecting her words, he suspects. Making certain she is going to make herself clear.

Marcello, why are we really here?

The waiter arrives. Ready to order?

Marcello glances up. Francesca doesn't even look at him, *poveretto.*

Not yet, he says. Give us a minute.

The waiter leaves, Marcello lowers his menu. I'm being sent on a short business trip, he says.

She waits for him to continue.

Giacometti wants me to investigate a claim.

That's not what you do.

There's a possibility of a promotion.

Come on, you know what Giacometti is like. I'd be surprised if you're even paid expenses.

Marcello is quiet. Perhaps she's right. He should've refused.

If I can save them that money, he says. I'll at least have the chance of moving out of the office and into the field. The pay will be better.

But you enjoy the archives. It's what you're good at.

All the same, they want me out there.

And where is *there*, exactly?

Malé, he says. They're sending me home.

She bunches her napkin in her hand and rests it on the table. When? she says. When do you have to go?

Tomorrow.

Stai scherzando? Her voice tremors. What about our plans?

I'll be home by Friday. I don't have much choice.

That's a lie.

Look Franci, you know how I feel about Malé, but the decision's been made. Let's have dinner and think past this. It's going to be good for both of us.

How?

Our future, he says. Now, have you had a look at the specials?

She regards him for a moment, then straightens her back, smooths out the napkin across her lap again, and opens the menu.

He reaches for her hand. It's going to be fine, he says. In a few days, we'll be in San Vito, and I may even have a little extra to splash around.

She smiles weakly, and he waves the waiter over.

*

Marcello struggles to unlock the door to the apartment, that is, Francesca's apartment, paid for by her father. The key fits but won't turn. When he's alone, it

unlocks without a glitch. But now that he senses her irritation, her need to get in and speak her mind, the door won't open.

Give it here, she says, coming beside him.

I can do it, he says. He removes the key, gives the bunch a shake, and then tries again. Fails.

Let me do it, she says. Give here.

He drops his hands to his sides; the key remains in the door, the bunch left hanging. He does not let her pass.

Move, she says.

He shifts aside, leans against the wall, and stares at the picture hung opposite: a framed print of Bordone's *Gli amanti veneziani*. He finds it an odd choice for a communal hallway but has kept his opinion to himself.

She removes the key and sorts through the others, not all of them familiar to her.

You were using the wrong one, she says, reinserting the key.

It's the same key, he says in a whisper.

She turns it once, nothing, but then, pushing her shoulder against the door, she turns the key again, and… *presto*. It opens. He expects one of her vindictive glares, a blend of self-satisfied victory and mocking deprecation. But her eyes do not meet his, she simply strides in without a word. He removes his keys and closes the door behind him.

Her bag is on the kitchen counter. With the pot on the stove now cooled, the aroma of spezzatino hangs in the air. In the bedroom, closets open and shut.

Francesca? he calls out. Shouldn't you put this food in the fridge?

There is no reply.

Then she appears at the door, dressed in her white slip, fiddling with her earrings, the mascara around her eyes messy. It needs to stand, she says. I told you.

All night?

Staring at him, she removes one of her earrings and then begins with the other. Yes, she says, all night.

If you say so.

She holds the pair of earrings in her fist then opens her hand and considers them at length, as if trying to remember where she got them. They're the earrings he gave her after they'd been dating for 6 months. It's now been almost a year. She tightens her fist again.

I don't understand you, she says. Then, turning away, going back into the bedroom, she says something he doesn't catch. His eyes fall on his attaché case in the hall. He takes a breath and follows her.

The bedroom is softly lit by the mirror lights of her dressing table where she sits with a selection of creams, face cleansers, cotton wool pads. She wipes the make-up from her face. When they first started spending nights together, he found this ritual endearing. But this evening these once gentle gestures seem mechanical and harsh.

He removes his suit, hangs up his jacket and trousers. She looks at him, reflected in the mirror, standing in his socks and boxer shorts. He sees his slightly bulging belly, his white legs, notices his mismatched socks. He sits down on the edge of the bed and removes them, bundles them up with his shirt, goes into the bathroom and dumps it all into the wash hamper. He leans on the basin and looks in the mirror. His 29th birthday just last month, and yet there is a weariness about his face, fine wrinkles branching out from the corners of his eyes. He brushes his teeth.

From the bathroom door, he watches as she unscrews another of her jars, dabs cream beneath her eyes with the tip of her ring finger, slowly massaging the anti-aging balm into her young skin. He spits, rinses.

I think you're exaggerating, he says, turning off the bathroom light.

You don't get it, do you?

He sighs and comes over to the dressing table, stands behind her, placing his hands on her shoulders. He feels her tense up. Looking at her, her eyes looking back at him, he kisses the top of her head. What's going on with you? he says.

She rests her hands in her lap. I just thought going to the restaurant tonight would be... She doesn't finish, instead she picks up another jar, unscrews the lid.

What? he says. What did you think?

It was unexpected, you coming home early, suggesting we go out. Naturally I thought that you –

Yes?

I thought maybe it had something to do with us.

It did. I mean it will.

I'm not talking about your career, she says, shifting on her chair, her shoulders tensing up again.

He wants to remove his hands, to step away.

I don't want to wait too long, she says. It gets more difficult, you know. She turns towards him and reaches for his hand. I want to be a mother while I'm still young enough to enjoy it.

I understand that, he says.

She stands up, grabs his hands, places them on her hips. You want it too, don't you? I'm not saying we have to get married just yet, though yes, that too, eventually, soon enough, but I want us to have a child.

A child? he says, softly, as if he hasn't fully understood.

She nods intently, putting her arms around his neck, kissing him. He returns her kisses softly, but she insists with her tongue, holding him tighter. The smell of her night cream is overwhelming, the moist, oily texture of ointment rubbing off on his skin. She moves his hands further down onto her behind, round and firm beneath her silk nightdress.

Please, she says, slipping her hands into his boxer shorts, tugging them down. She pushes him onto the bed, lifts her dress up over her head, drops it to the floor, eases her panties down. He reaches back towards the bedside drawer, only she is already on him, kissing him, guiding him into her. He grips her thighs; but she stays on top, her eyes closed, moving fast, pushing down.

When it's over, she lies beside him, her head on his chest. This means everything to me, she says, content, taken with sleepiness.

She falls asleep, but he cannot.

Why does everything happen so fast with her? Thinking back, he sees their whole relationship as one reoccurring collision between his rash whims and her forceful planning.

All night, the dressing table lights remain on, the jars of cream open.

Back then, when the barn across from the farmhouse began to creak, he needn't have looked to the sky to know it was coming. When he got there, Rachele was collecting firewood in a basket; the wood kept behind the barn, sheltered under a corrugated iron canopy. It began with light rain, and she hurried to the clothesline where a sheet sailed ghostly, preyed on by the wind. As it snapped free from the wooden pegs, she snatched onto it, falling to her knees, smothering it against her chest. She stood smiling, pressed the sheet into his arms and ran back to where she'd left the basket. Though still damp, the sheet was rough against his cheek. He smelled the same soap she used on her clothes.

Inside the house they stood at the window watching the rain; the wind chasing clouds across the sky, like a dog herding black sheep. She fed logs into the fire and he stared at the blue flames dancing about the wood, until the smoke stung his eyes and he looked away.

Her grandfather was out in the fields.

Come with me, she said.

The upstairs bedroom was dark. She opened the curtains and then led him beside the bed, where they knelt. From under it, she pulled out an old suitcase, undid the latches. He expected it to be full of linen or lace; instead, some clothes, an old camera, a pair of ballet slippers, and a bundle of letters without envelopes tied with twine; handwriting small, precise, black ink. She tugged at the twine and the letters fell into her lap. In amongst them lay an old photograph, worn at the edges from handling. My parents, she said, showing it to him: her father in his Alpini uniform, hair long around his collar; her mother in a ballet dress, hands above her head. She turned the picture over: Carnevale, febbraio 1987 – the year she was born. She

picked up the ballet slippers, the tan leather inner soles dark in patches, the name of the shoemaker, stamped in gold ink, faded into an indecipherable script.

She placed them back beside the camera.

Rachele, you up there?

She swept the letters from her lap into the suitcase, shoved it under the bed. When her grandfather came into the room, they were standing by the window.

He had on the fleece-lined dirty anorak, with the large pockets. The same coat he wore all year round.

What are you doing in here? he asked, glaring at them from behind his large frame glasses, the ones that magnified his eyes like those of some fabled beast.

The room's always so dark, she said, her voice matter-of-fact, eyes defiant.

The old man came to the window, and they moved away. He gripped the curtains, the soft morning sunlight casting his tall shadow on the bed, and seemed to hesitate, before wrenching the curtains shut, ripping light from the room.

Get out, this instant.

In the kitchen, he was the one who helped her set the table for their breakfast. Cups of tea, yesterday's half-loaf of bread, a jar of plum jam. Still wearing his coat, her grandfather came in, the ballet slippers in his hairy fist. He sat, placing the slippers on the table beside him. She raised a knife and began to slice the bread.

Leave that now, please.

She put down the knife and sat.

With his eyes on his empty plate her grandfather no longer seemed to see them.

You are not to go in there, understood?

He watched as she wrung her hands beneath the table, her pale skin breaking out in red patches. He wanted to reach for her.

The old man slammed his fist down on the table causing the teacups to topple on their saucers.

Do you hear me?

Yes, she said.

Good, now let's get on with our day. He stuffed the slippers into his large coat pockets, then corrected his cup.

Silent, Rachele stood to fetch the tea.

THREE

Day two, Wednesday

Marcello wakes up. Curtains opened. Bright sun. Francesca is no longer beside him. The bathroom door is closed. He glares at the alarm clock: six a.m. Still two hours before his train for Verona, then the connection to Trento, before the final stretch to Malé. If Trenitalia is running on time, the journey will take him five hours. Francesca emerges from the bathroom dressed in a grey suit; make-up applied.

The bathroom's all yours, she says, standing over him, her hands on her hips. You'd better get a move on if you're to get this case solved before the weekend. Coffee, inspector Zamboni?

He nods, forcing a laugh, raising himself up against the headboard.

She leans down and kisses him on the forehead. I was thinking about last night, she says, smiling. Then she straightens up and rests her hands flat on her belly before grasping the ends of her tight-fitting jacket and tugging down. I'll put the coffee on, she says.

Showered and dressed, as on any other workday, in his suit, he prepares for the trip, setting his clothes out on the bed, enough for the next three days. No more.

Francesca brings him his coffee.

I'm going now, she says. I'll call you later.

He sets the coffee down on the bedside table.

Someone's quiet this morning, she says, putting her arms around him. His arms remain at his sides, but she brings them up around her. I just want you to know what last night means to me, she continues. And I'm sorry if I was a little harsh. I understand going home is difficult for you, and that you're doing this for us. I love you, Marcello.

Me too, he says.

She takes him by the chin. Now, get a move on, *bello mio*. I'm looking forward to Friday.

When she's gone, he drinks his coffee, bitter, taken down like medicine. She likes it strong. He opens the beige Louis Vuitton bag she bought him for Christmas and begins to pack, but with each item comes a rising anxiety. The idea of returning to Malé is enough without having to contend with the stress of Francesca and her plans. Last night was a mistake. She is not on the pill, and so they have been careful to use condoms in the past. He's heard of couples who try and try before they actually fall pregnant. But he knows how things work: it is only when you want something that it evades you. He fears that for him it's going to be beginner's luck. He's not a religious man, but he makes the sign of the cross. *Dio mio*, he says.

He zips up the bag and goes into the kitchen, checks to see that he has all the necessary documents, then closes his attaché case. Although the pot of spezzatino has been put in the fridge, the smell lingers. Nausea rises at the thought of it. He's pleased to be getting away.

Milano Central Station is crowded, mobbed by a dominance of labels: Gabbana gangs, Gucci girls, Kangol kids. At an exhibition he attended recently – one of the many Francesca has dragged him to – a video displayed footage from 1946, the arrival of De Gasperi in Milano the day Italy became a republic. He'd noticed the

crowds that converged on the station in support and was struck by the homogeneity of people's clothing back then. Despite the grainy black and white footage, there was a marked sense of sameness, of austerity and dignity in the way people dressed in the 1940s, even amongst the poor and middle class, men in suits and ties; women with their little purses, prim petite hats, low heeled shoes. Since then so much has changed. The elegant austerity and dignity of the past seems lost.

At the station kiosk, he buys a copy of La Repubblica, then boards the 8:15 train to Verona and takes his seat. He notes briefly the newspaper headlines, then removes Steyn's file from his case. He skims the employees' procedural, how the firm expects him to conduct his investigation. Spinelli made it clear that he is to report back each day, regardless of what he has or hasn't discovered.

Reading through the policy, he comes to the section marked D. Article 33 – the binding clause: in case of suicide the claim is rendered null and void. Only now does he fully understand the task expected of him. He reads through Steyn's list of assets, notably the property itself. Situated on the outskirts of the town, along the river, Roncogno had been a train station, albeit a small one, that was shut down when the Malé station was built. The building was left to ruin, becoming a playhouse for children who never referred to it as Roncogno, but simply as the stationhouse. The file confirms that Steyn bought the house in 2016. It didn't seem right then. It still doesn't.

To his mind, Steyn Gela hasn't aged. He remains the same man he met ten years ago. A man in his late twenties. Short cropped hair, a boyish face, with open, expressive eyes, the colour of which he was never sure, brown or green. A likeable man. Anyone could see that. Did he remain likeable? Had time been good to him? If he were alive, he would be almost forty. A man in his prime, with still half a life ahead of him.

He met Steyn while working as a farmhand, picking apples in the autumn for Rachele's grandfather, who the locals call Il Vecchio. The old man recruited the same group of workers year after year, including two taciturn brothers from Romania and a mother and her daughter from Albania, so alike that they might have been sisters. He remembers how he'd first heard about the man from South Africa from the other pickers, how he'd been curious to meet him. And how surprised he was on being introduced to a white man and thinking there'd been a mistake. White. Not black. Not an African, then?

Steyn Gela proved to be different in other ways too; he appeared less aloof than the other farmhands, and even though his Italian was poor he made an effort to learn, carrying a small dictionary in the pocket of his yellow raincoat.

Late one afternoon, after the day's work, passing by the low stone wall across from the barn, Marcello overheard Rachele chatting to Steyn. He hid, watched and listened as Steyn spoke, paging through his dictionary, communicating with gestures, hands raised in frustration. He noticed the man's guarded glances towards Rachele, looks that were not signs of shyness, but rather a means of disguising some guilt. Right then he disliked him *a pelle* – a deep mistrust beneath the skin.

At twelve o'clock, Marcello steps off the train in Malé. The church bell rings out. But there is nobody to hear it. Unlike in Milano, there are no taxis. He walks through the deserted town under the midday sun, sweat pooling beneath his shirt. *Porco cane*. Why did he decide to wear his suit? Past the schoolyard, the path leading into the woods is as he remembers it: lush ferns at the edges, tucked amongst rows of firs beneath canopies of beech, offering a reprieve from the sun, but not the heat, in which whizzing insects thrive, press in, drown pasted in the wet sheen on his skin.

The river is heard before it is seen. Its waters widest before the bend. Then the path opens into a clearing and he is there. Roncogno. Between the river and the stationhouse, the railway track runs across the valley like a stitched wound, lined on both sides with long grass and dandelions. The exterior large stone bricks are all that is recognisable of the old building, newly roofed with beech wood beams and red concrete tiles. Steyn had been good with his hands. A gravel-stone driveway runs behind the house to a single garage door. He tries the handle. Locked.

He returns to the front of the house and stands gazing up at the main window. He sighs, then slowly approaches the raised porch. He recognises the bench; although sandpapered and treated with varnish, he's able to make out the lines burnt into the wood. He drops his luggage, then slowly sits, presses his hand over the dark grooves in the smooth surface. Seeing the faint scar on the base of his right thumb, he brings his hand away.

Beside the front door, fixed to the wall, a wooden box, like a birdhouse, holds Steyn's mail. He goes through it: bills, ads, a renewed subscription card for *l'Espresso*. Nothing important. He chides himself for having half-hoped to find the answer delivered to him even before entering the house. He slips the single brass key from the envelope, unlocks the door.

The house is well-lit by a large bay window. A marble tiled entrance meets flush with dark wooden floors throughout the open plan lounge extending towards the kitchen; the large room is scantly furnished with a rug, a chesterfield armchair and sofa, a coffee table. Above a stone fireplace hangs a landscape painting of a rocky hilltop, a rush of cloud sweeping towards it in the background. On the brick wall opposite, black and white photographs of different sizes in coarse wooden frames hang haphazardly. At a closer look, the pictures appear to be rough prints, trials of varying quality, the subjects random: landscapes, still-life, people in the

street. He dumps the mail on the coffee table and takes off his jacket, draping it over the back of the armchair.

The kitchen too has been redone, fitted with modern gas hobs and a wood burning stove. In the centre stands a rectangular island of stone with an oak surface and wine shelves built in beneath, walled with cool cement, stacked with local red wines: cavit merlot, marzemine, pinot noir, teroldego; and unopened bottles of grappa, artisan specialities with cuttings of pine and whole chestnuts floating inside the bottles like specimen jars in medical labs. The cupboards are sparsely stocked with boxes of Barilla pasta, canned tomato puree, jars of preserves, black olives. In the corner of the room, an iron staircase spirals down to the cantina. The door is locked. Perhaps it is a mere oversight that Spinelli has given him a single key that doesn't unlock all doors, but he is pleased. The idea of a skeleton key brings to mind hidden treasure, but also the bones of the dead.

Upstairs, the house is closer to how he remembers it. At the end of a narrow hall are two doors. With a deep breath, he turns to the door on his left and reaches for the handle. It opens. He is met by a cold darkness and a scent at once familiar yet strange. He tries the light switch, but it doesn't work. The electricity must be off. Entering the room, he bumps into a chair, then stumbles over to the window. He places his hand on the shutters, warm from the sun outside, then opens them. The sun shines in. At a glance the room, neat and plain, resembles a guest room: a double bed, a side-table with a lamp, a chest-of-drawers. On the bedside table lies a small book wrapped in brown paper. He picks it up, leaving in its place a perfect frame of dust. With his sleeve, he brushes the dust from the book and turns to the title page. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus. The author's name means little to him, but from the title he guesses that it's a retelling of one of the Greek or Roman myths (he could never tell the difference). He sits on the bed, the mattress firm, and flips

through the book. Torn strips of yellow paper mark pages on which paragraphs have been underlined with pencil. The writing is small, the language antiquated ornate, stern, reminding him of the Bible which he hasn't read since his school days. He lowers the book. Closes his eyes. That strange scent, clear to him now. Yet, after all this time, it can't be possible: the lingering stink of fire smoke, the stench of damp ash. He places his hand between the pages, presses down, spreading his fingers; on his thumb, the scar faded to no more than a white sickle moon. He edges forward, the bed creaking under his weight.

He'd told himself never to return.

That day, he'd come to the turnstile, just like he had the day before. But she wasn't there. So, he waited. When he heard the bell in the distance, he knew she wouldn't be coming. He arrived at the schoolyard out of breath. Don Gino at the gates, as was his custom, to gather the late flock, to admonish them with stern words.

Zamboni, you're late.

I overslept, he said, looking back.

Don Gino, with his sharp, pinched nose, adjusted his glasses.

How are things at home?

Fine, he said, placing his hand on his chest, quietening his heart.

And your mother?

She too.

Keeping busy?

Not as much as before.

I see, he said, looking down the road. You know being late means an hour of detention?

It's only the second day.

All the more reason why you should not be excused.

Marcello held his hands behind his back, dragged his shoe across the dirt.

Go on to class, said the headmaster.

At the classroom door, he waited, listening; dead quiet. Then he knocked and entered. The other children looked up from their work. Filippo Bonetti in the front desk sat leering, his pencil sharpened to an exaggerated point, held in his fist, like a knife. Maestra Angela was at the back of the room, arms crossed; a familiar stance, as she watched over them.

Good of you to join us, she said.

She sauntered to the front, setting off a chain reaction of boys' heads, lifting like a mob of meerkats. She sat at her desk and looked him over with a concerned expression.

Come closer, she said, bringing out her black book from her desk drawer. She removed a pink slip and picked up her pen.

Reason for being late? she asked.

Just am.

That's not a reason.

Maybe he was getting his mother up, said Filippo under his breath.

The class laughed.

Maestra Angela slammed her desk with a violent clang of her thick silver ring.

That's enough, she said. You all have work to do.

The classroom hushed, and she turned again towards Marcello.

Well?

He shrugged, gazing aside to the blackboard, to the equations written in Maestra Angela's precise hand. She tapped the backend of her pen on the desk and then completed the detention slip without further questions.

Here, she said. Take this with you after school to the library.

Yes, Maestra.

Now, sit down. You'll have to work fast to catch up.

He sat at his desk in the back and took out his exercise book. Then, as Maestra Angela picked up her chalk, scratching figures on the board, Filippo slipped a note to the boy behind him. The note was passed back in turn, quickly from desk to desk, under and over, until it was given to Marcello, the marked recipient. He opened the note, a torn off scrap, pressed it flat against the page of his book.

Hear about the fire?
Shame you didn't burn down with it.

Marcello?

He looked up, feeling flushed, the rest of the class staring back at him.

Maestra?

Are you working?

Yes, Maestra.

Tell us then.

Tell you?

The value of Y?

He looked down at his desk, at the note, at the words, pencilled darkly.

He stayed behind, hiding in the library, grateful for detention. Afterwards, he only left the school grounds when he was sure the brothers had gone. He chose a different route home, Rachele's way, a path that led to the stationhouse.

It was not as Filippo said. It had not burned down, but there'd been a fire – the outer wall around the second-floor window framed by black soot. He entered as he had the night before, saw the dry dead leaves in the hall swirling on the marble floor, then up the stairs, there being light enough this time.

Just outside the room, the door, burned black in patches, lay axed and cast to one side. Inside the reek of the dead fire smothered the room, cold, black and charred. He stepped slowly, as if across a burial ground. The remains lay in the corner. Frayed shreds of material, the bristling felt fibres of the torched green uniform, the white skirt now rippled, fire-brushed lightly brown, and, here and there, scorched brass and melted plastic, all bedded with fine ash, starkly white coal-like bits, and branches too tender to burn.

He got to his knees to search for the slippers, poking about with a stick, sorting through the wet black muck of ash and synthetic threads, twisted and beaded. But there was no retrieving them. Burned up to their very soles.

When he came outside, Franco Bonetti was there. Alone on the bench.

Hey, don't run away.

I got to get home.

Really?

My mother, she…

She what?

He looked down, saw he was still holding the half-burnt stick, then flung it aside.

I want to show you something, said Franco.

Marcello glanced up at the broken, burnt-out window.

Franco also looked up.

Good thing the whole place didn't catch. You would have been *in guai*.

Me? But I didn't…

But what if somebody said you did?

You wouldn't.

Maybe, he said. Then he took something out of his pocket.

You see this? It's a magnifying glass, a good one too.

Marcello came closer.

See, real glass and steel. Belonged to my grandfather. My father will whip me if he finds out, he said, polishing the rim with his thumb. Ever used one before?

Marcello shook his head.

Sit down, I'll show you.

Marcello sat, gripping the edge of the bench.

Franco shifted along, leaving a space between them.

That's how we did these, he said, tracing his finger along the dark lines: swear words, secret symbols, a naked woman with oversized breasts, the brothers' initials.

It takes time, and the sun, he said, looking up at the sky, squinting. Sun like today. Here, you try.

I should go.

Aspetta, he said, reaching for Marcello's wrist, pressing the magnifying glass into his hand. Go on, try.

Marcello felt the weight of the steel. Real, not a toy. He gripped the handle, held it upright then tilted and turned it, until it caught the sunlight.

That's it, said Franco. Now let's see if you can write something.

Like what?

Che ne so? How 'bout your name? Here, he said, pointing to an unmarked spot. Marcello repositioned the magnifying glass till the sunlight reflected through it, onto the wood. And it began to burn.

It's working, Marcello said. I'm doing it.

Yes, you are, Franco said, moving closer, as if to get a better look; but then he grabbed Marcello's free hand by the wrist, held it in a fierce grip.

What are you doing? That hurts.

Don't stop, or it will, he said, applying more pressure.

Marcello feared dropping the magnifying glass.

That's it, carry on.

As the sun seared a tiny black mark in the wood, Franco, with a wry smile on his thin lips, took careful hold of the hand grasping the magnifying glass, then slowly, twisting at the wrist, he brought, Marcello's other hand, palm down, into the path of the scorching beam.

Marcello flinched. Franco, *smetterla*, stop.

Why did you run off last night?

He struggled, but he wasn't strong enough.

Franco, please. It wasn't my fault.

Whose then?

Il Vecchio was there.

You're lying.

Marcello felt the burn like a bee's sting.

He would've killed me.

You could have run back to us. Didn't you think of that?

I don't know. Franco, please.

Instead we had to come looking for you. Got home late. You know what my father did?

Marcello flexed his hand, but it only got worse. He fixed his eyes on the bench, on the words, *cazzo, figlio di puttana, vaffanculo.*

Got the belt, that's what.

Hot tears ran down Marcello's face. He couldn't help it. Nor could he hide them.

Franco, sorry. *Per favore.*

Did your father ever punish you?

The sun pierced his skin, Marcello screamed.

Franco eased his grip, snatched back the magnifying glass. Marcello wrenched away and fell to the ground; he brought his hand to his mouth, licked his wound.

That's how it works, Franco said, his smile gone. Standing he slipped the magnifying glass into his pocket and looked down at the bench. You didn't make much of a mark.

Marcello got to his feet and, stepping back, said nothing, his eyes on the inflamed sore.

Better go, said Franco. Don't want to be late again. He turned away, shaking his head. Pity about those slippers, he said.

Then he rounded the building, towards the river, and was gone.

Marcello shuts the book. Shaking his head, he faces the window, then forces himself to stare into the direct sunlight. When he can bear it no more, he looks away. He places the book back on the bedside table, back in its bed of dust; then he closes the

shutters and, shutting the door behind him, leaves the room, leaves it just as he found it.

With no real memory of it, the room opposite seems brighter; the sunshine flooding through the wide French window is less harsh. Beside an armchair stands a pile of books, pieces of paper jutting out from each of them; shelves of more books line the walls. In front of the window sits a writing desk and chair, wooden pieces made in Sudtirolo, strong and beautiful. The chair is old, straight backed, probably torture to sit in. The desk conceals a drawer, so seamlessly crafted that were it not for the small keyhole he wouldn't have noticed it. He tries to open it, but it too is locked.

He returns downstairs to the kitchen where he sorts through the jars and canned food. His acquired Milanese palate begs for more. He'll need to go to the store, but first he had better call Francesca. He reaches her on her mobile.

Have you seen her yet? she asks.

My mother? No, not yet.

You really should.

He changes the subject, asks what her plans are for the evening.

Nothing special. Drinks, probably around the Navigli, then dinner at Brera. I'll let you get back to work, she says. I don't want to keep you.

He tells her that he misses her, and then regrets it.

Go see her, she says, and hangs up.

He feels irritable. He doesn't like to be told what he should do. Especially by Francesca, who never has anything bad to say about her own family, a family who have perfected the rituals of being family, because their family is the measurement of reason by which all important matters are decided, and so wanting to or not wanting to are not even questions to be considered. You do things for and with your family,

simply because they are family. He has learnt not to argue on the subject. His indifference to his family confuses her. But he knows that she is right. He must see her, his only family; his mother.

FOUR

With a knapsack from an upstairs closet, he heads back into town to buy groceries, and to see his mother, to get it over with, to have something to tell Francesca. The path uphill is difficult in the heat, bees zigzagging with the urgency that possesses them in the early summer. He trips on the straying root of a tree, like a stuck-out leg. He longs for the level, concrete pavements of Milano. To think that this same path had once been travelled with a lightness of heart, before the past became strung through with regret, the present overexposed with need, the future doused with dread, back when time was seamless.

She had often walked ahead of him, his neighbour, the girl who lived with her grandfather in the house across the field, the girl a year older, who went to his school, the girl others left alone. But that day, the first day of school, meeting at the turnstile on the edge of the woods, he and Rachele walked side by side, his memories of the summer on the farm still vivid, more so because of the new beginning which was exciting yet strange because they had both lived first-day-mornings before, but never together. The air was chilly, a sign that summer was being dismantled, and they walked quickly, not speaking much. Beneath her red coat she wore his shirt, the one she liked, the one he'd given her on her name day, and he reached for the collar, taking hold of the corner to straighten it, but recognising the gesture, something his

father used to do before Sunday mass, he caught himself and lowered his hand. Still, he liked that she wore it, but wasn't quite sure what it meant, or if it meant anything.

But as they neared the school, and others started to appear along the road, he felt it did mean something. And when they arrived at the gate, and he saw the Bonettis gathered under the oak tree, and his insides tightened, pulling away from the rest of him, he knew exactly what it meant.

As he walked with Rachele past the tree, Franco looked in their direction, whistled through his teeth. He moved away from her; the distance was slight, but he could tell she noticed. She held her books against her chest and ran up to the school building. He shoved his hands into his pockets and headed to the tree.

In town, stepping awkwardly on the cobbled stones, he is aware of people watching him. He wishes that he'd been sensible and changed out of his suit. He thinks he is recognised by some and regarded with suspicion by others to whom he is a stranger. On a bench outside the grocery store an old man sits clutching a knobbly walking stick; his face is tanned and leathery with bristle-like white hairs on his large-boned chin. He looks up, shading his eyes from the afternoon sun with his hand, a glint of contempt in his eyes, then looks away again, in the direction of a woman in a blue dress hurrying towards the store. He seems familiar; something in his manner, robust and disciplined, like many of the men folk of the town, mostly farmers and tradesmen. But also, there is something sinister; the hairs on Marcello's arms stand on end. Is it him? Il Vecchio. No, not likely. No, he's not wearing glasses. Neither would he be caught dead idling outside on a bench, not in town, not anywhere, not when there's work to be done.

Inside the small store, a teenage girl with dark curly hair kneels on the floor unpacking tins from a box onto the shelves. She looks up at him, then away, picking

up another tin. He finds what he needs: ground coffee, ciabatta bread, sun-dried tomatoes, smoked salmon, pecorino. He doubts his mother's diet has improved, living on pasta *in bianco* and rice, so he adds to his basket some olive-bread, asiago cheese, matured lucanica, things she used to like. He places the goods on the counter. The girl leaves the tins and comes to attend him at the register. She smiles as she rings up his groceries. Despite her spotty skin, she is pretty. It is girls like her that sadden him most here, the beautiful girls who would turn heads in the big city, who could make a life for themselves in Milano or Roma. But the sad truth is that they never leave Malé. This town is all they know, all they are expected to know. The girl brushes aside a lock of hair and asks if he'd like a plastic bag. It costs extra. He shows her the knapsack and says that he will manage.

He is about to leave the store when he sees the woman in the blue dress watching him. She smiles, approaching him, and it is then that he recognises her: middle aged; brunette, hair cut short; intense, intelligent eyes. Maestra Eleanora, his English tutor. Her basket looks heavy, filled with empty glass jars, bags of sugar, and a large bottle of Bailoni – the key ingredients for those who dabble in grappa concoctions *fatte in casa*. It doesn't surprise him. As *una staniera*, her ways had always been a little controversial.

Marcello? she says, don't you look smart in your suit. All grown up.

He looks down; without necktie or jacket, he feels incomplete.

I just arrived, he says, from Milano.

Visiting your mother? I saw her earlier this week. She didn't mention it.

She doesn't know. I came on short notice. It's work.

I see, she says, looking at her basket, quizzically as if she'd forgotten something. Life insurance, isn't it?

He nods, and it occurs to him that she and Steyn were related somehow. Distant cousins, at least that's what people said.

I heard the sad news, he ventures.

You mean about Steyn?

Yes, *mi dispiace tanto*. I'm very sorry.

Thank you, she says, setting her basket down. Not many people around here seem to remember we were family.

You know how it is. People forget.

When it's convenient, she says, raising the back of her hand to her cheek. Anyway, why don't you come by the house sometime? You remember where it is, don't you? Just look for the sunflowers in the garden. I'd better finish here. She picks up her basket. Good to see you again.

He turns to leave. The girl remains at the counter, staring dreamily past the pile of cans in the aisle.

He trudges up the path to the old village. From the distant hills, a couple approach, a man and a woman, tourists, Dutch perhaps, judging by their attire: misshapen baseball caps and bright orange neck scarves. As they come closer, he greets them with a quiet *buon giorno*, and the couple respond as they pass by, almost elatedly, using the Italian phrases they have probably rehearsed. With the far-stretching green hills that meet the mountain range in the north, Malé is picturesque to the tourists arriving each year from Germany and the Netherlands. But his feelings for the natural beauty of his birthplace are marred by his memories, by his soured relations with almost everybody here.

The first property in the old village belongs to the Bonetti family. In the large front yard, a black horse grazes beneath a tall silver birch tree. From the

outside, the old two-storey house appears neglected; but it is a ruse. Owning more than half the town and most of the surrounding farmlands, the Bonettis have money. Since the untimely death of her husband from a weak heart, the widow Signora Isabella, the family matriarch, has worn old, black frocks to town, while in truth she hides a pot of gold. Superstitious and hard-fisted, the widow often keeps to herself in the big house. As children they called her *la strega*, of course, never in earshot of her three sons. After the death of her youngest she was given to bouts of hysteria and seemed to lose it altogether. There is movement behind the lace curtains in the upstairs window. Marcello is loath to meet either of the brothers and picks up his pace.

Beyond the rise of the hill, lies the farmland belonging to Il Vecchio. From across the field he can see the old farmhouse, seemingly unchanged. And across from it, the barn. The barn filled with shoes. Old shoes mostly. Shoes worn until they no longer served the purpose of shoes; nailed to the dark streaked wood, nailed to the planked walls, to the solid beams that held up the hayloft, some dangling like sleeping bats, high up in the rafters, where shards of sunlight breaks in from the wooden slates above. Brown and black and white, leather shoes, some with wooden heels and some with exposed spiked teeth, where the sole has torn away.

He was once fascinated yet terrified by the spectacle of the shoes, by the visions of ghosts. Did the shoes carry the spectral feet of the people who'd worn them? When he asked Rachele about them, she said that it was her grandfather's thing. It was the war that did it to him; he had no shoes then. Even food was hard to come by. He said they'd eaten cats if they found them, and they weren't the only ones. He got his first pair of boots as a soldier. After that he never threw shoes away, neither his nor his family's, so he kept them all in the barn. There had to be hundreds. She said he killed the mice he found nesting inside the shoes but left the

nests of birds and loved the owls. He said owls were good omens; he believed in things like that. And he had ideas about people, too. He'd been heard to say that anybody who went about without shoes couldn't be good. There'd even been talk of the devil.

Rachele once pointed out her favourite pairs and told him to whom in her family the shoes had belonged. If he shuts his eyes, he can still see the grassy tufts poking out from the work shoes where a swallow has nested; her father's Alpini boots bolted at the ankle into the barn door.

He flinches, imagining the pain, and looks away.

His mother's house lies on the far east side, where Il Vecchio's property ends. Their house once served as the caretaker's lodgings, but during the war it had been leased out to his own grandfather who later bought it. It now belongs to his mother. His first glimpse of the house surprises him. Growing up, after his father left, the small yard was abandoned to long grass and weeds. Opening the gate, he now finds a well-kept garden: the grass neatly trimmed, rose bushes beneath the front window, even a vegetable patch with lettuce, pomodorini, zucchini.

He knocks on the door. He waits, listening for her, but hears nothing. It's only three o'clock. Where could she be? Perhaps he should have called first, let her know he was coming. He knows he has not done so because he hopes to find her at the bottle, to have a reason to leave.

He knocks again, firmly, imagining her passed out, and then he bangs, harder. He stops when his hand hurts. A moment of silence and then footsteps approach from behind the door. The unlatching of chains. Why does she lock it? There are no thieves; and she owns nothing worth stealing. The door opens, slightly. His mother peers out through the crack.

Marcello? she says, sounding unsure of herself.

Hello mother.

What are you doing here?

I'm here for a few days. Short notice. For work, he’s quick to add. He glances back at the garden, thinks to mention it, but doesn’t. Aren't you going to invite me in?

She shakes her head, as if a part of her refuses, but then she takes a grip on the door handle and opens up, shielding her eyes from the sun stretching into the dark hallway. He steps inside. An empty vase sits beneath the mirror, veiled under draped cotton foulards.

Where were you? he asks.

What do you mean? she says. I've been here. She brushes past him and goes down the hall towards the kitchen.

He follows her. That's not what I meant. I was standing at the door for some time. Didn’t you hear me knocking?

I’m busy.

Entering the kitchen behind her, he sees that she is in truth busy. The place is a mess. A bag of flour, a bowl of sugar, butter, cracked eggshells litter the counter. The heated oven hums.

What's all this?

What does it look like? I'm baking biscuits.

What for?

They’re for my club meeting Sunday.

Since when do you belong to a club?

It’s a sort of a reading group, she says quietly. I'd offer you some, but they’re not ready yet. Do you want coffee?

Mother, it’s Tuesday. He looks around for a bottle.

What?

You said your club meets on Sunday, but it's only Tuesday.

I'm practising, she says fussed, wringing her hands under the tap. It's been a while since… Anyway, do you want coffee or not?

I can't stay long, he says, slipping the knapsack from his shoulder and sitting at the small kitchen table.

She retrieves the medium sized moka pot from the cabinet above the sink and half fills it with water, gazing back at him, observing, he guesses, his suit, down to his now scuffed shoes.

How is Milano? she says.

The usual, busy.

She nods, takes coffee from the tin and heaps spoons of it into the moka. Her hands steady. As a kid, he watched her in the kitchen as she held the knife over the onions, wiping her eyes with the back of her shaky hand. A bottle of cooking wine beside her. He slides a bowl of copper coins on the table towards him.

She tightens the pot and sets it on the gas stove. How is she?

She has a name, he says, sorting through the bowl of coins, mostly old lira.

Of course, she has a name, but if I can't put a face to the name then you can't blame me for not remembering it, can you?

Francesca, he says. And you will meet her. It's just that she is busy too. She has her own business.

Yes, everyone is busy. Even me.

She returns to the cluttered counter, pours flour into a measuring jug, sieves it into a mixing bowl. They remain in silence as he lines a row of coins out in front of him. The moka begins to purr.

Would you mind? she says.

He gets up and switches off the flame, then takes down two cups from the shelf and pours the coffee.

Sugar? he asks.

She looks at him, frowning. I've never taken sugar.

That's right. I'll leave it here. He takes his coffee and sits back down at the table.

So, what's this about work? she asks.

It's complicated.

And your poor mother doesn't understand complicated. Where are you staying? You still have a room upstairs.

He scoops the coins into his hand and drops them back into the bowl. Do you remember Steyn Gela?

With her back turned to him, she slowly reaches for some eggs and cracks one into the bowl.

Mother? Do you remember him?

She lowers her hands to her apron and fetches a tissue. She blows her nose. Sorry, she says. It's my allergies. Steyn Gela, yes, what about him?

He was insured by my company. I'm staying at his place. It's more convenient. For work, I mean.

I see, she says. She sips her coffee.

He waits for her to say more, but she seems far away. He finishes his coffee and rises from the table.

I should get going.

Will you come again? she asks.

I'll try.

Maybe I'll save you a biscuit, she says, her eyes looking at the mixture in the bowl.

I'll let myself out.

On leaving, opening the gate, he glances back at the garden. Flourishing. Cared for. Then, looking up at the house, he slams the gate and strides away.

He returns home via a different route, entering the woods and bypassing the town completely. The road, he knows, will take him longer. He picks up a branch from the ground and rips off the leaves.

Baking biscuits, he says to himself, the *s* hissing through his teeth. *Biscotti.* He swings the stick in front of him like a cane, whacking dandelions from their stems.

FIVE

Back at Roncogno, opening the knapsack he realises he still has the groceries for his mother. He takes it all out and stuffs it in the fridge, only to discover that it isn't working. He has yet to turn on the power. He slams the door, which shuts with a short, muted sound, like a kiss blown from fat pouted lips. He slumps against the fridge, hands linked behind his head, eyes closed. Why has seeing his mother brought on such a foul mood? *Madre mio*, he whispers.

When he opens his eyes, he finds himself looking at the electricity panels. He finds the mains switch and flips on the power. The air buzzes. The fridge hums. To the left of the mains board, he discovers a panel of keys, each of them labelled with a coloured plastic keyring. None of the keys are particularly old, none, he thinks, belong to the desk drawer upstairs. But he finds the key to the cantina and goes down the spiral staircase.

On opening the door, he is greeted with a musty smell. He turns on the lights and moves down a narrow corridor lined on either side with shelves from floor to ceiling, packed with books. At a glance all the titles appear to be in Italian. As an archivist, he is impressed by the order, arranged not only alphabetically, but also according to publisher. Buzzati, Calvino, Moravia, Svevo; Adelphi, Einaudi, Mondadori, Sellerio. He is ashamed at how many of these books he has never read. And probably never will.

The corridor leads to another door that opens into the garage. Switching on the light, he finds Steyn's car, an old Fiat Panda. He remembers Steyn driving around town; the window wound down, no matter the season; the noise of the engine. The vehicle seems to have an odd tilt to it. Walking around to the front of the car, he sees that the right tyre is flat. He peers in at the driver's side, then tries the door, which opens. He gets in, puts his hands on the steering wheel. It's been a while since he has driven, and he feels like a kid pretending to drive. He glances at himself in the rear-view mirror; in the backseat is an old blanket neatly folded on top of a large box. He turns, leaning awkwardly into the back, and shifts the blanket aside. He finds more books. Pirandello, Verga, Leopardi, Morante, Levi, a number of collections by Ungaretti. Books he was meant to read in high school. Books that bored him, books he never finished. He buries them again beneath the blanket.

He gets out of the car and looks around. At the back of the room is a well-kept workbench with tools fixed to the wall. There is also a portable toolbox. In a corner stands a wheelbarrow, some gardening implements, an old bicycle. He inspects the garage door, finding it locked from the inside. Perhaps there is no key after all.

He carries the toolbox up to Steyn's study. Using a large screwdriver, he forces the drawer open, damaging the lock. He glances around the room, then shakes his head, dropping the screwdriver into the toolbox.

Inside the drawer is a Moleskin journal. The pages of the first quarter are filled with diary entries, dated from the 6th June 2003. Then entries become less frequent and stop. The rest of the journal resembles an architect's notebook, sketches, building plans, cross-sections of the house, jottings of calculated measurements, lists of materials. He is unfamiliar with Steyn's handwriting, which

appears oddly inconsistent, as if written by two people, but assumes that it is his. He returns to the cover page, where he finds a printed caption:

In case of loss, please return to: Steyn Gela

This could be something. He turns the pages, word after word, line after line of dark ink blur before his eyes: his brain refusing to decipher what wasn't intended to be read. At least not by him.

He calls up Spinelli.

Marcello, what do you have for us?

It might be nothing, he says, but I've found a journal.

Bravo. Go on, what's in it?

That's just it. I don't feel that I should be reading it. It's in English, and private, the handwriting is rather awkward.

Is it legible?

It is, but… Perhaps I should send it to the office for one of our graphologists to decipher.

That's not necessary. Giacometti has complete faith in you. I shall tell him the good news.

But I don't have the expertise.

According to your résumé you do.

I don't follow.

Your high school diploma awarded by the liceo-linguistico – top of your class in English, weren't you? Rather impressive. *Buon lavoro*, he says and hangs up.

Marcello glances at the closed journal on the desk. Drums his fingers on the hard leather cover. *Ma che buon lavoro*, he mutters.

In the bathroom, he quickly changes from his suit into another set of clothes, a pair of chinos and short sleeved shirt. The heat is stifling, and he wishes

he'd packed shorts and a T-shirt. He returns to the study with his attaché case and takes out Steyn's file. He rereads the policy, pausing once again at section D. The binding clause. Article 33. Suicide. Null and void. He sets the folder aside, then opens the journal. On the first page, first entry, he begins to read.

3 giugno, 2003

From Africa to Europe via O.R. Tambo International. I arrived in Italy. Milano, Malpensa – eerily quiet and ironically Third World, dirty and run-down. Outside, early summer, blue skies, belting sun, and I'm wearing the corduroy jacket that wouldn't fit in my backpack. I caught a slow bus to Stazione Centrale, a great architectural beast: the dark iron domed cage crashing into white ornate arched ceilings; the marble columns thick, cool to the touch. Then I boarded the train for the two-hour journey to Verona. Began reading Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, old red hardcover, for a mood of old European life. But unlike Prince Myshkin I found no fortunate conversation in the hot carriage. No little dogs were thrown from train windows, which were bolted shut. I ended up falling asleep, one hand on my luggage. In Verona, I gave the home of the lovers a mere thought having another train to catch – a long trek from Verona to Trento along the Brennero pass, then another train, the Trento-Malé-Mezzana line. And here I am – Malé, a town deep in the Val di Sole. Naturally I should find her living here. The girl from the train. In Rovereto, one station away from Trento, a girl got on, '*Posso*?' she said – 'may I?' – but, not understanding at the time, I simply stared at her, wide eyed, dumb. A non-response. All the same, she took the seat next to me. I wished to make amends (how to speak a kind word while knowing so few?) so I took from my book the old sepia photograph of the young Sudanese girl and wrote on the back of it the only Italian words I knew that made any sense – *Ciao bella, non capisco* – then gave it to her. A strange gift perhaps, but she was so *bella*. She smiled, took the picture, glossed it lightly with her thumb, then she watched me, awkward and hot in corduroy, as I took up my backpack and left the train. She followed, along with everybody else. Malé – end of the line. I lost sight of her on the crowded platform, but then saw her again, ahead of me, glancing back with an expression of curiosity, a slight smile. Amends. *Che bella.*

5 giugno,

First Italian full moon. Confused not to recognise the stars. No Southern Cross. No Centaurus. Lost in a northern sky without my points of orientation. But the

moon, la luna, I can count on her. Not yet accustomed to my new life and surroundings. Living for now on Via Foreste with my father's cousin and her husband, who provide me with a room and meals. Eleanora, a teacher, and Italo, a professor of history and economics at the university of Trento. Both speak English, so to practise my Italian I venture out, try to speak with people, strangers met in passing, listening all I can. I must learn. The hours pass slowly. I read and think and dream constantly. That will change once I find work. For now, my days seem unreal, so unlike anything I have known, a story book scene, surrounded by mountains and countryside bordering with Switzerland and Austria. In every direction, farmlands, orchards, cherry trees, vineyards, stray vegetable patches and even, in the garden of a neighbouring house, an overladen kiwi tree. Alongside the town runs a river, whose waters I hear at night. It's wide and calm in some stretches, and I had my first swim this afternoon, stepping quickly, tender-footed across the sun hot pebbled bank and waded my way into the cool water. Swimming further out, finding the water warmer in some parts than in others, as if the sun itself had taken a dip here and there, and with my eyes on the opposite bank, I decided to swim the length of it. Only just made it to the other side, then lay in the sun half-dead, listening to the bathers around me, Italian mostly, but also recognised some Dutch, so similar to Afrikaans. And it's here, in these surroundings, amongst these people, that I search for her. The girl from the train.

17 giugno,

Finally! Word of my presence in the town has spread quickly and with the help of my cousin I have found my own place. An old stable, or what locals call a cantina, converted into a small apartment with kitchenette, bathroom, and bedroom. The ceilings are low and the walls thick, so when I close the shutters the darkness is so total it's as if I'm deep in a cave. Antonietta the owner lives in the terraced house above. She is a widow who lost her son in an accident when he was about my age. She has a cat named Alú who, escaping the heat, ventures down to the shade of my windowsill. Antonietta is aware that I have yet

to find paid work, but until I do, we've agreed that I do odd jobs for her, like gardening and general upkeep. As it is on the outskirts of town, I feel that she just likes having someone nearby, other than Alú.

2 luglio,

This morning I came outside to fierce sunshine and the quiet humming of Antonietta above, attending her garden of ceramic pots, flowers and herbs. She greeted me with a wave of her yellow latex gloves and asked me up for a second. She has no patience for small talk and asked me directly if I could write well in English. When I said that I could, her face became serious. She removed her gloves and told me about an old friend of hers living in London to whom she wanted to send a letter. She said her friend doesn't speak Italian. She met him a few years ago having gone to England to work as an au pair after the death of her son and husband. She did not go into details about her relationship with this man, but I imagined they'd been lovers. She said her written English is poor now, and she's asked me if I've the time to help her. She would tell me what to say and I would simply write the words for her. She said that 'in cambio' she'd invite me for lunch. I told her that I'd been living rent free for days without doing a stitch of work and that 'in cambio' it would be a pleasure to write for her. And so, I've become an amanuensis.

11 luglio

Since my arrival I've heard talk of a rivalry existing between the folk of Malé and those in the town of Bolentina across the valley. This afternoon while out walking, I heard the church bell chime on the hour and no sooner had it fallen silent, than the bell in the distant town begin to ring. An old woman sat bent, picking vegetables from her orto, and I asked her why the clocks were out of sync and she replied with a shake of a zucchini that many differences exist between *'noi e loro'*. Although it was almost dinner time, I decided to go see the town for myself. I asked *alla vecchietta* for directions, and with a scowl she pointed a bony finger towards the path up to the castle ruins where the road divides. I walked up the cobbled road and came to the ruins, nothing more than

a few toppling walls of stone, and proceeded left up a narrow path. The further I went the more entangled it became with vines and overgrown brush. I pressed on, slightly anxious about getting lost as it seemed to get late quickly with the reddened glow of the sun shining among the dark trunks of the increasingly close-knit trees ahead. I came to a shallow stream with larger trees, their branches and thick trunks deformed and entwined, embedded within larger rocks, lying half submerged at the water's edge like petrified prehistoric lizards. With the sky darkening around me I decided to follow the stream down, hopefully to the main road. But not far along I saw the beginnings of a well-trod path across the stream. Crossing the water, leaping from one rock to another, I followed it, eventually arriving at a worn fence overgrown with vines, dotted with white flowers, surrounding what looked like an orchard. I opened the gate and there, in the dark, witnessed fireflies for the first time, their tiny lights flickering on and off, like miniature torches, their batteries failing. I walked amongst them and managed to cup one of the creatures inside my hands and peered in at it with childlike delight before letting it go. A dog started barking and just beyond the apple trees I saw a dim light coming from the window of a small shed. The dog, a crossbreed with a strand of Rottweiler, was chained to a long metal stake in the ground. As I approached, the dog barked and leapt towards me, only for it to be yanked backed by its short leash. An old man in thick framed spectacles came out to yell at the dog, which heeled immediately with a whimper. Seeing me there, the man asked, speaking in dialect – a somewhat butchered version of the Italian I find in books – chi sei? And I replied that I was lost, mi sono perso, pointing back in the direction I'd come from. He wore work pants, boots and a sweaty white undershirt, and looked at me cock-eyed, as though he'd seen an apparition, some imp appearing out of the darkness. Che forte il suo cane, I said, and we both looked at his dog, panting heavily, its tongue lolling to the side of its sloppy jowls. Then the old man raised a hand, and I followed him into the shed. Inside it smelt thick with stale pipe smoke. He gestured for me to sit at the table on which stood a half-empty bottle and an empty glass. He opened a

cabinet above a zinc basin and took down another small glass and set it before me. He sat heavily in his chair, uncorked the bottle and, with a steady hand, he poured our glasses full. Salute, he said, and we drank the grappa that scorched my throat. I was unable to say much, but this did not deter him from speaking. He refilled our glasses and we drank more as he continued to talk, gesturing wildly with his hands about the shed and pointing outside at the dog. After the third glass he became sluggish, as if his body weighed more than he could carry, his speech unravelling into a slur, and then he began to weep, lowering himself onto his arms. Soon he was asleep, and snoring. I corked the bottle and carried the glasses to the sink, then left. Outside, the dog lifted its head and watched me go. I walked back, through the apple trees, past the fireflies, to the path that led to the stream. And I made my way home. Best I find Bolentina another day.

A Life in Search of a Narrative:

The Construction of Narrative Identity in the Autobiographical Fiction of J.M. Coetzee

The unexamined life is not worth living.

– Socrates in Plato, *The Apology*

There is no doubt that fiction makes a better job of the truth.

– Doris Lessing

He alone is left to do the thinking. How will he keep them all in his head, all the books, all the people, all the stories? And if he does not remember them, who will?

– J.M. Coetzee, *Boyhood*

Introduction

I – Meeting Coetzee

My first encounter with J.M. Coetzee was in 1998, the year I began my undergraduate studies in English Literature at the University of Cape Town, where he lectured as a Professor of Literature. Although I had heard of Coetzee, the writer, the kinds of books he wrote were unknown to me. But that would soon change. In my first semester, for a series of lectures by André Brink, I was to read Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980).

By the late 80s, a period in which the once rigid totalitarian laws of apartheid had slowly begun to fall, the books of white South African authors were commonly found on the shelves of middle-class whites (I am tempted to say liberal-minded whites, but this was not necessarily the case – as those who possessed these books did not always share the opinions found in them). White writers such as Nadine Gordimer, Alan Paton, and André Brink, all took an ethical stance in their literature, speaking out against the apartheid government with novels such as *July's People* (Gordimer, 1981) *Cry, the Beloved Country* (Paton, 1948) and *A Dry White Season* (Brink, 1979). Consequently, these writers were frequently censored along with black writers, such as Ezekiel Mphahlele, Alex La Guma, Lewis Nkosi, who were banned outright. Although J.M. Coetzee was certainly among those writers writing in opposition to the National Party's policies of segregation, his novels were considered more obscure and allegorical in their approach – for which he was often criticised, both during and after the apartheid era.

As an academic, Coetzee had a reputation as a quiet, private, if not reticent individual. Encounters with him on campus were fleeting; with acute agility, he escaped the grasp of admiring, inquisitive students. In 2001, he retired from teaching and soon afterwards emigrated to Australia, a move which caused consternation in

some and anger in others. The public assumed his departure had something to do with his falling out with the ANC government. By then, I myself had ambivalent feelings towards Coetzee. Whilst I had become a great admirer of his fiction, I did not agree with his turning his back on the country, which was very much how it seemed, an opinion admittedly fuelled by the newspapers at the time.

Then in 2004, while living in Italy, I attended the Festivalletteratura in Mantua, where Coetzee was to read from his new novel, *Elizabeth Costello*. I took my seat in the beautiful Palazzo Ducale with my very same copy of the novel I had read as a student, *Waiting for the Barbarians*. It might have unnerved the audience to find Coetzee seemingly so detached from them. Far from a crowd pleaser, he seemed simply to do what was expected of him: to read, to answer questions, all of which he fulfilled with professional coolness; more like a secret agent than an expert on the human condition. At the end of the reading, the audience were invited to come up to the front, single file, where Coetzee would sign copies of his books. I waited my turn, thinking of ways to ingratiate myself with the man, my former teacher, a fellow South African, and an inspiration to me as a writer. Because of our shared nationality and shared vocation, I had naively assumed that there existed a kinship that deserved some kind of recognition. How wrong I was.

When my time came, I stood before him, greeted him, and said that I had been a student of his at UCT. I would like to say that he smiled, that I detected some warmth, some remote sign that he recognised me, for that is how I would like to remember it, and how I would like to tell the story. In truth, there was only an air of impatience, perhaps because of the horde queuing behind me, but certainly indicated by his pen poised, waiting. I asked him to address the dedication to my cousin. *To Helen*, he wrote, and beneath it, signed his name. The book was returned to me, and I moved on. Chastened, disappointed, but obstinately curious about him.

This last impression of Coetzee has remained with me until today. I have since continued to read and reread his fiction and non-fiction, from which I have pieced together an idea of who Coetzee is. Because for a man who says so little, a man who, on the whole, refuses interviews, a man who is private, there is so much in his work that appears personal, so much that seems to want to reveal who he is. It is out of this contradiction that I begin my study on, or rather, continue my search for, J.M. Coetzee.

II – Methodology

Given the author's notorious reserve, interviews with Coetzee are rare, however, those granted reveal an intellectual open to debate. The conversations between Coetzee and his long-standing friend, academic David Attwell, prove valuable in the understanding of Coetzee and his approach to his craft (*Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, 1992; *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face-to-face with Time,* 2015), as does *The Good Story: Exchanges on Truth, Fiction and Psychotherapy* (2015) in which Coetzee and psychotherapist Arabella Kurtz address a number of relevant themes pertaining to those psychoanalytic theories key to understanding the interconnected mechanisms of memory, identity, and autobiographical imagination in the creation of narrative.

However, the French philosopher in hermeneutics Paul Ricoeur's definition of *narrative identity* will serve as the prime instrument of investigation in my analysis of Coetzee's fictional autobiographies, and the terms outlined within that definition will be used throughout the course of my rereading and interpretation, specifically with regards to what Coetzee chooses to reveal about himself, and how he chooses to reveal it.

Ricoeur first touched on the problematics of narrative identity in his three-volume-oeuvre *Time and Narrative* (1983, 1984, 1985), a series which explores the distinction between and the likeness of historical narrative and fictional narrative. In his later work, *Oneself as Another* (1992), Ricoeur again poses the question of whether a structure may be applied to our experience that integrates historical narrative and fictional narrative:

> Do we not consider human lives to be more readable when they have been interpreted in terms of the stories that people tell about them? Are not these life stories in turn made more intelligible when the narrative models of plots – borrowed from history or from fiction (drama or novel) – are applied to them? (114)

In response, the idea of *narrative identity* emerged, whether it be that of a person or a community; a form of narrative that lies between the story told by history and the story told by fiction. In other words, a form of narrative that is neither entirely factual nor completely invented, but one that lies between the two. Thus, Ricoeur argues that understanding how one constructs narrative, how we tell stories, is intuitive, that the human lives we speak of (ours and others) are better understood when they have been interpreted and presented within a narrative structure acquired from the recognisable models adopted from history and fiction. According to Ricoeur:

> … self-understanding is an interpretation; interpretation of the self, which in turn, finds in the narrative, among other signs and symbols, a privileged form of mediation; the latter borrows from history as well as from fiction, making a life story a fictional history or, if one prefers, a historical fiction, interweaving the historiographic style of biographies with the novelistic style of imaginary autobiographies. (114)

Due to the extensive complexity of Ricoeur's study on selfhood, and the limitations of this essay, I shall limit myself here to an explanation of his use of the distinction between *ipse*-identity (selfhood) and *idem*-identity (sameness), and the two models of *permanence in time*: those being the notions of *character* and *keeping one's word.*

I shall then apply these terms to my analysis of Coetzee's work which I believe illustrates Ricoeur's theory of *narrative identity*. To distinguish Ricoeur's use of certain terms from general usage, I shall present them in italics throughout this essay.

Ricoeur sets out a series of conceptual criteria: primarily, physical sameness (*idem*) which is distinct from the notion of transcendental selfhood (*ipse*). He believes an individual's *narrative identity* is to be found in the overlapping of *ipse* and *idem*: when physical sameness and selfhood are recognised as unified, i.e., as belonging to a particular individual, unlike another. Furthermore, the notion of time is a significant factor in determining identity, specifically *permanence in time* as opposed to *changes in time*.

Ipse entails the more transcendental aspects of identity, by which we can understand the features of a person that go beyond or outlast the physical – namely how one is perceived in terms of narrative: the stories one tells of oneself, and the stories others tell of one. The idea of selfhood is connected to the existential questions of 'Who am I?', followed by 'What am I?', as well as one's sense of identity as marked on an ethical plane and, therefore, on one's actions (118).

In terms of *idem*-identity, or physical sameness, the first two sub-criteria are *numerical* identity and *qualitative* identity. The first, *numerical*, adheres to the notion of oneness and identification of one thing and, thus, the reidentification of the same thing twice (116), for example, an actor leaving the stage at the end of one scene and returning in the next. The second term, *qualitative*, adheres to the notion of extreme resemblance, the similarity of things whereby they are 'interchangeable with no noticeable difference' (116). For example, two actors appearing on stage wearing the same costume. However, although these two components of identity are distinguishable, they are connected and, in terms of infallible identification, further complicated by the introduction of time (117). For instance, while watching the

performance of an actor in a play, we do not question whether the actor leaving and returning to the stage, say between one scene and the next, is the same actor. However, doubt may ensue with the distance of time, for instance, when discussing the play the next day or describing the actor's performance in a review; time, then, introduces an element of uncertainty when comparing a 'present perception with a recent memory' (117).

To strengthen the idea of sameness, Ricoeur presents a third component to the notion of identity: *uninterrupted continuity*. This factors in changes to resemblance over time, for instance one's growth or aging (117), for example, an individual, from a baby to an adult, is the same in terms of *numerical* identity and maintains resemblance in spite of changes over time. Ricoeur points to how we see ourselves in photos over a number of years. Hence, time introduces a 'factor of dissemblance', of difference (117). Therefore, in order to counter this 'threat' on identity a fourth component is necessary, one which grounds *similitude* with *uninterrupted continuity*, namely the idea of *permanence in time*, which reduces doubt through the basis of a strong organisational system or biological structure, for instance, the genetic code of an individual (117).

Having established the criteria of identity based on substance (including *numerical* and *quantitative* identity) Ricoeur then asks whether there is a form of *permanence in time* that exists beyond the physicality of substance. In other words, is there a category of identity that answers both questions, *who* as well as *what*? (118).

In response, Ricoeur presents two models of *permanence in time* that bring together these notions of who and what a person is: these two models are expressed as *character* and *keeping one's word.*

The first model, *character,* relates to one's *lasting dispositions*, which are constituted by two components: first, one's *habits*, which over time become *traits,* in

other words, distinctive signs by which a person is recognised, and, second, one's *acquired identifications,* that is, the identity a person (or a community) has created that might be seen in one's accumulated heroes, values, ideals, forming the criteria in which one recognises oneself (121). Key in the creation of one's *narrative identity*, the components of *lasting dispositions* suggest that recognising oneself *in* a given set of values equally entails recognising oneself *by* a given set of values (121).

The second model is that of *keeping one's word.* This rather idiomatic phrase contains the sense of faithfulness, of perseverance to maintain one's identity and the idea of self-constancy (123). The model pertains to Ricoeur's primary thesis in *Oneself as Another* as to how one's *narrative identity* is closely linked to those of others and how we are bound to our community by ethics: a faithfulness to ourselves and to others.

My interest in Ricoeur's approach to identity, therefore, stems from the importance he sets on the temporal dimension that binds the idea of self with the idea of a person's actions: the mysterious grey area that exists between historical narrative and fictional narrative. According to Ricoeur, between fact and invention there exists a narrative of identity that defines us even whilst being difficult to define in itself, due to the interconnectivity of multiple narratives made over the course of an entire life. As we live, so we endeavour to apply a structure of narrative to our existence in order to make meaning of our lives, and the lives of others we interact with.

By using Ricoeur's criteria to reveal Coetzee's *narrative identity* in his autobiographical novels, I do not wish to reduce Coetzee's work so that it adheres to Ricoeurian theories. My intention, rather, is to support Ricoeur's theory of identity, namely that one's identity is revealed fully only in the culmination of a life, through a matrix of connectedness of multifaceted narratives, stemming both from each

individual person's perception of self in a duality of the physical and transcendental, and the perception of one's self by others, by one's community, and the subsequent inter-play between these two perceptions: the construction of self through stories, many stories, the stories we tell, the stories told by others.

III – Approaching the Autobiographical Novels: *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (1997); *Youth* (2002); *Summertime: Scenes from Provincial Life* (2009)

How, then, is the author J.M. Coetzee to be recognised as the protagonist in each of his autobiographical novels when they focus on distinct periods of a life and adopt varying forms of focalization, with ambiguities regarding the names by which the protagonist is signified and omissions of biographical, traceable facts?

Jerome Bruner describes autobiography as: when 'a narrator, in the here and now,' takes on the 'task of describing the progress of a protagonist, in the there and then, one who happens to share his name' (27). What distinguishes Coetzee's novels from the more conventional autobiographies is in part how he chooses to name the protagonist: while in *Boyhood* and *Youth* the protagonist is largely referred to as 'he', in S*ummertime* the naming of the protagonist varies – 'he', 'John', 'Coetzee' – as per the shifting narration.

Furthermore, while across the three novels there are physical descriptions of Coetzee's protagonist in which we might piece together some resemblance over time, pointing to a single individual, each book can also be read on its own merit, with each protagonist seen as an individual, examined at distinct stages in a life, with marked differences, which come inevitably with age, between the boy and the man (in Ricoeurian terms, I refer here to the *idem*-identity, whereby doubt as to the sameness of an individual's physical identity may result with the distance of time).

Also, a little research into J.M. Coetzee's life reveals recorded facts at odds with what we learn from his autobiographical novels. For instance, his family life with his wife Philippa Jubber, whom he met as a student and married in 1963, and their two children, is completely omitted (Attwell, LW 156). Thus, we do not have to go far to separate the historical narrative from the fictional.

What, then, can we find in these autobiographical novels that might lead us to confidently identify J.M. Coetzee? How is the *character* of his protagonist *seen to be the same*? It is here that I draw on Ricoeur's theory of *narrative identity*, for how does Coetzee depict himself with any consistency if not through the Ricoeurian notion of *character*, those *lasting dispositions* that constitute the part of identity that transcends the physical, and a *faithfulness* to that *character*?

In the previously mentioned discussions with Coetzee, psychotherapist Kurtz discusses the processes invaluable to the defence of the psyche and of the organizing of experience, in that they simultaneously restrict and protect perception and perspective – processes 'intrinsic to human experience' (Kurtz 29). Two such processes are *splitting* and *projection*[1]. The process of *splitting* refers to the separation of the world from the self that perceives that world, according to binary qualities (for instance, 'good and bad', 'friendly and hostile', etc.), whilst the process of *projection* refers to 'the locating of oneself imaginatively in another person and identifying oneself with them' (29).

In Coetzee's work, this theory is exemplified where he creates his own divisions: 'mother and father'; 'English and Afrikaans'; 'whites and non-whites'. Yet while such divisions already exist in and of themselves, he seems to drive them further apart as a result of his emotional associations with certain values, values he

[1] These principles of *splitting* and *projection* adhere to Ricoeur's idea of *acquired identifications*.

subsequently clings to or turns from. The values we acquire are projected on to the world, rooted into our experience. Thus, our narrative identities appear constructed over time, through experience, by the identifications we gather or discard, be it consciously or unconsciously.

In part, this essay examines those recurrent themes representative of the *lasting dispositions* of J.M. Coetzee's *character*, as enacted by his protagonist in the three autobiographical novels under investigation. These themes appear as follows: language, race-politics, place, family, sexuality and vocation. Collectively, these themes represent a reconstruction of the author's *narrative identity*. Furthermore, through the various phases of the protagonist's life, Coetzee explores the development of the values that form one's system of ethics, showing how, though the protagonist's values may shift and bend or waver with experience, once formed they seldom change; instead they remain constant, and it is that constancy, a *faithfulness* and perseverance to maintain one's identity which, in the Ricoeurian frame of time, underpins identity, *narrative identity*. Therefore, I hope to show that while in the three novels the protagonist is met on three separate occasions, each time at a distinct stage in his life, and thus envisaged on each occasion as unique, he can also be seen as being one and the same, a single protagonist whose *character* and *faithfulness* to one's self, that is, whose *narrative identity*, is formed and cemented over the entirety of the three books.

Lasting Dispositions

I – Language

Language in Coetzee's work unfolds firstly in writing, the author's chosen means of expression, and secondly as a vessel of identity: for with language comes culture. In the case of Coetzee, a white Afrikaner raised in an English-speaking home, the identification of culture (namely the associated heroes, customs, values) and the relationship with language is complicated by a duality resulting in a sense of ambivalence or, perhaps, a division of identity.

According to Bruner the construction of one's identity begins at a young age and is intrinsic to the learning and development of language, not only in the grammar, syntax, and lexicon, but in the idiom that comes with rhetoric and the conventions of narrative (36). Bruner suggests that 'self-making depends heavily upon the symbolic system in which it is conducted – its opportunities and constraints' (36). In other words, the construction of one's identity and the stories an individual tells about oneself are enmeshed in the traditions of one's community and the subsequent linguistic conventions used to tell the stories of and within that community.

In *Boyhood*, language is a constant source of conflict for the protagonist, particularly Afrikaans, the native language of his father's family, the Coetzees, and the language spoken on the Voëlfontein farm. Whilst at school, where he is an English-speaking boy with an Afrikaans surname, he lives with the dreaded possibility that he will one day be moved into an Afrikaans class, where '…the thought of being turned into an Afrikaans boy, with shaven head and no shoes, makes him quail. It is like being sent to prison, to a life without privacy' (126).

Thus, beginning with *Boyhood*, a larger pattern of the protagonist's love-hate relationship with Afrikaans emerges. It is a language that he finds at once backward

and expressive, depending on who is speaking it and where it is spoken. There is evidence that he loves the language, moments when speaking Afrikaans in which '…all the complications of life seem suddenly to fall away. Afrikaans is like a ghostly envelope that accompanies him everywhere, that he is free to slip into, becoming at once another person, simpler, gayer, lighter in his tread…' (125). Yet we also find the opposite, times when he thinks '…the language of the Afrikaans boys is filthy beyond belief. They command a range of obscenity far beyond his, to do with *fok* and *piel* and *poes*, words from whose monosyllabic heaviness he retreats in dismay (57).

Evidently, the protagonist connects language with values. With Afrikaans, again an ambivalence exists. Although it is not overtly stated in *Boyhood,* it is unambiguously suggested that the protagonist is at odds with the Afrikaner because of the brutality and injustice seen in the country's laws and its supporters' treatment of non-whites. It is the Afrikaans of the state, the National Party, the Dutch Reformed church with its Calvinist doctrines, the very institutes responsible for making and enforcing the apartheid laws and practices that he so detests, and with which he does not identify. At school, for instance, he finds the language severe, heavy, 'weighted down with idioms that are supposed to come from the *volksmond*, the people's mouth, but seem to come only from the Great Trek, lumpish, nonsensical idioms about wagons and cattle and cattle-harness' (81).

However, it is the Afrikaans of the farm, of his family, the Afrikaans of the Coloured children from whom he first learnt the language, it is *their* Afrikaans with which he feels a sense of kinship. On the farm, the sound and play of Afrikaans lexicon appeals to him; there is a romance with the language with its expressiveness, its mutability: 'He likes the funny, dancing language, with its particles that slip here and there in the sentence' (81).

Conversely, it is the values and ethics found in English language literature with which the protagonist identifies more and, therefore, by which he is identified. As a boy, his heroes, historical and fictional figures, and, as an adult, his artistic influences, writers and poets, stem largely from the English-speaking world. Significantly, English is passed down to him by his parents: his Afrikaner father who reads and does the crossword in the *Cape Times* (an English language newspaper), a man fond of poets, such as Keats and Wordsworth, and who claims Shakespeare to be the greatest ever writer (104); and from his mother, of German and Dutch heritage, who also 'reveres' Shakespeare, a woman whose English is 'faultless', whose grammar is 'impeccable' (106).

The protagonist's relationship with language and its associated values marks his understanding of otherness and his relationship with others. During the boy's time at St Joseph's, a school in Cape Town, we witness his sympathy for Theo Stavropoulos, his wealthy and smart classmate who tries to teach him Greek (149). The boy is an outsider and often teased or ignored by the other boys and even disliked by his teachers (150). The episode depicts the protagonist's inclination to connect with those different to himself, a common recurrence over the course of the autobiographical novels where an observable pattern of behaviour arises in his relationships with people of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds – the ostracised, the disenfranchised, the marginalised members of community, society, country.

In *Youth,* we find an older protagonist at the University of Cape Town on the verge of completing his degree in mathematics yet with aspirations of becoming a poet. We are not far into the novel when he leaves the country; and having fled the Cape of his childhood for London, it appears that he has also escaped the conflict triggered by Afrikaans. However, this, it becomes clear, is not the case. For instance,

the protagonist is visited in London by his cousin Ilse and her friend Marianne, both of whom are Afrikaners. We recognise here the protagonist's ambivalence towards Afrikaans, sentiments much like those felt by the boy in *Boyhood.* In the company of his cousin and her friend, the older protagonist is at once comfortable with the Afrikaans language, which even though he has not spoken it for years makes him '…relax at once as though sliding into a warm bath…', and yet also overly sensitive to the stigma others might attach to the language: '…he would prefer it if she lowered her voice. Speaking Afrikaans in this country, he wants to tell her, is like speaking Nazi, if there were such a language' (Y 127).

This incident aside, *Youth* deals mostly with the protagonist's developing affinity for the English language writers he wishes to emulate, but more significantly with his failure to do so. Despite his desire to write, 'a year has passed since he last wrote a line of poetry. What has happened to him? Is it true that art comes only out of misery? Must he become miserable again in order to write?' (160). Consequently, in an attempt to overcome his writers' block, the protagonist uses his powerful work computer to produce poetry[2], to 'string together pseudo-poems made up of phrases generated by a machine' (161).

In *Summertime*, language is inescapably connected to politics and the history of the country. We see once more, as we did in *Boyhood,* the protagonist's conflictual relationship with Afrikaans, but also the cultural implications and paradoxical allegiance to those affiliated with the language. Again, Coetzee portrays the protagonist as an outsider. He is an anomaly in that his past is steeped in Afrikaner background, and yet he remains outside of it, in part because of the choice made by

[2] As a result of his doctoral interest in stylistics and the work of Beckett, Coetzee did, in fact, conduct a similar experiment using computers to produce an analysis of lexical structures in the prose of Beckett (Coetzee, DP 21).

his parents to raise him and his brother in a home environment where only English was spoken, where English was to be the basis of their education; and in part by his own subsequent choices, largely determined by his love for books in English.

In the testimony of his cousin Margot, we hear of the protagonist's return to the Karoo, to the Voëlfontein farm, a place where his bond with the Afrikaner people and their language was, as a boy, strongest (S 87- 152). Margot's narrative is told, rewritten by the fictional biographer, in the style of *Boyhood* and *Youth*: a close third person, present tense mode. What we learn from Margot's narrative is that 'John' is even more of an outsider than when he was younger, because of the choices he made – to favour a foreign tongue (English) over his own, to leave South Africa in favour of foreign countries: 'She blames the deterioration in his Afrikaans on the move he made to Cape Town, to 'English' schools and an 'English' university, and then to the world abroad, where not a word of Afrikaans is to be heard' (93).

In a later scene, the protagonist refers to himself and his father as Afrikaners: '…he and I, two Afrikaners devoted to an English game that we aren't much good at. I wonder what that says about us…' (95). Margot goes on to question their identity as 'real Afrikaners', not only because of his 'halting' ability to speak the language, but also the distance the two men keep from Afrikanerdom, with its ties to the church, and to the founders of the apartheid government:

> Two Afrikaners. Does he really think of himself as an Afrikaner? She doesn't know many real [*egte*] Afrikaners who would accept him as one of the tribe. Even his father might not pass scrutiny. To pass as an Afrikaner nowadays you need at the very least to vote National and attend church on Sundays. (95)

The complexity of the protagonist's connection to the Afrikaner nation is perhaps best expressed in a discussion between Sophie and the biographer on the question of John's identification with the Afrikaner:

> *So we have the case of a man who spoke the language [Afrikaans] only imperfectly, who stood outside the state religion, whose outlook was cosmopolitan, whose politics was* […]

> *dissident, yet who was ready to embrace an Afrikaner identity. Why do you think that was so?'*
>
> My opinion is that under the gaze of history he felt there was no way in which he could separate himself off from the Afrikaners while retaining his self-respect, even if that meant being associated with all that the Afrikaners were responsible for, politically. (238)

Although Coetzee portrays his protagonist in *Summertime* as standing outside of, or away from, Afrikaner culture and politics, he nevertheless, by name and by birth and, therefore, by association, remains affiliated with the Afrikaner, with their culture and politics, their ethics, their crimes.[3]

In brief, the values the protagonist acquires from Afrikaans through his heritage and experience in the Afrikaner town of Worcester and the Karoo are set against those values adopted from an English education, values gathered largely from literature. The result is the birth and development of conflict, both internal and external, the formation of a *lasting disposition* in the protagonist's *character*. If languages truly do speak through people, as Barthes ("The Death of the Author") and Coetzee himself ("Remembering Texas") have argued, then the protagonist's bilingualism divides him.

[3] This identification with an ethic that appears to run contrary to Coetzee's own leads one to the question of collective responsibility, that is, to the notion of the collective shame of a nation for the perpetuated crimes of that nation. I shall return to the idea of collective shame later in the essay.

II - Race-Politics

If one looks at Coetzee's fiction in its entirety, a pattern emerges – a theme that is dark and pessimistic, one that questions the fundamental morality of human existence with particular regard to how people treat other people. Or rather, the ways in which people *mistreat* other people.

From his first novel *Dusklands* (1974) to his most recent *The Death of Jesus* (2019), none of the protagonists, no matter how different, escape that very human predicament of being an outsider. Their status as such is similar to other outsiders in literature[4], similar in that they are individuals trapped within a community, society, or system to which they belong but from which they disassociate themselves on a moral and an ethical level; outsiders inside. Coetzee always renders his protagonists in some way complicit – for instance, David Lurie in *Disgrace* (1999) and the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) – implicating them in the unethical crimes that, taken individually, may seem no more than a mere ripple on the surface, yet when combined amount to a gaping wound across the face of history.

For Coetzee, the pattern of behaviour has many threads – social, political, historical. What binds them is the notion of morality and the adverse, unethical power systems within society. In Coetzee's autobiographical novels, that society, with its entangled threads of immorality, is South Africa. His identification with, and ambivalence towards, his natal state and its history contributes to the forming of his *narrative identity*.

In *Boyhood*, we are privy to the protagonist's thoughts, his doubts, and tribulations of a rather precocious, dark, and narcissistic nature. Coetzee's work

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[4] Outsiders such as Kafka's Josef K, or Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov, the creations of two authors Coetzee admires.

suggests that perception of what is ethical, of what is right and wrong, is first determined by one's upbringing: at home, at school, within the community (all possible points of conflict), but also by the books one reads, the histories and fictions that go into creating us – individuals created from the outside.

The protagonist's understanding of others is complex. Indeed, a brooding, even cynical, ambivalence underscores the boy's general view of the world. We see how as a child in the 50s (the Cold War period) he secretly favours the Russians over the Americans: 'Preferring the Russians to the Americans is a secret so dark that he can reveal it to no one' (B 26); he also secretly prefers the honourable British soldiers, marching in their bright red uniforms to the sound of their bagpipes, to the rude and cowardly Boers (67). There is a sense that these secrets would shame him, should they ever be discovered.

At school, the boy – who is from, it is suggested, a family of atheists – says that he is a Roman Catholic, simply because he has innocently assumed there to be a connection with the great Romans from his history books (18). As a result, he is taunted by the Afrikaner boys who must attend the school service of the Dutch Reformed church. Furthermore, he befriends the Jewish boys who are also excluded from the service. Again, he is bullied as one of them (20). However, the protagonist does not seem to commit to any belief with any conviction or good faith, but rather his choices come out of misunderstanding, false belief, foolishness. For the most part, the boy's actions are self-serving. In other words, Coetzee does not ascribe to the boy a strong sense of moral or ethical righteousness. In this, we find the beginning of a recurrent pattern whereby the boy becomes the outsider, but, being so, he is not innocent of the community's actions; in this way, abstaining equates to not acting. He does not take a moral stand. Therefore, he is not worse, but neither is he better.

The boy seems sensitive not so much to racial difference as a moral issue but rather as a social norm with which he feels uncomfortable. Although he has been raised at a time in a society where children are not taught to question the existing racial distinctions, he is constantly at odds with this social normality of his day-to-day experience of others – in Worcester, in Cape Town, and on the farm – to the extent that his doubts are not turned outward but inward, as if the shame is his alone to bear.

We are told of the two Coloured families living on the Voëlfontien farm. We hear of one of them, Outa Jaap, now dead, who belonged to a 'vanished generation'; the boy understands that what this means is that Outa Jaap was a part of the farm, and that his presence there preceded that of the Coetzee family (84). The boy observes the behaviour of others towards the Coloured *volk* with interest; he is relieved to see that the relationship between his uncle and Ros (Outa Jaap's son) and Freek, a hired hand, is 'correct and formal' (85). What is implied by these words is that elsewhere, on other farms, or with other farmers, the behaviour of a master towards his servants is not correct and certainly not formal.

Coetzee's interest in the indigenous peoples of southern Africa prior to colonial occupation is prominent in both his fiction (*In the Heart of the Country,* 1977; *Life and Times of Michael K,* 1983;) and non-fiction (*White Writing*, 1988), particularly his research on the Khoikhoi and Khoisan people, otherwise known by the derogatory terms 'Hottentots' or 'Bushmen'. In *Boyhood*, the protagonist's ideas of Coloureds, some of whom are likely descendants of the Khoikhoi, resemble that of an anthropological study of an unfamiliar people, and are, to some degree, stylistically emblematic of some white writing of the colonial past:

> He burns with curiosity about the lives they live. Do they wear vests and underpants like white people? Do they each have a bed? Do they sleep naked

> or in their work-clothes or do they have pyjamas? Do they eat proper meals, sitting at table with knives and forks? (85)

Therefore, what may appear to be the naivety of a child is, in fact, more a reflection of the world in which that child is raised, a world wrought with ignorance and Calvinist principles, whose ensuing behaviour and values he questions, because of the, as yet, inexplicable sense of shame he feels:

> For the truth is that it *is* embarrassing to have Tryn and Lientjie in the house. He does not like it when he passes Lientjie in the passage and she has to pretend she is invisible and he has to pretend she is not there. He does not like to see Tryn on her knees at the washtub washing clothes. He does not know how to answer her when she speaks to him in the third person, calling him '*die kleinbaas*,' the little master, as if he were not present. It is all deeply embarrassing. (86)

Understatement is a distinguishing feature of *Boyhood*, used in the positing of difficult questions and the nature of unspoken wrongs in the mind of a young boy not yet privy to the secrets and shame of the adult world. To establish the ingenuousness of childhood, little is directly stated, but rather it is hinted at, with allusions as opposed to facts about the incongruous and largely discriminatory social norms during apartheid. The ethic by which the people of the Karoo live appears at odds with the sense of morality felt by the protagonist, and there are frequent episodes throughout the novel that illustrate the boy's sense of injustice, of something not being right:

> His uncle shakes his head, 'You mustn't ask them to touch guns,' he says. 'They know they mustn't.' They mustn't. Why not? No one will tell him. But he broods on the word *mustn't*. He hears it more often on the farm than anywhere else, more often even than in Worcester. (91)

The boy's questions about the interrelations between races might equally have been asked collectively of the people of apartheid South Africa, of people living on both sides of the colour bar, or of other segregated, oppressed societies. This constant scrutiny of the lives of others, along the yet to be understood socio-political plane of the boy's experience, marks the origins of the protagonist's values, the

foundation of what become his *lasting dispositions* which will lead to the sedimentation of his *character* and, fundamentally, to the formation of an ethical stance which he seeks to maintain.

Further instances that deepen the protagonist's personal experience of racism occur within the confines of family. There is the significant incident of Mr Golding and his teacup. Mr Golding, a 'Coloured', is in a position of power over the boy's father, a state of affairs frowned upon and not easily accepted in the social and political climate during apartheid. An absurd situation (all the more to a child's mind) in which what in reality a person was capable of being and doing went against what the government's laws said they were allowed to be and do. This power dynamic between the races asserts itself in the case of Mr Golding:

> After he [Mr Golding] has left there is a debate about what to do with the teacup. The custom, it appears, is that after a person of colour has drunk from a cup the cup must be smashed. He is surprised that his mother's family, which believes in nothing else, believes in this. However, in the end his mother simply washes the cup with bleach. (157)

The use here of the copular verb 'appears' is indicative of the boy's uncertainty when it comes to matters of how people of colour should be treated, and as to how he must behave. This uncertainty is also depicted in an earlier scene, where the protagonist is with his brother and mother, inspecting the damage inflicted on a beach after a stormy night. They are met by an old black man 'with a grey beard and a clerical collar, carrying an umbrella' (65):

> 'Man builds great boats of iron,' said the old man, 'but the sea is stronger. The sea is stronger than anything man can build.' When they were alone again, his mother said: 'You must remember what he said. He was a wise old man.' It is the only time he can remember her using the word *wise*; in fact it is the only time he can remember anyone using the word outside of books. But it is not just the old-fashioned word that impresses him. It is possible to respect Natives – that is what she is saying. It is a relief to hear that, to have it confirmed. (65)

In terms of *acquired identifications,* as with the incident with Mr Golding's teacup, this scene is important in that the values acquired by the protagonist in part stem from his mother's judgements and treatment of people of other racial backgrounds. However, the protagonist does not simply adopt her prejudices but assesses them according to his own preconceived value system, based on an ethics that becomes more and more entrenched as he and, indeed, the novels progress.

In spite of this underlying ethic, over the course of the novels an uncertainty not only of how to act but also what to think in racial terms is a constant in the protagonist's life. In *Youth*, even a scene in which the protagonist attempts to gain the trust of a child under his care by asking about her doll has implicit socio-political meaning:

> 'What is the golliwog's name? Is it Golly?'
> 'He's not a golliwog,' says the child. (120)

On the surface the scene appears innocuous; however, the use of the term 'golliwog' holds racial undertones, nuances which seem lost on the protagonist.[5] Ironically, the child's assertion that the doll is *not a golliwog* might be seen as the naturally childish retort of a little girl to a stranger she mistrusts, or as the reprimand of a politically correct, self-conscious voice. Although the episode draws no comment from the protagonist, the attentive reader is bound to be conscious of the word's connotations, particularly readers with an awareness of the heightened sensitivity to racially discriminatory language that still very much exists in countries with a history of racial segregation, countries such the USA and South Africa. Thus,

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[5] *Golliwog* first referred to the character created by Florence Kate Upton, which featured in a series of children's stories by Enid Blyton; it later became a toy popular in the U.K. and some Commonwealth countries, such as Australia and South Africa. Because of the obvious associations with the racially pejorative term 'wog', whose origin has a much earlier source, the golliwog has long been deemed politically incorrect and racist.

the ironic intention behind the question lies not with the protagonist but with the author, communicating with the reader.

Summertime further complicates an interpretation of the author/protagonist's values regarding politics. Through the close third person point of view of the protagonist and the testimonies of those who knew him – the author 'John Coetzee' – *Summertime* seems to attempt to destabilise the reader who, having read the previous two novels, may already have formed an idea as to what the opinions of the author/protagonist might be. From the outset of the novel, the reader is thrust into a depiction of the violent racial conflict prevalent during the apartheid years. In an entry in a notebook dated 1972, a date succeeding the period recounted in *Youth*, the protagonist reflects on a newspaper report on the political murders in neighbouring Botswana: 'The killers appeared to be black, but one of the neighbours heard them speaking Afrikaans among themselves and was convinced they were whites in blackface' (3). We discover that John has returned to South Africa, from where exactly we learn later, as the temporal gap between the end of *Youth* and the beginning of *Summertime* is filled with stories, albeit retrospectively narrated. Yet even in the gap, between the blurred edges of one narrative and the other, there is consistency of *character*. Wherever he goes, he seems unable to rid himself of the shame his country perpetuates through its social and political degradation:

> He reads the reports and feels soiled. So this is what he has come back to! Yet where in the world can he hide where one will not feel soiled? Would he feel any cleaner in the snows of Sweden, reading at a distance about his people and their latest pranks? […] How to escape the filth: not a new question. An old rat question that will not let go, that leaves its nasty, suppurating wound. Agenbite of inwit.[6] (4)

[6] The phrase *Agenbite of inwit* is a reoccurring one, first heard in *Youth,* attributed to Kentish Middle English dialectical expression that translates as a *gnawing inside oneself.* Coetzee adopts the alternative spelling used by James Joyce in *Ulysses,* 1922.

This sentiment of a*genbite of inwit*, this eating oneself up, suggests remorse: a protracted sense of guilt merely for being associated with the crimes of his Afrikaner forebears.[7] Again, the theme of shame emerges, a trait we begin to recognise as a *lasting disposition* that constitutes a part of the protagonist's *character*.

[7] In an interview with Attwell, several years prior to the publication of *Boyhood*, through a tale told in the 3rd person, J.M. Coetzee reveals a similar sentiment regarding his Afrikaner ancestors, who 'provoke in him uneasy dreams of being hunted down and accused…' (DP 393).

III - Place

Wer den Dichter will versthen,
muß in Dichters Lande gehen

– Goethe

From the desolate and violent landscapes that form the backdrop to the emotionless killing in *Dusklands* (1974), to the apocalyptic city and barren landscapes that enter the protagonist in *Life and Times of Michael K.* (1983), the influence of environment on character is a reoccurring feature in Coetzee's fiction. Whilst settings in Coetzee's work prior to 2003 are located in or, in the case of *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), resemble South Africa, following his emigration, Australia and Austrialianess become a feature in his subsequent novels, namely, *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), *Slow Man* (2005), *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007).

The theme of place is equally prevalent in Coetzee's fictional autobiographies and, therefore, indicative of its significance in his life-narrative. *Boyhood* takes us to apartheid-era South Africa, to the suburban areas of Cape Town, to the small Afrikaner town of Worcester, and the Karoo farmlands; in *Youth* we follow the protagonist from Cape Town to London in the 1960s – places whose stark differences both reveal and further develop the protagonist's *character*; and in *Summertime* we return to scenes at the height of apartheid and also post-apartheid South Africa, again visiting suburban Cape Town and the Karoo. The specificity of places in Coetzee's autobiographies depict the specific values and opinions that form the protagonist's *character* within the socio-political milieu of particular landscapes, and we find a constancy in these values and identifications over the course of the three books. The protagonist's values, developed in *Boyhood* in the trials of childhood and family life, are carried through to *Youth*, where they appear simultaneously to be tested, scrutinised, and to determine his choices; and, finally, in *Summertime,* we find

those values have lasted, have been upheld and, retrospectively, stand for – or identify – the protagonist as he is recognised by others beyond the end of his life. This pattern concurs with Ricoeur's idea of *lasting dispositions* as seen in the formation of *character traits* and *acquired identifications* over time.

For Coetzee the understanding of place may seem to rest on a sense of belonging, and yet, often, it is rather a sense of *not* belonging. Coetzee's depiction of being out-of-place in South Africa begins in *Boyhood* on the Voëlfontien farm. Whilst legally belonging to members of his family, it is the descendants of the Khoisan who rightfully lay claim to the land by birthright. It is here that we discover the early scintilla of Coetzee's sense of being an outsider, a 'seasonal visitor' (95) in the country of his birth:

> The secret and sacred word that binds him to the farm is *belong*. Out in the veld by himself he can breathe the word aloud: *I belong on the farm*. What he really believes but does not utter, what he keeps to himself for fear that the spell will end, is a different form of the word: *I belong to the farm.* (95)

These sentiments of belonging to a place, to the Karoo, appear in contrast to the sentiments expressed towards South Africa in the second novel, namely, that he does not belong there. *Youth* depicts the protagonist's wishes to break free from his life in South Africa – from his studies, his working life, his relationships, his family (whom he seldom mentions and who feature very little in his life at this point). These aspects of his life are affected and determined ultimately by the place that he is in, by the country in which he was raised. Before his departure for London, we witness a South Africa deep in rising political tension:

> …the country around him is in turmoil. The pass laws to which Africans and Africans alone are subjected are being tightened even further, and protests are breaking out everywhere. In the Transvaal the police fire shots into a crowd, then, in their mad way, go on firing into the backs of fleeing men, women and children. From beginning to end the business sickens him… (Y 37)

With this presentiment that he does not belong, that the time of white occupation of the land is fast coming to an end – 'Are there signs one ought to recognise? The PAC is not like the ANC. It is more ominous. *Africa for the Africans!* Says the PAC. *Drive the whites into the sea!'* (39) – the young protagonist leaves South Africa for London. Any thought of returning to the country of his birth is regarded with distaste; it is a country that does not belong to him, where he does not belong, sentiments which echo yet conflict with his affection for the Karoo: 'The farm will never belong to him, he will never be more than a visitor: he accepts that' (B 95).

Later in London, he finds himself living in the same house as Theodora, the nanny from Malawi. Because they have both come from southern Africa to England, he reflects on his and her rightful geographical place:

> *Africa is yours*. What had seemed perfectly natural while he still called that continent his home seems more and more preposterous from the perspective of Europe: that a handful of Hollanders should have waded ashore on Woodstock beach and claimed ownership of a foreign territory they had never laid eyes on before; that their descendants should now regard that territory as theirs by birthright… It was never intended that they should steal the best part of Africa. (Y 121)

If Coetzee's opinion is to be garnered from his writings, then he believes the Cape belongs to the Khoisan peoples.[8] The rest are late arrivals. In *Boyhood*, the belief as to whom the land belongs coincides with the boy's understanding of race, from his understanding of physiognomy in determining the origins of Coloureds: 'They are Hottentots, pure and uncorrupted. Not only do they come with the land, the land comes with them, is theirs, has always been' (B 62). This view reoccurs in *Summertime* with the biographer's interview with Sophie who affirms that John had a view of the Cape as '…a country of its own, with its own geography, its own languages and culture. In this mythical Cape the Coloured people were rooted' (235).

[8] The idea of rootedness of people in southern Africa, particularly the Cape, is one that Coetzee has explored extensively in his essay collection *White Writing* (1988)

This overwhelming sense of belonging versus not belonging persists. The protagonist's movements are outlined by Martin, his colleague at UCT: 'John left South Africa in the 1960s, came back in the 1970s, for decades hovered between South Africa and the United States, then finally decamped to Australia and died there' (209). The reason for the protagonist's self-imposed exile does not surprise the reader familiar with the episodes in *Boyhood*, scenes in which the boy's understanding of place are inextricably connected to the people of South Africa, distinguishable along lines of race, language, and social class, all claiming the land as their birthright. However, as we hear from Martin, not everyone's claim is legitimate:

> …our presence there was legal but illegitimate. We had an abstract right to be there, a birthright, but the basis of that right was fraudulent. Our presence was grounded in a crime, namely colonial conquest, perpetuated by apartheid. Whatever the opposite is of *native* or *rooted*, that was what we felt ourselves to be. We thought of ourselves as sojourners, temporary residents, and to that extent without a home, without a homeland. (S 210)

The fact, then, that the protagonist, like the author Coetzee, cut ties with the country so deeply etched into his identity, stems ultimately from a deeper sense of not belonging and was inevitable: 'sooner or later our ties to it would have to be cut, our investments annulled' (211).

In *Summertime*, we revisit the protagonist's sentiments for the Karoo through his cousin Margot's memories of their time together on the farm as children and, later, as adults. These scenes enforce the idea of the ambivalence John feels towards the Karoo, towards his country, and how deeply his feelings – of love, of melancholy – are tied up with place: 'This place wrenches my heart', he says. 'It wrenched my heart when I was a child, and I have never been right since' (97). It is in the Karoo that John best expresses the loss of emotions so closely attached to place, feelings irredeemably confined to his past: '*Best to cut yourself free of what you love*, he had said during their walk – *cut yourself free and hope the wound heals*' (134).

Coetzee's use of Goethe's quote as an epigraph to *Youth* proves significant in terms of the South African author's *narrative identity*: 'Whoever wishes to understand the poet, must visit the poet's land'. Ironically, Coetzee himself is testimony to the truth in these words. To better understand himself, he has revisited the memories of his native land which belongs to him and is an integral part of the making of his identity, despite his conviction that he does not belong there.

IV - Family

Boyhood appears to provide an intimate view of the Coetzee household and the conflicting episodes of growing up in a predominantly Afrikaans-speaking town during apartheid. As if family were a microcosm of country, the boy's self-conscious questioning of behaviour within this segregated society appears tied to his understanding and criticism of his own family's conduct.

The protagonist's feelings towards his mother and father are strongly ambivalent. There is often a sense that he is playing them against each other, setting them in two camps: one good, the other bad; yet neither is wholly good, nor wholly bad. According to Kurtz (29), in terms of psychoanalytical theory, such organising of experience, namely the separating or 'splitting' of one's world into binary elements, is an unconscious process adopted by the self in defence of the psyche. Like many pre-adolescent children, the relationship between the young protagonist and his parents is often conflictual. However – and this is partly conveyed by Coetzee's unconventional, terse narrative style – the protagonist's attitude towards his parents, and the severing of his emotional attachment, particularly to his mother, seems methodical and coldly calculated. Indeed, the emotional detachment throughout the three books begins with his treatment of his parents and becomes a *lasting disposition*.

Hence, there are numerous instances in *Boyhood* in which the boy seems to be studying his parents' behaviour with an acute eye. This is especially true in scenes involving his mother's dealings with non-whites. While there are instances, such as the aforementioned episode of the 'wise man of the beach' (65), which appear to reassure the boy's conscience, there are also episodes in which his mother's behaviour confuses or angers him. For instance, her mistreatment of Coloureds provokes a voice of righteousness in the boy:

> …if his mother were to call out 'Boy!' and wave, as she is quite capable of doing, this boy would have to stop in his tracks and come and do whatever she might tell him…and at the end of it get a tickey in his cupped hands and be grateful for it. And if he were to be angry with his mother afterwards, she would simply smile and say, 'But they are used to it!' (61)

Although here he disapproves of his mother's actions, in a later scene we see the complex effect such casual racism has on the protagonist's own experience of Coloured people and, subsequently, the weight it places on his conscience:

> If he were someone else, he would ask the Portuguese…to chase them away. It is quite normal to chase beggar children away. You have only to contort your face into a scowl and wave your arms and shout, 'Voetsek, hotnot! Loop! Loop!' and then turn to whomever is watching, friend or stranger, and explain: 'Hulle soek net iets om te steel. Hulle is almal skelms.' – They are just looking for something to steal. They are all thieves. (73)

This scene draws a distinction between the protagonist and his mother. The line 'If he were someone else' suggests that he does not have it in him to behave in this way towards the Coloured children. However, he is certainly able to imagine the scenario and reproduce the language, 'Voetsek, hotnot! Loop! Loop!', evidently remembered from similar scenes he has witnessed. What he is left with at the end of this episode is an all too familiar sense of shame. Attwell notes that in an earlier draft of *Boyhood* the boy complains to his mother about his father 'hanging around the boundary of the cricket ground…because the other boys think he is coloured' (LW 159). Attwell suggests that although the boy knows that this is a shameful thing to say, 'in his declaration of war against them, he is flinging his parents' racial outlook back at them' (159). Coetzee's depiction of the boy in this and other scenes is not sympathetic, but rather it suggests that acknowledging one's guilt does not make one any less guilty.

Furthermore, the mother's influence on the protagonist is depicted in ambiguous terms. He defines her as protective, sheltering him from his father's anger, and yet, for this, he is contemptuous of her:

> …He is grateful to his mother for protecting him from his father's normality, that is to say, from his father's occasional blue-eyed rages and threats to beat him. At the same time he is angry with his mother for turning him into something unnatural, something that needs to be protected if it is to continue to live. (B 8)

Yet, whilst this passage suggests that he wishes to be normal, he has romanticised the idea of being 'something unnatural', something abnormal, somebody special: 'I hate normal people,' he replies hotly' (78). He is precociously self-aware and, thus, recognises a developing duality in his character: 'At home he is an irascible despot, at school a lamb, meek and mild… By living his double life he has created for himself a burden of imposture' (13). He hones this duality purposefully, despite the deceptive nature of it, as if it were necessary in crafting an identity for himself: 'He knows he is a liar, knows he is bad, but he does not change because he does not want to change. His difference from other boys may be bound up with his mother and his unnatural family but is bound up with his lying too' (34).

The fact that the protagonist has an awareness of how his deception shapes his identity and how he seeks to sustain the lie as a form of self-preservation is indicative not only of Ricoeur's concept of *lasting disposition*, but also an aspect of the second model of *permanence in time – keeping one's word* – as it pertains to the perseverance to maintain one's identity: 'If he stopped lying… he would no longer be himself. If he were no longer himself, what point would there be in living? (34).

The contempt he feels for his mother's love, and the dependency he has on it, has an evident effect on his future rapport with women. In *Youth*, the protagonist's numerous, albeit fleeting, liaisons with women show a similar pattern in that there is both attraction and repulsion – a need for love, which he deems necessary for the cultivation of his creativity, but contempt for any demands on his time which might inhibit his freedom.

However, whilst in the beginning of *Boyhood* we witness the boy's jealous, antagonistic love for his mother – jealous of her love for his younger brother, yet angry at her for loving *him* at all – there is a consistency in the cold determination with which he endeavours to deaden his feelings towards her:

> He is a liar and he is cold-hearted too: a liar to the world in general, cold-hearted toward his mother. It pains his mother, he can see, that he is steadily growing away from her. Nevertheless he hardens his heart and will not relent. His only excuse is that he is merciless to himself too. He lies but he does not lie to himself. (35)

Thus, in order to establish his identity, he needs to subdue his sentiments for his mother, and we follow the regression of their relationship into *Youth*, where this killing of sentiment continues:

> His mother is distressed by his coldness, he knows, the coldness with which he has responded to her love all his life. All his life she has wanted to coddle him; all his life he has been resisting. […] He must harden his heart against her. Now is not the time to let down his guard. (Y 18)

The desired result of this determined detachment from his mother's love is the absolute death of what his mother represents: the nurturing instinct. References to her diminish to a single, albeit significant mention in the final pages of *Summertime*:

> Where did that resistance of his come from, that refusal to accept that the end goal of education should be to form him in some predetermined image, who would otherwise have no form but wallow instead in a state of nature, unsaved, savage? There can be only one answer: the kernel of his resistance […] must have come from his mother… (253)

It is fitting, then, that he should realise in his maturity how his mother, in allowing him to develop through the freedom he was granted, had in fact shaped him and not inhibited him with her love.

The boy's relationship with his father, however, is often more directly hostile and suggestive of Freud's Oedipus Complex in that while at times he admires his father, he dislikes him in equal measure, looking at everything he does, and has done, with a severe irony:

> His father was a gunner in the war…He wonders whether he ever shot a plane down: he certainly never boasts of it. How did he come to be a gunner at all? He has no gift for it. Were soldiers just allotted things to do at random? (B 89)

Although they share many interests, his father seems constantly to disappoint him, falling short of his expectations in sport (cricket), as a war veteran (89), as head of the family; even his father's pretence as an Englishman provokes his criticism: 'he remains mistrustful of his father, despite Shakespeare and Wordsworth and the *Cape Times* crossword puzzle' (126). Thus, in *Boyhood*, the recurring themes of failure and shame are personified in the father figure, with frequent references to his failures, his disappointments, his sins. At times the boy's language, when referring to his father, verges on the hateful:

> He seethes with rage all the time. *That man*, he calls his father when he speaks to his mother, too full of hatred to give him a name: why do we have to have anything to with *that man*? Why don't you let *that man* go to prison? (156)

By the end of *Boyhood,* the protagonist's esteem for his father has deteriorated, and there is very little mention of him in *Youth*. However, their relationship is extensively revisited in *Summertime*, portrayed more sympathetically, although, for Coetzee, neither man's behaviour warrants redemption. Both are at an age in which they recognise their own and each other's flaws and affinities, living together in a state of seeming tolerance, playing out a symbiotic relationship, more like two animals than a father and a son: 'So he is cast back on his father, as his father is cast back on him. As they live together, so on Saturdays they take their pleasure together. That is the law of the family' (245). This terse, conflictual relationship is presented as being apparent to outside observers too. When Julia, one of the protagonist's lovers, is asked whether John loved his father, she replies:

> Boys love their mothers, not their fathers. Don't you know your Freud? Boys hate their fathers and want to supplant them in their mothers' affections. No, of course John did not love his father, he did not love anybody, he was not built for love. But he did feel guilty about his father. He felt guilty and therefore behaved dutifully. With certain lapses. (S 48)

These 'certain lapses' are not given in any detail by Julia, but in the closing pages of the book, what is meant becomes all too clear:

> He is going to have to abandon some of his personal projects and be a nurse. Alternatively, if he will not be a nurse, he must announce to his father: I cannot face the prospect of ministering to you day and night. I am going to abandon you. Goodbye. One or the other: there is no third way. (266)

It is indeed telling that Coetzee should have decided to conclude his autobiographical oeuvre with scenes relating to the relationship with his father and his slow demise, but what exactly he is attempting to tell us is, as is often the case with Coetzee, a matter for conjecture. Attwell argues that by opening and closing the novel with scenes relating to the father figure, Coetzee intended the final book to serve as a form of redemption: 'Among other things, *Summertime* is an act of reparation. *In extremis*, father and son learn to accept one another.' (LW 160)

The final scene calls to mind Albert Camus' *L'Éstranger* (1942) whose protagonist Meursault is accused of indifference to his mother's death, an accusation that in the end is enough evidence to see him condemned to death, albeit for another crime. Referring to the latent meaning behind his novel, Camus once said: "I only meant that the hero of my book is condemned because he does not play the game…. He refuses to lie…" (Carroll 27). Is Coetzee perhaps suggesting that he too is an outsider in these respects? Is he inviting readers to cast similar judgement on him for his cold indifference to his father and, in *Boyhood*, his mother? Once again, we see how these questions are connected to Coetzee's *narrative identity*, but also to an exploration of ethics in his work, to the ethic he consistently portrays through his protagonist, a portrayal steeped in the themes of shame, guilt, confession. But to what end? A reprieve? Absolution? I will argue that this is not Coetzee's intention.

V - Sexuality

In aspects biological, relational, transcendental, sexuality reveals much about one's character, about one's identity. Coetzee's portrayal of his protagonist's perceptions of sexuality are indicative of his traits and acquired values and, therefore, of the *lasting dispositions* that constitute his *narrative identity*.

From *Boyhood*, the protagonist's feelings and behaviour regarding sexuality appear heavily influenced by his childhood, that is, by his early relationship with his parents, but also by his perception of the society in which he is raised. While similar circumstances of sexual awakening are more generally common during adolescence, there is a marked sense that for the protagonist desire is rendered taboo in terms of what is socially accepted. As a boy, his natural sexual urges and curiosities are complicated by social prejudice, not only in terms of race, but also gender and familial relations. Therefore, the protagonist's experience of sexuality is tied to aspects of taboo on almost every level. Out of these taboos emerges deep-rooted shame, one that persecutes him in later life as recounted in the subsequent books.

This sense of shame seems primarily connected to his perceptions of the physicality of others: to the body. While sexual awareness develops at a young age partly through an understanding of the body – one's own and those of others – by means of imaginative leaps or actual intimacy, for the young protagonist the initial awareness and actual experience of the physical body is complicated by the stigma attached to the racial groups within the socio-political delimitations of apartheid and the taboos it imposed. Across Coetzee's autobiographical narrative arc, the breaking of sexual taboos, impressed on the protagonist through the intimacy with others, be it real or fantasized, inevitably evokes a sense of shame, or fear of it.

The boy's desire is natural but also complex in that it is stressed by an appreciation of aesthetic beauty, defined in part by the marble sculptured illustrations he 'pores over' in 'Arthur Mee's *Children's Encyclopaedia*' (B 107). From these books, the boy '…has an idea of the perfect human body. When he sees that perfection manifested in white marble, something thrills inside him; a gulf opens up; he is on the edge of falling' (57). However, in the boy's actual experience of the bodies of others, gathered mostly from stolen glimpses in the classroom, on the playground, or in the street, lies a sense of guilt, a feeling that should his desire be discovered, it would be deemed shameful:

> Of all the secrets that set him apart, this may in the end be the worst. Among all these boys he is the only one in whom this dark erotic current runs; among all this innocence and normality, he is the only one who desires. (57)

Therefore, from the outset the protagonist's desire appears inflected with shame, albeit a shame at this stage of his life set within the relatively safe cradle of the imagination. However, what further complicates the boy's sense of desire is that it is strongly intertwined with his messy, socially imposed, conceptions of race. While his sense of desire may be natural for an adolescent boy, his physical attraction is subject to categorization along racial lines as a result of the segregated society in which he is being raised, where he 'likes to gaze at slim, smooth brown legs in tight shorts. Best of all he loves the honey tanned legs of boys with blond hair,' and in which 'Afrikaans children are almost like Coloured children, he finds, unspoiled and thoughtless, running wild, then suddenly, at a certain age, going bad, their beauty dying within them' (56).

The idea of sex and sexual liaisons are blanketed in the forbidden, suggestive imaginings from the mind of a boy wrapped in the heated, passionate frustrations of adolescent desire: 'Beauty and desire: he is disturbed by the feeling that the legs of

these boys, blank and perfect and inexpressive, create in him. What is there that can be done with legs beyond devouring them with one's eyes? What is desire *for*?' (56).

The overt sense that desire is forbidden, that sexual boundaries exist between races, stems from apartheid legislation. While the Immorality Act of 1927, which forbade extramarital sex between whites and blacks, was effectively the legacy of former British and Afrikaner governments, the Nationalist Party's apartheid government of 1948 introduced further segregation laws, such as the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949) and Immorality Amendment Act (1950) laws which forbade marriage and extramarital sex between whites and other races. If shame is born out of the socio-political taboo attached to the desired body, then the boy is ashamed of desiring that which is not available or permitted to be desired. The protagonist's awareness of the forbidden leads to illusions and fantasies about the unknown Other: 'He is Coloured, but there are Coloured people everywhere. He is wearing pants so tight that they sit tightly across his neat buttocks and leave his slim clay-brown thighs almost naked' (60). Furthermore, the boy's ignorance of and curiosity towards the Coloured children leads to his fantasy induced hypothesis regarding their sexual freedom:

> His body is perfect and unspoiled, as if it had emerged only yesterday from its shell. Why do children like this, boys and girls under no compulsion to go to school, free to roam far from the watching eyes of parents, whose bodies are their own to do with as they please – why do they not come together in a feast of sexual delight? Is the answer that they are too innocent to know what pleasures are available to them – that only dark and guilty souls know such secrets? (60)

His image of the Coloured children as free and innocent is ironic and false because while their social position denies them that freedom it also attaches to them a mark of degeneracy. He attributes to them the erotic and heroic feats seen in the stories and depictions of Greek gods at sexual play with mortals – 'Daphne pursued by Apollo; Persephone ravished by Dis' (57) – and they become for him the

embodiment of the conflict between desire and chastity, of sexual immorality in all its allure.

The protagonist's personal need to understand others through a desired intimacy is best demonstrated in the episode with Eddie, a Coloured boy who comes to work for the Coetzee family whilst they are living in Cape Town (74). The protagonist's relationship with Eddie reveals a personal truth about people of different race and social class. Eddie teaches the protagonist how to ride a bicycle, thus affirming that Coloureds are adept at certain activities where he is not (75). Also, during a bout of wrestling, the protagonist is outdone physically: Eddie '…had a wiry strength and a singleness of purpose that always made him the victor. The victor, but cautious in victory' (75). However, the adults dehumanise Eddie, for instance, in the way he is severely beaten by the Englishman Trevelyan after running away and being caught; (75) or when the protagonist's mother claims that people like Eddie 'always end up in a reformatory, and then in jail' (76). On the other hand, the moments of playful intimacy between the boys, scenes of physical closeness, serve to humanise Eddie in the protagonist's eyes:

> The smell of Eddie's body stays with him from these bouts, and the feel of his head, the high bullet-shaped skull and close, coarse hair… There is a moment as the two of them wrestle when his lips and nose are pressed against Eddie's hair. He breathes in the smell, the taste: the smell, the taste of smoke. (76)

These brushes with the physicality of Eddie – his scent, the touch of his skin, the coarseness of hair, incite the protagonist's curiosity and drive him to spy on the boy while bathing:

> Every weekend Eddie had to give himself a bath, standing in a footbath in the servant's lavatory and washing himself with a soapy rag. He and his brother hauled a dustbin below the tiny window and climbed up to peek. Eddie was naked but for his leather belt, which he still wore around his waist. Seeing the two faces at the window, he gave a big smile and shouted *'Hê!'* and danced in the footbath, splashing the water, not covering himself. (75)

These episodes with Eddie demonstrate the protagonist's need for intimacy with the body of the other boy in order to confirm for himself how alike or unalike they are; in other words, he seeks to understand the differences separating them outside of those stated by authorities, namely, the Nationalist Party, the Church, and his parents; authorities of whom he is suspicious.

The protagonist's relationship with his parents, with regards to the intimacy of a physical nature, is undoubtedly an influence on his ability to relate emotionally and physically to others over time. The boy's reactions to any contact with his father's body confirm the antagonistic relationship between them. In *Boyhood*, the sight of his father's and uncles' naked bodies whilst swimming provokes an awkwardness in the protagonist:

> When he saw that they were going to swim naked, he tried to withdraw, but they would not let him. They were gay and full of jokes; they wanted him to take of his clothes and swim too, but he would not. So he saw all three penises, his father's most clearly of all, pale and white. He remembers clearly how he resented being made to look at it. (121)

While to the reader this scene might appear a harmless, even natural interaction between a father and son, the language used to recall the scene, 'he resented being made to look at it' (110), suggests that the boy feels coerced into witnessing something he finds repulsive, as if it were a violation of his private self.

In another scene in which the boy and his father are watching a boxing match, the boy tugs at his father's hair in a moment of excitement. The boy reflects on his actions with a sense of bewilderment: 'In his hand he retains the feel of his father's hair, coarse, sturdy. The violence of his action still puzzles and disturbs him. He has never been so free with his father's body before. He would prefer that it did not happen again' (110). The unwanted intimacy, a violent one, brings him a sense of regret. He is ashamed of his behaviour, at having been intimate with his father's body of which he wants no part, wants no affiliation.

We have seen how the protagonist appreciates but also loathes his mother's affection. It is out of this ambivalence that he consciously begins distancing himself from her – resulting in a relationship that is irreversibly changed. His emotional detachment from his mother finds a physical counterpart in the recalling of what he believes to be his first memory:

> She guards her breasts carefully in case they are knocked. His very first memory [...] is of her white breasts. He suspects he must have hurt them when he was a baby, beaten them with his fists, otherwise she would not deny them to him so pointedly, she who denies him nothing else. (35)

The boy's recall of his infancy, of his mother's breasts, and the subsequent bearing it has on their relationship adheres to what Coetzee calls, in his discussions with Kurtz, *sympathetic intuitions* (GS 133):

> ...accounts of infant psychology often refer to the infant's needs. We don't find it necessary to give a scientific definition of need because on the basis of our own experience we can intuit what a need is, indeed even what it feels like. I call such intuitions *sympathetic intuitions.* (133)

Coetzee argues that our faculties of sympathy and imagination enable us to identify sympathetically with others. In other words, we have the ability to imagine and project ourselves into the lives of others and, to some extent, live the lives of others in a particular moment. However, this is not to say that the life of the other we are living is the true life, but rather that these '...sympathetic identifications have a fiction-like status, and that our *sympathetic intuitions* can be relied on only to yield fictional truths' (134). Furthermore, Coetzee contends that '...the sole access we have to past mental states of our own is through memory,' (135) and so we cannot recall our infancy:

> ...you can imagine such an existence; you can project yourself sympathetically into it; you can, briefly, be such a baby. The identification is further strengthened by an awareness that the baby into whose life you are projecting yourself is or was you yourself. Though you cannot consciously remember being that baby, you must have been it. (135)

Therefore, imagining to be an infant in need is a *sympathetic intuition* like any other: 'When we sympathetically inhabit our neonate selves, we are inhabiting a fiction' (135). Kurtz's response provides an interesting counterpoint to Coetzee's view. She says that while we are sympathetically able to imagine the lives of others, there are also instances in which we project parts of ourselves onto others, and that these projected parts are sometimes the aspects of ourselves that we reject or fear (139). She says:

> Psychoanalytic theory proposes that we project into others those parts of ourselves which we want to get rid of, or not to know about, and so on, […] that we actively, if unconsciously, invite others to know something about us that we do not know about ourselves. (140)

Accordingly, we may envisage the protagonist's behaviour in his relationships with others from a twofold perspective: first, as his imagining of his mother's life and her love for him, a love that has come at a cost to her, because of the pain he causes her, and second, as the unconscious projection of his unwanted self, that is, the self that is unable to reciprocate his mother's love, the part of him that fears intimacy.

These points demonstrate a continuity of behaviour, cemented over time in the three books as *lasting dispositions*. The protagonist perceives how much his mother's identity is responsible for the formation of his own, and it is this realization of his dependency on her that appears to motivate his emotional distancing from her. This systematic coldness on his part sets the pattern for a later sequence of events, evident in *Youth*'s portrayal of his troublesome relationships with women, at once possessive and distant. And yet, there exists a complex dynamic between dependency and freedom. First, he is dependent on women out of his need for love as the symbolic fulfilment of the poet's Muse, a romanticised vision that a certain kind of woman would free his poetic spirit: 'If he had a beautiful, worldly-wise mistress who smoked with a cigarette-holder and spoke French, he would soon be

transformed, even transfigured, he is sure' (4). Second, he flees women who seem in any way dependent on him. When it comes to relationships, be they platonic or romantic, he possesses a distaste for commitment.

It is in *Youth*, then, where fantasies of childhood desire manifest in actual experience and sexual encounters. Yet, while he contemplates love, his affairs end abruptly, some come to nothing while others end in ignominy. For instance, prior to his departure for London, the protagonist is involved with a girl named Sarah whom he 'gets pregnant' (32). He is found wanting, exposed for his inadequacy not only as a lover but as a person, lacking the right sentiments needed to develop a relationship with another human being: '"I will stand by you," he could say. "Leave it all to me," he could say. But how can he say he will stand by her when what standing by her will mean in reality fills him with foreboding, when his whole impulse is to drop the telephone and run away?' (33). The protagonist's conduct with Sarah is shameful, yet he seems to be without remorse: 'She has taught him a lesson in how to behave. As for him, he has emerged ignominiously, he cannot deny it. What help he has given her has been faint-hearted and, worse, incompetent' (35). He plainly acknowledges his transgressions, and yet, without the accompaniment of guilt, these confessions lack sincerity. Instead, his reactions, for the most part displays of passive-aggressive irritation, arise out of fear of shame, of public exposure of his misdeeds: 'He prays she will never tell the story to anyone' (35). Thus, in absence of sincere self-recrimination, the protagonist is effectively shamed only by us, the readers. Again, the emergence of shame in the story of the protagonist's life follows an evident pattern, a trace of shame.

The reoccurring idea of the protagonist not being 'built for love' (S 82) both contradicts and reinforces the idea he has of himself and the idea others have of him, which resonates Ricoeur's notion of continuity of *character*: how we behave is

how we are seen to behave, and with whom and what we identify is how we are identified, by ourselves and by others. In *Summertime*, we hear of the mature John's attempts at romance: his wishing to make love in time to the music of Schubert; his writing of letters (175) and attending dance classes (182). Given what we already claim to know about the protagonist, such behaviour, again seen in terms of Ricoeur's theory, can be described as acting out-of-character, which paradoxically reinforces what we expect of his character. In other words, if we contend that these endeavours of a seemingly romantic nature are not, in fact, for the sake of romance, we might uncover a behaviour that is more an obsessive pursuit of the artist's life, and thus in keeping with the protagonist's character.

It is apparent that the protagonist's experience of the sexually nuanced bodies, so erotically depicted in *Boyhood*, has influenced his adult associations with sex as a shameful act. Though he envisages love as connected to its romantic depictions in books, sex itself is mingled with feelings of shame. Consequently, in *Summertime*, while sex is depicted as a subject with which John is not entirely comfortable, seen in the testimony of his lovers by whom he is sexually ridiculed, there emerges the notion of sex as art: the expression of desire through art forms: sexuality enacted through art, music, dance. For instance, the protagonist's desire for Adriana, a Brazilian woman, a professional dancer and the mother of one of his students, is first expressed through letters:

> One letter was about Franz Schubert […] He said that listening to Schubert had taught him one of the great secrets of love: how we can sublime love as chemists in the old days sublimed base substances. […] It was from Schubert that he had learned to sublime love, he said. Not until he met me did he understand why in music movements are called movements. *Movement in stillness, stillness in movement.* (175)

This attempt to sway Adriana with his words does not convince her. She does not understand his abstraction of love, his complicated reasoning, his reduction

of love and feeling to language that seems too systematic, too formal: 'perhaps this is how these Dutch Protestants behave when they fall in love: prudently, long-windedly, without fire, without grace' (172). He next attempts to win her over by learning to dance. He signs up for one of her classes at a studio where she teaches Latin American steps. However, here too he fails, and once again Adriana's testimony exposes John's character, his inharmoniousness with the body, even his own: 'He was not at ease in his body. He moved as though his body were a horse that he was riding, a horse that did not like its rider and was resisting' (183).

In the testimony of his lover, Julia, we have similar evidence of John's ambiguous relationship with love and sexuality. As with the *Braziliera*, the protagonist attempts to understand physical intimacy with Julia by transforming sex into a form he can relate to – classical music. John wishes his lovemaking with Julia to unfold in time to the slow rhythms of Schubert, wishing her to 'feel through the music!' (69). John perceives lovemaking through music as a re-enactment of feeling:

> Feelings had natural histories of their own. They came into being within time, flourished for a while or failed to flourish, then died or died out. The kinds of feeling that flourished in Schubert's day were by now, most of them, dead. The sole way left to us to re-experience them was via the music of the times. Because music was the trace, the inscription, of feeling. (69)

However, John's vision of lovemaking is explicitly not shared by Julia: "Music isn't about fucking,' I went on. 'Music is about foreplay. It's about courtship. You sing to the maiden before you go to bed with her, not while you are in bed with her' (70). This failure in bed is significant in that it foreshadows a later scene in which John and Julia's lovemaking was in her words: '…something truly to write home about. I even shed tears at its conclusion' (75). What made their truly felt intimacy possible, in Julia's opinion, was that for once, and only once, John was able to connect with her on an emotional level:

> John saw or guessed what was going on in me and for once opened his heart, the heart he normally kept wrapped in armour. With open hearts, his and mine, we came together. For him it could and should have marked a sea-change, that first opening of the heart. (83)

The key phrase here is, *should have marked.* Instead, John, in keeping with his character, '…strapped the armour back over his heart, this time with chains and a double padlock, and stole out into the darkness' (84). Thus, we have Julia's final, damning verdict on John as a lover: '…John wasn't made for love, wasn't constructed that way – wasn't constructed to fit into or be fitted into. Like a sphere. Like a glass ball. There was no way to connect with him. That is my conclusion, my mature conclusion' (81).

VI - Vocation

Ricoeur's theory sustains that *acquired identifications* – the identifying with the values and qualities of heroes and villains – constitute a vital element in the construction of one's *narrative identity*. Coetzee depicts his calling as an author in terms of his literary influences, the writers and books with which he identifies. In *Boyhood,* we learn of his childhood heroes from history and story books, 'Sir Lancelot of the lake and Richard the Lionheart and Robin Hood with his longbow yew and his suit of Lincoln green' (129), and of the literary education given to him both at school – 'English classes…on Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (138) – and at home by his parents: his father, who owns the poems of Wordsworth and Keats and admires Shakespeare, and his mother, who likes the poems of Rubert Brooke whose '…books have pride of place on the mantelshelf in the living room...' (104). The young protagonist's literary education leads not only to his identifying with historical and fictional figures, but also to the understanding that books lead to greatness.

Reading offers the protagonist a choice of opposing factions, a choice of antagonists: 'who do you like, Smuts or Malan? Who do you like, Superman or Captain Marvel? Who do you like, the Russians or the Americans?' (27). However, this choice is complicated by the largely unconscious connections he makes between his real and fictional worlds. For instance, his understanding of the English and Afrikaners and the social constructs associated with them lead to his favouring English heroes, those of 'Dunkirk and the battle of Britain…' or 'the boy at the battle of Jutland, who stood by his guns while the deck was burning under him,' (129) over the less heroic figures of the Afrikaner tradition, the likes of '…Dirkie Uys, who rode his horse till it died…or…Piet Retief, who was made a fool of by Dingaan…' or the '…Voortrekkers getting their revenge by shooting thousands of

Zulus who didn't have guns...' (129). Also, the protagonist favours the Russians over the Americans because of the connection to his mother: 'His mother's name is Vera…Vera, she once told him, was a Russian name. When the Russians and the Americans were first set before him as antagonists between whom he had to choose…he chose the Russians…' (27).

In view of Kurtz's discussion on the psychoanalytical defence processes, *splitting* and *projection*, the protagonist tends to classify individuals or groups according to the values adopted from books. Following the patterns of historical narratives, for instance, accounts of the Cold War, and grand narratives, for example, the Spartans against the Persians, he projects storylines onto people and aspects of his life. Thus, he unconsciously uses these processes to better understand his experience of the world and his role in it. What these processes create is a form of narrative through which the boy sees his own character forming, a discovery, then, of a story about himself in which he plays the central role. Thus, within these narratives of Other emerges a narrative of self, a *narrative identity*, answering the questions: who he is in relation to others and what significant role he will play in his own life story.

In *Boyhood*, while on a scout camp, the protagonist is saved by an older boy after almost drowning. Bruner refers to such incidents in one's life as 'turning points', that is, '…those episodes in which […] the narrator attributes a crucial change or stance in the protagonist's story to a belief, a conviction, a thought (31). What materialises from this event for the protagonist is not only a real sense of his mortality, but also a sense that his life has been spared, that his life has purpose: 'From that day onward he knows there is something special about him. He should have died but he did not. Despite his unworthiness, he has been given a second life. He was dead but is alive' (B 17).

Thus, three fundamental aspects of the protagonist's childhood contribute to the construction of his *narrative identity*: firstly, his imaginative connection with and projection of his *acquired identifications*, namely the values associated with heroic literary figures; secondly, his brush with death and the resulting awareness of his own mortality; thirdly, the deep conviction that he is 'special'. This complement of historical and fictional narratives enables the protagonist to plot his own life story, embedded within a structure that extends, in Ricoeurian terms, like a narrative bridge between an historical truth and a fictional one.

Taken from Aristotle's *Poetics*, the term *emplotment* stems from the Greek *muthos* meaning 'fable' and 'plot': a make-believe story that is well-constructed (Ricoeur, OP 188). However, Aristotle's perception of plot is not a structure that is fixed but rather a process, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Viewed through Ricoeur's understanding of *emplotment*, Coetzee's autobiographical oeuvre can be envisaged as an 'assimilation of a life to a story' (187) – an integration of critical events into the story of one's life. Thus, along the lines of *emplotment*, through continuity of *character* and the connectedness of multifaceted narratives, the protagonist both creates and follows the path to becoming a writer.

Firstly, an awareness of his own mortality develops into a reoccurring trait – a preoccupation with death. Thus, knowing that he will die, he begins his pursuit of immortality in the same way as his heroes, '…Horatius and his comrades …Leonidas and his Spartans… Roland…' (25), have cheated death and become immortal. In fact, he '…can think of nothing more heroic than holding a pass, nothing nobler than giving up one's life to save other people, who will afterwards weep over one's corpse' (25). Accordingly, imagination plays an integral part in the forming of the protagonist's life narrative. In discussion with Kurtz, Coetzee reveals his early memories of childhood and his own active imagination and self-awareness:

> I remember at the age of eight or nine becoming aware of myself as a child inordinately given to fantasy. At the time I felt this to be a form of self-indulgence, and felt guilty about it; my feelings of guiltiness were fortified by the very puritan culture in which I lived, as well as by disapproving comments from people who knew me well, my uncles in particular (but not my mother). I compared myself with other children of my age, contrasting the ease with which they handled the real world with my own ineptitude. Nonetheless, I never thought of giving up my fantasy life and attaching myself to the real. Rather, I accepted fantasising as a kind of affliction that had been visited on me at birth, a congenital disease that I was doomed to carry. (GS 156)

This interplay of 'fantasy life' and the 'real world' appears throughout *Boyhood*. In the episode in which the teachers undermine and mock his Greek classmate, the protagonist assumes a role: 'the injustice of it all angers him; he would like to do battle for Theo' (150). By preparing himself to do battle, he has entered the realm of the knight or the soldier, the realm of the imaginary.

Key to the development of the protagonist's identity as a writer is his perception of language as an outlet for his imagination. Ingenuity with language arises in his personifying and the attributing of mimetic qualities to letters of the alphabet. Not only does he associate his mother with the 'icy capital *V,* a plunging arrow' but he favours the Russians and the Romans, 'because he likes the letter *r*, particularly the capital *R,* the strongest of all the letters' (27). Also, his efforts at school to write imaginatively suggest a need to express himself through language. He is expected to write essays on various topics, essays '…on the character of Mark Anthony, on the character of Brutus, on road safety, on sport, on nature' (139), and his enthusiasm for the task sparks when his imagination runs free, when the imagined merges with the real:

> …he feels a spurt of excitement as he writes, and the pen begins to fly over the page. In one of his essays a highwayman waits under cover at the roadside. His horse snorts softly, its breath turns to vapour in the cold night air. A ray of moonlight falls like a slash across his face; he holds his pistol under the flap of his coat to keep the powder dry. (139)

Similar fusion of the historical and imaginary are a common feature of Coetzee's metafictional narratives, beginning with his first novel *Dusklands* (1974), in which the two distinct parts focus on the Vietnam War and colonial expansion into south east Africa and whose characters bear the name Coetzee. The novel's fusion of the historical and fictional, along with autobiographical intrusions, is certainly a trait of Coetzee's work, supporting his own assertion that: 'All autobiography is storytelling, all writing is autobiography' (DP 392).

Another indication of the protagonist's imaginative manipulation of his world manifests in his love for sport, cricket in particular. The implicit component of competitiveness produces an imaginative re-enactment of conflictual relations with others. The logic and values attained from real-life incidents (at home or on the playground) and from his reading (stories of historical battles, legends) are projected onto the logic and values of the game. His inventiveness and creativity point to an ability to project role-play on to the world. The scenes that play out in his imagination manifest through invention in a corporeal form – from the imagined to the created. To illustrate, the protagonist is exasperated whilst playing cricket in the garden, first by his brother, who grows bored of the game, and then by his mother, whose awkward, if spirited, inability to throw the ball is 'shameful' to him (29). As a result, he invents a ball-throwing mechanism, which effectively functions as a substitute for real people:

> He cuts a jam-tin in half and nails the bottom half to a two-foot wooden arm. He mounts the arm on an axle through the walls of a packing-case weighed down with bricks. The arm is drawn forward by a strip of inner-tube rubber, drawn back by a rope that runs through a hook on the packing-case. (29)

What this episode illustrates is the protagonist's tendency to remove himself from situations that make him uncomfortable, to limit or deny the involvement of others in his life, and to play on his own. His ability to invent, to create, effectively

allows him to replace people, to achieve isolation. And this ease with which he is able to get on by himself, without others, is indicative of his character. At heart, he is happiest with his own company, immersed in a solitude that resists involvement with others, but also one that results in creative output. Thus, a pattern of behaviour emerges: the removing of oneself from society, because of the shame or the conflict that arises, and within the solace of solitude comes the vigour of imagination and the process of creation, and '…with this he is satisfied: he has bowled and batted all by himself, he has triumphed, nothing is impossible' (30).

We have seen how the protagonist's imagination and heightened sense of self contribute to the development of his *narrative identity*. Now let us turn to how the awareness of his own mortality influences the shaping of his identity as author. We read how the protagonist's young self is guided by a certainty that he is destined for greatness, that '…he is convinced that he is different, special' (108). However, this certainty is overshadowed by the presentiment of his own mortality: 'What he does not yet know is why he is in the world. He suspects he will not be an Arthur or an Alexander, revered in his own lifetime. Not until after he is dead will he be appreciated' (108). If we are to interpret the protagonist's driving force to be his aspiration to be like his literary heroes, then it reveals that what he truly desires is immortality.

While in *Boyhood* the protagonist identifies with heroic figures of grand narratives, their triumphs and defeats, in *Youth* the desire to emulate his heroes assumes a more determined, serious guise. His heroes are now writers. We encounter the protagonist as a young man and a maths student at the University of Cape Town. Recalling the younger precocious reader from *Boyhood*, we now find a more mature protagonist and, for that matter, a more complex figure, whose literary interests and aspirations are all but developed, no longer dwelling on the remote

figures of history and legend, but pondering the realm of the literary figures he wishes to emulate. All aspects of his life seem, to use Coetzee's own analogy of 'congenital disease', afflicted by his ambition to be a poet. Evidence of his lifestyle pertains to literary sources in almost every way. Even his diet is one 'Rousseau would approve of, or Plato (Y 3). In his endeavour to develop his own voice as a poet, the youthful protagonist demonstrates a critical appreciation of different writers and their styles:

> Hopkin's lines are packed too tight with consonants, Shakespeare's too tight with metaphors. Hopkins and Shakespeare also set too much store on uncommon words, particularly old English words: *maw reck, pelf.* He does not see why verse has always to be rising to a declamatory pitch, why it cannot be content to follow the flexions of the ordinary speaking voice – in fact, why it has to be so different from prose. (21)

In a sense his *narrative identity* is moulded out of the lives of kindred spirits, those writers with whom he has 'aesthetic allegiance' (Attwell, PS 31) We are privy to his opinions on a number of writers, particularly the poets Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, and authors such as Henry James and Ford Madox Ford. We learn how they have come to shape his own view of the world, both in terms of socio-political history and art: 'Like Pound and Eliot, he must be prepared to endure all that life has stored up for him, even if that means exile, obscure labour, and obloquy' (Y 20). According to Attwell, not only is Coetzee indebted to his precursors in terms of style and philosophical outlook, but there is also common ground in that he shares with them the trait of identity construction within narrative, in other words, there exists a heightened awareness of self in all their writing. Attwell says:

> The antecedents that Coetzee chooses from the history of the novel are those writers who have brought self-consciousness to the surface and writers in whose work one easily discerns a process of self-invention: Becket, Joyce, Kafka, and Nabokov, but also Defoe, Dostoevsky, and Sterne. (PS 31)

Furthermore, as discussed, in *Youth* the protagonist believes that what all artists need in order to be successful is to be ardent lovers. However, not only is it

important to prove oneself in the art of love, to show one's passion, one must equally be seen to possess such desire. He compares his romantic exploits with those of other artists, the likes of Picasso: 'Picasso, who is a great artist, perhaps the greatest of all, is a living example. Picasso falls in love with women, one after another…' (Y 11); and Henry Miller: were he 'merely a satyr, a monster of indiscriminate appetite, he could be ignored. But Henry Miller is an artist, and his stories, outrageous though they may be and probably full of lies, are stories of an artist's life' (29).

However, it is not in the protagonist's character to be like Miller or Picasso: 'He is quieter, gloomier, more northern' (11). And yet, this failure to be an artful lover does lead to a realisation of self, for his need for solitude and the acceptance of his aversion for the public gaze. Thus, a more realistic view of his role in life as a writer begins, but a different sort of writer to those he aimed to be like. And with that realisation comes a consolidation of his *narrative identity*, as solitary writer, as an outsider.

According to the theory of *emplotment*, if a life is told as a story is told, then it requires an ending (Ricoeur, OP 188). And what ending is more conclusive than death? Between the years 1986 and 1990, Coetzee lost both his parents, his son, Nicolas, and his former wife, Philippa (Attwell, LW 56). Given the tragedy surrounding his personal life and how frequently the theme appears in his fiction, Coetzee's relationship with death is a significant one. In discussion with Attwell, he reveals his relationship with time and ultimately death:

> I am not surprised that you detect in me a horror of chronicity South African style…but that horror is also a horror of death […] Historicizing oneself is an exercise in locating one's significance, but is also a lesson, at the most immediate level, in insignificance. It is not just time as history that threatens to engulf one: it is time itself, time as death. (DP 209)

In *Summertime*, while the reader revisits the living voice of the protagonist in the dated and undated diary fragments, at the beginning and end of the novel respectively, he is otherwise dead. We follow testimonies concerning 'John Coetzee' in life and in death, by those who knew him, namely lovers and former colleagues. Coetzee's choice to present his protagonist's life from beyond the grave through the testimonies of others is congruous with the protagonist's character in that it reflects his preoccupation with his own death as established in *Boyhood.* Coetzee's creative choice to conclude his autobiographical novels, to end his life story as a writer in its semantically complete state as dead, adheres to Ricoeur's theory of *narrative identity* in that a narrative is only fully complete once the life is fully lived and the author is dead (OA 115).

Furthermore, the choice to present the protagonist as dead plays with the autobiographical genre and allows Coetzee to address the controversy surrounding his life. The ultimate examination of a life, lived and transformed into a story, is effectively articulated in *Summertime* where Coetzee examines his life from the perspective of his critics and the public. Witnessed as both a living, aspiring writer and a deceased, acclaimed one, these testimonies offer an almost fatalistic view on his endeavour to be a writer. Through the voices of others, he steps outside of his physical self and scrutinizes his life from the most critical of positions:

> …as a writer he knew what he was doing, he had a certain style, and style is the beginning of distinction. But he had no special sensitivity that I could detect, no original insight in the human condition. He was just a man, a man of his time, talented, maybe even gifted, but, frankly, not a giant. (S 242)

There are numerous critics of Coetzee in terms of how he lives and how he wrote in the past, particularly regarding his public image in South Africa. *Summertime*, then, is his riposte, albeit, paradoxically, from the standpoint of the critics themselves. Here we read the opinion of his former university colleague:

> *Coetzee was never a popular writer. By that I do not simply mean that his books did not sell well. I also mean that the public never took him to their collective heart. There was an image of him in the public realm as a cold and supercilious intellectual, an image he did nothing to dispel. Indeed one might even say he encouraged it.* (235)

The notion of the artist as public intellectual is a debate that Coetzee is familiar with, as he has often been called to defend his position, a challenge he tacitly and reluctantly takes up. *Diary of a Bad Year* and *Elizabeth Costello* are just two of Coetzee's novels surrounded by controversy because of their subject matter: often volatile issues of a political and social nature which, while claiming to be fiction, come packaged with undeniable aspects of the author's persona.[9]

Coetzee is no outsider to controversy or criticism. The question of what the author is allowed to write in private, within the imaginative realm, and what might be interpreted by the reader as public, on matters that concern the extra-fictional world, is a matter implicitly addressed in the novels.

> The question of what should be permitted to go into his diary and what kept forever shrouded goes to the heart of all his writing. If he is to censor himself from expressing ignoble emotions – resentment at having his flat invaded, or shame at his own failure as a lover – how will those emotions ever be transfigured and turned into poetry? And if poetry is not to be the agency of his transfiguration from ignoble, why bother with poetry at all? (Y 10)

Even as early as *Boyhood*, there is a foreboding of what the public invasion of the private self can lead to. One afternoon, a classmate enters his home uninvited to find the protagonist lying beneath a chair:

> 'What are you doing there?' he had asked. 'Thinking,' he had replied unthinkingly: 'I like thinking.' Soon everyone in his class knew about it: the new boy was odd, he wasn't normal. From that mistake he has learned to be

[9] Jane Poyner argues that the 'metageneric play' of Coetzee's later work 'self-reflexively strips away layers of intellectual authority to make Coetzee both accountable and not-accountable to the ethico-politics his characters promote. In these later works the figure of Coetzee most obviously haunts fictionalized texts to disrupt the pacts of genre… It is the slippage between the two, between author and author-protagonist, that energizes questions about the relationship between public intellectuals and the truths they promote.' (169)

> more prudent. Part of being prudent is always to tell less rather than more. (29)

The quality of prudency is one readily associated with Coetzee. Ricoeur cites Aristotle's belief that 'every story teaches and reveals universal aspects of the human condition' (OP 190). In Aristotle's view, poetry teaches universal truths, one of them being *phronesis* or *prudential* or intelligence. Thus, poetry, or fiction in general, teach moral values as opposed to the more practical knowledge taught by, say, the sciences. Story, then, nurtures what Ricoeur calls *narrative intelligence*, a quality Coetzee possesses in abundance given the consistent, implicit ethical nature of his work (OP 191).

Ricoeur's idea that a work is completed by the reader in the reading invites comparison with Roland Barthes's claims that when '…the author enters into his own death, writing begins…' (Barthes 142) and thus '…a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination' (148). Therefore, if the autobiography is the designated space in which the author reveals his/her identity and the space where the reader, whether it be critic, admirer, or scholar, finds the author, then Coetzee has cunningly played the Barthesian card. In *Summertime,* where it us up to us to determine what is the truth, the death of the author is very much the birth of the reader (316). In other words, as Ricoeur argues, it is on the reader that the responsibility of interpretation of a text lies. It is the reader who completes the narrative (OP 188).

> At the age of thirteen he is becoming surly, scowling, dark. He does not like this new, ugly self, he wants to be drawn out of it, but that is something he cannot do by himself. Yet who is there who will do it for him? (B 151)

The answer to the boy's question, albeit an unconscious and paradoxical one, is *others*. In his childhood and youth, he is drawn out of himself through reading the lives of others. As he grows older, he is drawn out of himself through writing. Writing the lives of others. In both instances, he loses himself, but by losing himself,

he finds his *narrative identity*. Writing, then, is a form of remembering, a process that coheres to psychoanalytical theory of forming narratives to access repressed memories; but also, in terms of hermeneutic theory, it is a form of remembering whereby we create narratives of our history by adopting a narrative structure that is familiar to us through our culture.

> He alone is left to do the thinking. How will he keep them all in his head, all the books, all the people, all the stories? And if he does not remember them, who will?' (B 166)

We tell stories of the lives we have lived, so that they can be remembered. So that we will be remembered, and not die. For Coetzee, writing is as much self-affirming as it is life-affirming.

Keeping One's Word

Truth, Ethics, Shame

From the recurrent themes in Coetzee's autobiographical novels, themes indicative of the protagonist's *character*, the first of the models of *permanence in time*, I turn to the second model, that of *keeping one's word*. This second model pertains to Ricoeur's primary thesis in *Oneself as Another* (1992) as to how one's *narrative identity* is closely linked to those of others and how we are bound to our community by an ethical responsibility. Thus, the model is symptomatic of the perseverance to maintain one's identity, but also of a faithfulness to ourselves and to others.

The notion of faithfulness asks not only for consistency in time but also that one adheres truthfully to one's word. When an author decides to write a form of life-narrative, the intention, one assumes, is to write the truth. However, the terms 'truth' and 'intention' are complicated in that they resist singular definition; no more so than in the genre of autobiography, because the very act of writing about one's own life, as a means of defining oneself, and all that it entails, is not a hard-fact science. Rather, it is an enigmatic thing, all at once layered, multifaceted, intangible, timeless.

In his inaugural lecture presented at the University of Cape Town in 1984, Coetzee defined autobiography as 'a kind of writing in which you tell the story of yourself as truthfully as you can, or as truthfully as you can bear to' ('Truth in Autobiography' 1). He also affirmed that autobiography is considered not as a genre of fiction but as a form of 'history writing with an allegiance to truth' (1). Leading from Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782), Coetzee discusses the concept of truth in terms of the cost of telling the truth. He suggests that at the heart of such self-analysis lies a desire which through the process of writing acquires a value, and the more so if that desire is shameful: (3)

> A desire whose value is kept secret increases in fascination and therefore in value […] the value of desire is retained as a resource which, to the degree that it is mysterious, fascinating, illicit, shameful, can be exchanged for words in the economy of confession […] everything shameful is valuable: every secret or shameful appetite is confessable currency. (3)

Coetzee suggests the more shameful the desire, the greater the cost of its revelation. Yet, if the author reveals the full truth – that which is most shameful to the author – then the author is exposed and the work itself loses its value. To make Coetzee's analogy clearer, let's turn to his own autobiographical novels. In each of the books we are shown numerous scenes that we look upon as shameful, such as, the boy stealing condensed milk and blaming the theft on the Native delivery man (B 63). Also, we perceive the protagonist's own sense of shame, for instance, the shame of his 'dark desires', when gazing at the body of the Coloured boy (60). Although these instances read in the confessional mode, in the guise of verisimilitude, they are not necessarily true. In fact, as a result of Coetzee's chosen fictional mode, we do not know to what extent these episodes are true or not. More importantly, we do not know what shameful truth lies concealed behind them. Another example is Coetzee's omission of details concerning his immediate family life during the 1970s. Thus, he may be said to withhold the truth that proves most costly. Using the analogy of 'the veil' and the confessional, Coetzee suggests a dynamic interplay between truth and the aesthetics of narrative. In veiling the truth, intrigue is created (TA 3). In other words, the act of crafting truth is also, potentially, an act of concealment.

Coetzee claims Rousseau may have begun writing the *Confessions*, with the intention of telling the truth, however, he may not have known what that truth was. The process of writing, therefore, is as much a process 'of *finding* the truth as of *telling* the truth' (3). Hence, in the attempt to tell the truth about ourselves, we discover ourselves and our history. And yet, as writers, as artists, the relationship between the

truth and the desire to reveal, to confess, is conflictual, because inevitably the threat of giving up the mystery exists and, thus, the currency of secret desire.

In Coetzee's view, then, the autobiographer is involved in the act of '*making* the truth of his life' (4). In the process, elements that are left out are as much a part as those elements that are selected – omissions are a part of the life, because they are concealed parts of the teller. In conversation with Attwell, Coetzee says 'that the interviewer may not get the whole truth because the subject may not know the whole truth because resistances and repressions involved are too strong' (DP 105). Also, autobiography, while presenting the past, is equally a representation of the present in which the writer writes, to the extent that one reflects in an endeavour to understand oneself, at the time of writing, in relation to the narrated past (TA 4).

Furthermore, this interplay between what is recounted and what is not is complicated when the truth about the past is not unveiled and must, therefore, be compensated for by form, perhaps unconsciously, surfacing through language. In a sense, how one writes, in that the words are genuine, supersedes what one writes, which cannot be called fact. Thus, it is the text's authenticity as it is revealed through language that is in the end tested for its veracity.

Coetzee concludes that what ultimately provides any life narrative with its frame of truth is *sincerity*, which he defines as 'the immediate presence of the moral self to the self' (4). Conversely, in Coetzee's opinion, withholding the truth is not a gesture of insincerity. An autobiographer is not only in possession of a life lived, but also in possession of a pen and an imagination, the instruments of craft, with which he/she brings that personal history to life for the reader. The unspoken pact that exists between the writer of autobiography and the reader calls for sincerity, but it also expects a truth beyond truth, an authenticity revealed through language.

In an interview with David Attwell in 1992, Coetzee sustained that 'all writing is autobiography: everything that you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it' (DP 17). This assertion appears to echo an earlier statement by Coetzee in his essay 'Remembering Texas' (1984) in which he reveals how he came to suspect that 'languages spoke people or at the very least spoke through them' (DP 53). What these rather enigmatic, Barthesian claims point to is Coetzee's belief that truth is not, like one of Nabokov's butterflies, something that can be precisely pinned down, but rather something that is revealed in moments and concealed in others, a term subject to time and its subjective interlocuters – memory and interpretation.

Coetzee provides a two-part definition of truth: truth that is true to fact and a truth 'beyond that' – a 'higher truth' (DP 17). Outside the objective truth of documentary, for Coetzee truth is revealed through the creative process: in and from the process of writing:

> Writing, then, involves an interplay between the push into the future that takes you to the blank page in the first place, and a resistance. Part of that resistance is psychic, but part is also an automatism built into language: the tendency of words to call up other words, to fall into patterns that keep propagating themselves. Out of that interplay there emerges, if you are lucky, what you recognise as the true. (18)

Because human nature is complex, a person's life story is not one but many, and so it follows that the identity of a person's life is equally complex. According to Brockmeier and Harré, a single life can consist of multiple life stories which may alter over time (48). As with Ricoeur's theory of *narrative identity*, this idea suggests that it is false to believe that autobiographical texts are different from one another as a result of varying degrees of truth, because it implies that a 'graduation of truth values' (Brockmeier and Harré 49) exists between hard, documented facts and lies or self-deception, which in turn leads one to infer that there is a marker of reality, a set

of objective criteria against which narrative truth is weighed. And yet, argue Brockmeier and Harré, a predetermined reality, subject as it is to interpretation, does not exist (49). According to this view, the very process of searching and giving meaning to one's life over the course of that life is the basis of what it means to be human. The following passage from *Youth* illustrates the protagonist's awareness of that narrow cross-section between the permeable layers of fact and fiction, of how in the act of writing '*things are rarely as they seem*' (10):

> How could she believe that what she read in his diary was not the truth, the ignoble truth, about what was going on in the mind of her companion during those heavy evenings of silence and sighings but on the contrary a fiction, one of many possible fictions, true only in the sense that a work of art is true – true to itself, true to its own immanent aims – . (10)

What this passage also suggests is the role of readers in the interpretation of the narrative based on their own experience – a reading which may or may not conform to their memories and understanding of the same events, of the same history.

In his discussion with Kurtz, Coetzee again defines truth in ambiguous terms: a truth bound mysteriously to fiction and the fallibility of memory. As he did in his 1984 lecture and later in his interview with Attwell in 1992, Coetzee describes autobiographical writing as a kind of truth-making (GS 4), whereby one constructs the truth about one's life story through a process of selection. However, what is selected depends partly on choices as to what is deemed worth telling and partly on what one remembers. And what one remembers and what one unconsciously invents as a result of misinterpretation or selection is not always clear, as the protagonist illustrates in *Youth*:

> Besides, who is to say that the feelings he writes in his diary are his true feelings? Who is to say that at each moment while the pen moves he is truly himself? At one moment he might truly be himself, at another he might simply be making things up. How can he know for sure? (10)

It is difficult to discuss truth without considering the problematics of memory and interpretation. According to Freeman and Brockmeier, one possible definition of autobiographical writing is that it is the investigation or examination of the self which draws on one's experience, as extracted from memory, for the purpose of presenting one's identity to the reader (81). Such a definition could be equally associated with the field of therapy where it is an investigation of the self through the patient's telling of experience through recall of memory. Where autobiography is a kind of historical storytelling and therapy a type of healing process, both draw on memory in order to attempt a truthful representation of the speaker or, in the case of the autobiography, the writer. But to what extent is memory fallible? How far can we rely on our memories? If, in the telling of memories, one develops a kind of narrative embellished by use of language and dramatic devices to enhance the effect, then to what degree are false memories created? Coetzee asks the reader and, indeed, himself:

> What relationship do I have with my life history? Am I its conscious author, or should I think of myself as simply a voice uttering with as little interference as possible a stream of words welling up from my interior? Above all, given the wealth of material I hold in memory, the material of a lifetime, what should or must I leave out, bearing in mind Freud's warning that what I omit without thinking (i.e. without conscious thought) may be the key to the deepest truth about me? Yet how is it logically possible for me to know what I am unthinkingly leaving out? (GS 2)

Theories of memory are further complicated when factoring in aspects of interpretation. When it comes to reading autobiography, the reader cannot resist applying their own interpretation to the text based on what they know, or think they know, about the author's life and identity. The question of interpretation becomes even more problematic when one considers that the author himself is interpreting his own memories from an understanding of his own identity partly formed by others and the account of their memories, memories that may well be false or, at

least, unreliable. Coetzee portrays the idea of fallible memory in *Boyhood* as the protagonist doubts what he remembers:

> It is a magnificent first memory […] But is it true? Why was he leaning out of the window watching an empty street? Did he really see the car hit the dog, or did he just hear a dog howling, and run to the window? Is it possible that he saw nothing but a dog dragging its hindquarters and made up the car and the driver and the rest of the story? (30)

Coetzee is very much aware of the conundrum of interpretation and the problem of memory as it relates to one's identity in the narrative of one's life. When scrutinizing experience, Coetzee asks how do we distinguish the event itself from: 'the event as we interpret it to or for ourselves, or as it is interpreted to or for us by others, particularly authoritative others?' (GS 12) Accuracy of memory and interpretation complicate the telling of truth as it exists in the murky realm between that which is, in Coetzee's terms, true to fact, and that which is a higher truth, attained ironically at times through fiction.

Coetzee discusses memory in terms of 'memory traces' (12) which are subject to interpretation, a relationship further complicated by the idea that behind every interpretation exists a will to interpret:

> How are we to disentangle the memory component from the component of interpretation, leaving aside for the moment the will behind the interpretation? Is it possible – philosophically but also neurologically – to speak of a memory that is a pristine, uncoloured interpretation? (12)

In more scientific terms, Kurtz describes memory as a means of 'encoding or representing experience for the purpose of learning and development.' The faculty of memory is required to master behavioural functions, but also to reflect on experience from which we subsequently learn: '…the urge to fix the story of our lives may be an aspect of a largely adaptive drive to rehearse the lessons of the past, issuing implicit instructions to ourselves in the present' (GS 23). She identifies two main memory systems: first, non-verbal, procedural memory, used in performing

'action sequences' (walking, etc.) and, second, episodic memory, used to 'code experience' verbally. It is episodic memory, then, that enables us to develop narrative, to tell stories (23). The shaping of memories differs from person to person, and can be determined by various factors, such as: the degree to which one might distort experience; the emotional relevance one attributes to experiences, whereby one event is seen as more significant than another, or when emotion is severed from memory altogether; or self-knowledge, that is, one's awareness of the processes of memory at work (24).

While Coetzee has said that all writing is autobiographical, he also asks, in terms of the freedom the author has in shaping the form of life-narratives, whether all life-narratives are fictions (GS 3). Coetzee suggests that the stories we choose to tell about ourselves are intrinsically tied to our identity and our moral values, in that we will shape the narrative according to a set of values which we as the protagonists of our own life stories are seen to uphold:

> we use [life-narrative] to elaborate for ourselves and our circle the story that suits us best, a story that justifies the way we have behaved in the past and behave in the present, a story in which we are generally right and other people are generally wrong. (4)

Be it in Coetzee's fiction (novels) or non-fiction (essays), or in a combination of both (*Elizabeth Costello*; *Diary of a Bad Year*), there is an underlying ethical agenda, and yet one he seems to subvert in that his portrayal of self is often shameful. It seems that while Coetzee values aesthetics, the realm of ethics is equally if not more important. Returning to Coetzee's claim that a higher truth is revealed in the process of writing, I believe that the truth Coetzee finds through writing is a truth embedded in the realm of ethics and one that has emerged out of the complex relationship he has with his country: its people, and its past. And the resulting faithfulness to the

portrayal of that ethic in Coetzee's autobiographical novels adheres to Ricoeur's second model of *permanence in time* – to the *keeping of one's word.*

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On the theme of ethics in autobiographical writing, Freeman and Brockmeier outline the idea of 'narrative integrity', which they define as the balance between the harmony of aesthetic form and the depth of ethical commitment seen in 'the shape of one's life' (NI 76). Their argument presupposes that a dialectic structure of meaning exists between aesthetics and ethics: how we tell stories about our lives is conditioned by our understanding of ethics. However, for there to be communal understanding there must be a degree of consensus as to what such ethical values entail (76).

According to Freeman and Brockmeier, a ratio of narrative integrity exists. On the one hand, a high degree for narratives emerging out of eras and cultures in which the standards of moral and ethical values are strong, in which case, the autobiographical memory is relatively unambiguous with a 'limited range of possible meanings' (76). On the other hand, a low degree of narrative integrity in eras and cultures whose moral and ethical values are less defined (perhaps as a result of being in a state of flux, for instance, during a period of socio-political unrest as was the case in Europe across most of the twentieth century). Here, the autobiographical memory is potentially 'more ambiguous and multivoiced' (76).

Significantly, the South Africa of which Coetzee is writing appears to fall in between these two poles. Coetzee addresses the Afrikaner whose moral and ethical code is agreed upon, in that it is one preestablished by church and state (the Dutch reformed and National Party, respectively). However, Coetzee, through his protagonist, presents an alternative: the Afrikaner who lives in internal opposition to the dictated and expected ethic of the social milieu of the Afrikaner folk. During the

apartheid era, this opposing moral and ethical value system was the humanistic ethic desired by the majority of South Africans, namely, the politically and socially oppressed black and coloured population of the country.

'Narrative integrity' can also be defined in terms of historicity: the idea that one's identity, constituted by an individual's personal history and psychology, is 'limited in historical time and cultural space' (77). Historical consciousness, as it relates to 'an irreversible order of events', coincides with historical writing: a recording of a chronological sequence of events within historical time (78). With historical consciousness comes the idea of personal history, in other words, one's personal life history within a greater historical process. It is perhaps for this reason that autobiography is envisaged as an historical genre, and the autobiographical identity as the socio-psychological developmental structure within history (77).

In the essay, 'References: The Codes of Culture', Nadine Gordimer argues that interpretation occurs largely through a deep reading of the same cultural resource system: 'to share at least sufficient of [the author's] cultural matrix to gain aesthetic pleasure and revelation from his cited signifiers… is a detective game, in which satisfaction comes from correctly interpreting the clue' (*Living in Hope and History* 40). Gordimer sets out how shared cultural experiences allow us to recognise shared cultural references, and the 'signifier' refers to nothing but itself if there is no equivalent in the reader's cultural experience: 'the signifier works within a closed system: it presupposes a cultural context shared by writer and reader beyond literacy' (40).

There are numerous occasions in the three autobiographical novels in which Coetzee writes in Afrikaans, in which the reader unfamiliar with the language will encounter that which is entirely foreign. For instance, in *Summertime*, Margot defends John's choice not to eat meat: '*Jy wil seker sê, John, ons het almal ons voorkeure*' (94). As a

language Afrikaans, derived from southern Dutch vernacular, does not have significant reach or influence on the global culture. If the language is completely foreign, then it stands that the culture embedded within that language is likely to be equally foreign. Therefore, the Afrikaans terms used by Coetzee signify less to a reader unfamiliar with the language and, thus, with the culture.

In Gordimer's words: 'The polymath interchange of the arts, letters, politics, history, philosophy is not the traffic of that reader's existence' (41). Afrikaans is a language whose cultural references are limited, for the most part, to southern Africa. When writing in Afrikaans Coetzee does not take the shared experience of his readers for granted, because he often provides translations. Therefore, we may assume that he by no means wishes to exclude readers from the experience. However, I suggest that, when using Afrikaans, he may be consciously writing for a specific audience, that his use of Afrikaans is an intended code for a pre-imagined audience, and that, therefore, he primarily intends to address people with a shared experience. Yet, for one to be entitled access to a shared experience, one needs to be in possession of a shared memory. One attains access to one's memories, at least to the expression of them, through language. Thus, it is through language that one's shared life experience becomes accessible.

Furthermore, Gordimer argues that '…Whether we like it or not, we can be 'read' only by readers who share terms of reference formed in us by our education – not merely academic but in the broadest sense of life experience; our political, economic, social, and emotion concepts, and our values derived from these; our cultural matrix' (41). Therefore, in these terms, the issues which Coetzee addresses in his work, namely the sentiments of chauvinism, racism, elitism, can be read as those belonging to the experience of the author Coetzee, but also to those of the narrator and the protagonist, who are not *all* Coetzee but white men of an Afrikaner

background. Yet, the shared experience does not end there, for it includes others of the same or similar background, people who share or at least recognise the cultural matrix which he describes. Afrikaans is not only the language of the Afrikaner, it is also the primary language for the coloured people of South Africa who predominantly inhabit the eastern and western Cape and parts of the Karoo. Also, as a result of apartheid legislation, many black people around the country are able to understand if not speak Afrikaans, the language which was the compulsory medium of education and largely used in the workplace.[10] In other words, Coetzee's use of the language would resonate with a demographic that is vastly representative: men and women, across the colour line, familiar with Afrikaans and its connotations, its ripples of meaning, good and bad.

Is it not, then, these readers who Coetzee is addressing foremost? At the same time, is he not setting himself a trap by representing himself against the value-set belonging to many of his readers who may not share his cultural matrix? In response, Coetzee might argue, as does Barthes, that '…it is language which speaks, not the author…only language acts, "performs", and not "me"' (DA 314).

One need be cautious connecting Coetzee's opinions with those of his characters. Due to the similarities between his real life and his fiction, Coetzee is often accused of sharing the views of his characters. After the publication of *Disgrace* in 1999, Coetzee was criticized by the ANC for his negative portrayal of the post-

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[10] In 1974, the *Afrikaans Medium Decree* (an amendment to the Bantu Education Act of 1953, a law that enforced racially separated educational facilities) forced all black schools to use both Afrikaans and English as languages of instruction from the final year of primary school onwards. At the time, Afrikaans was seen, in the words of Desmond Tutu, as 'the language of the oppressor'. In opposition to this law, black students from Sowetan schools took to the streets in peaceful protest only to be met by vicious police brutality. The Soweto Uprising on the 16th June in 1976 led to an estimated 700 deaths as the protestors, many of whom were school children under the age of 18, were killed by police.

apartheid South African state, to the extent that the novel was discussed by the party in Cabinet and referred to in their 'submission to the South African Human Rights Commission's hearings on racism in the media' (Attwell, LW 215). Despite biographical evidence that Coetzee and his partner Dorothy Driver had intended to immigrate to Australia prior to 1999, their departure from South Africa shortly after the controversy surrounding *Disgrace* appeared pertinent (215).[11] However, when questioned on the connection between the views professed in his fiction and his own, Coetzee has a very clear stance, which paradoxically is that he prefers not to have one:

> I am immensely uncomfortable with questions – like this one – that call upon me to *answer for* (in two senses) my novels, and my responses are often taken as evasive. […] But my difficulty is precisely with the project of stating positions, taking positions. (DP 205)

Coetzee is not disassociating himself from the ethic in his work, but rather he is saying that what one evokes in the process of writing or for that matter speaking is not a true-to-fact claim to one's identity or what one believes. He adds: 'What I say is marginal to the book, not because I as author and authority so proclaim, but on the contrary because it would be said from a position peripheral, posterior to the forever unreclaimable position from which the book was written' (206). Thus, while an undeniable ethical cord runs throughout Coetzee's work, whether that ethic belongs to the author or the text itself is irrelevant. What matters is that the ethic transcends the text and reaches the readers.

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Reading the autobiographical novels as a unified narrative, an undeniable theme of shame emerges, so much so that the works collectively depict a history of shame. As

[11] J.M. Coetzee plays on this view held by his critics when in *Summertime,* the character Sophie claims the intradiegetic author John Coetzee '…was by nature very cautious, very much the tortoise. When he sensed danger, he would withdraw into his shell…' (238).

seen in tracing continuity of *character*, that which in part constitutes Coetzee's *narrative identity*, the sentiment of shame leaves an impression on all aspects of the protagonist's life: ashamed of his country's history; ashamed of his parents; but most of all ashamed of himself – his erotic urges, his behaviour towards women, ashamed of inhabiting a country in which he feels he does not belong, ashamed of his very nature. Not only are we privy to the protagonist's shame expressed through close third person, but we are left to make our own judgements on his behaviour when his own shaming gaze of conscience is not turned inward. Thus, although the narrative mode with its immediacy of present tense provides no sense of retrospective remorse, we are left shaking our heads.

There is an important distinction to be made between guilt and shame, but also a distinction as to what it means to be ashamed of oneself or to be ashamed of others as they stand as reflections of oneself, or even what it means to be shamed by others. These distinctions are central aspects in terms of understanding Coetzee's development of his protagonist's *character* in terms of the perception of self in relation to others – distinctions that go into the forging of *narrative identity*.

According to Jeff McHahan, contemporary philosophy defines shame '…as the experienced public exposure of one's vulnerabilities, weaknesses, or flaws, particularly one's inability to control the aspects of oneself that one presents to others' (89). McMahan, in his reading of Coetzee's work, argues that shame 'requires the presence, or at least the imagined presence, of observers. One can be ashamed *of oneself*, but not shamed only *to* or *before* oneself' (90). Guilt on the other hand is private; yet the exposure of guilt, a public unmasking, reveals the face of shame (90).

McHahan unfolds the idea of a nation being objectively 'shamed before the world whether they *feel* shame or not' (90). He suggests that Coetzee's work explores the implications of misdeeds committed in the name of others. For instance, are

white South Africans who deem themselves innocent of the inhumane crimes of the apartheid regime chained with a sense of collective shame merely by association, that is, by being white South Africans? (91). McHahan extends the analogy to the sentiment of pride. The pride one feels for the achievements of one's country despite having not participated directly in the deeds runs parallel to the shame one feels for the atrocities committed by one's country despite not having participated directly in the misdeeds (93). Furthermore, he argues, sentiments of pride and shame include all generations, people of all ages and, therefore, as this analogy stands, 'one's unchosen and ineffaceable identity as a member of a certain nation can make one the bearer of shame for the deeds of others. Even if one can cleanse oneself of the burden of shame, one's children and grandchildren will inherit a burden of shame' (93).

And yet, according to McHahan, such a view is implausible on rational grounds: one's emotions are 'unreliable guides in matters of morality' (97). Whilst the emotions of guilt or shame are measured along the lines of what feels 'appropriate or inappropriate, rational or irrational', moral actions are set against criteria of justifications (97). Thus, only rational thought and not emotion should determine the outcome of whether an individual or a group should be judged guilty or not guilty (97).

However, although we might claim to be rational beings, we cannot ignore our equally strong, if not stronger, propensity to be swayed by emotions. Therefore, given that we succumb to guilt and shame despite our claim to innocence, further questions remain regarding atonement of the guiltless (97). In terms of Coetzee's evocation of shame, McHahan argues that whether or not the reader connects the author with the socio-political views of his narrator or his protagonist is inconsequential, because what matters is that the views expressed are shared by

people other than Coetzee, that is, by his readers. Thus, if the sentiments of guilt and shame are collectively shared, so will the sense of responsibility to atone be shared. The suggestion here is that Coetzee's work is not about retribution but rather the prevention and deterrence of further crimes (99).

In the realm of shame and guilt one arrives at the point when the truth will out, when one feels the need to confess. In his essay 'Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky' (1985), Coetzee argues the act of confession, whether sacramental or secular, complicated as it is by aspects of truth values and intention, appears to have no end, if not in confession *to* and *for* oneself. (DP 291). Coetzee suggests that absolution is 'the liberation from the oppression of memory' and, thus, the end goal of confession. However, Coetzee asks, in a secular society, in the absence of sacramental grace, what form does absolution take?

Confessional writing, be it in the mode of autobiography or fiction, is analogous to the act of confession. *Summertime* resembles a confessional novel, albeit a fragmented one, divided into a series of testimonies. In conversation with the fictional biographer, each individual bears witness to the protagonist's transgressions, but in the process each testimony develops into a confession on its own terms, with each speaker confessing some truth, some transgression of their own. For instance, Julia's testimony, in conversation with the biographer is in the confessional mode, seen in phrases such as: 'Let me make a confession…' (35); 'I'm glad I told you that story. Now I feel less guilty…' (76). Thus, while we read Coetzee's autobiographical novels as a form of confession, one we believe to be unreliable because of the fictional qualities, we also interpret the testimonies of its characters as confessions, which suggest some hidden truth about the author and so on, without end.

The fundamental problem in the analogy that likens the author/reader relationship to that of the confessant/confessor is that the reader does not have the power to absolve. Therefore, Coetzee claims that in the absence of absolution in secular confession, in which the confessor has no authority, the act of confession is without end. For Coetzee, then, after confession comes interpretation, in which a truer explanation might be revealed. If the confessant acknowledges these revelations to be true then there must be a renewed sense of shame, a deeper shame, either because the confessant's original confession had been a lie or because he was unaware of it. Whether the confessant accepts the new truth about himself depends on his commitment to his original confession. The more deeply he has avowed the truth of his confession, the more deeply its truth has become part of his identity. And thus, yielding to the new truth entails damage to that identity (DP 273) Therefore, to escape the circularity of endless confession, Coetzee argues that writing, as a private form of confession, and in the absence of absolution, offers an end to secular confession. In Coetzee's words: 'The end of confession is to tell the truth to and for oneself' (291).

In his essay 'Confessing in the Third Person', Derek Attridge returns to Coetzee's idea of the interminability of confession in his discussion on the confessional form and whether Coetzee's novels *Boyhood* and *Youth* fit the form; thus, he seeks to understand if confession is possible in the third person and present tense. Attridge observes that the result of Coetzee's chosen mode of narrating events may be one of 'singular immediacy', but at the cost of intimacy found in 'confessional autobiography of a more orthodox sort' (140).

Attridge discusses the endless nature of confession in light of the aims of The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). In 1994, in an attempt to come-to-terms with the repressive apartheid years, the TRC was set up to hear both the

testimonies of victims and the confessions of perpetrators, hoping to uncover the crimes of the Nationalist Party. Whilst the Commission had the power to grant amnesty, as a secular body it did not have the power to absolve, nor for that matter to punish, and as result many of its judgements seemed arbitrary (143). Therefore, although the Commission endeavoured to attain truth through testimony and confession it seemed to follow an inconclusive road without any apparent, demarcated end, that is, without any foreseeable sign of absolution.

In comparison, Coetzee avoids the circular nature of confession through his use of the third person which distances the narrative voice from the narrated consciousness. Throughout *Boyhood*, the narrated voice refers to the protagonist as 'he' as opposed to 'I' or even 'John'. Also, Attridge suggests, the use of the present tense makes the narration more immediate, removing any sense of retrospection, creating an absence of the authorial presence reflecting on past attitudes or expressing guilt over past behaviour. He further notes that if '…anyone is to take responsibility for judgements on the boy of *Boyhood*, it is the reader, and the reader is thus implicated in the ethical web spun by the work' (143).

While Coetzee avoids the problem identified in his essay on confession (1985) by circumventing self-reflexivity, he complicates the relating of the work to the genre of confession (143). Attridge argues that such a confessional mode would not be accepted by the TRC, because 'although overt repentance was not required by the Commission, implicit in its demand for accounts of their deeds by perpetrators was both identification of person (it was I who did these things) and distance in time (I did them then, I would not do them now)' (144).

While the novels' narrative mode does not suggest that Coetzee wishes to exculpate himself from his actions, neither does it suggest a desire to shirk responsibility, nor that he is without remorse (148). Instead, 'it signals that the

author has no interest in making a case, in convincing the reader of the integrity of his motives or that his repentance is genuine' (148). It seems, therefore, that despite the absence of retrospective commentary of a more mature, reflective adult, the distancing achieved by the narrative mode hints at the difficulty behind self-revelation.[12] Therefore, Attridge argues, the work resembles a confession, albeit one without any certainty or implicit claim to responsibility and, therefore, not one that would be accepted by the TRC (152).

Furthermore, Attridge says shame is an inescapable part of confession; unlike repentance, it is not modified by the circularity of self-deceit, nor is it subject to formal conventions of articulation; it is both a physical and emotional response to one's shameful deeds or, even, the deeds of others (147). He says: 'the most difficult task in articulating the history and condition of the self is admitting that of which one is ashamed, that which one's very body resists admitting. And it is only in its grappling with this material that a confession can gain authority' (147). Thus, for Coetzee not only is shame embedded in the confessed truth and the act of confession itself, but it is also ever-present in what Attridge calls 'the interminable process of sceptical self-examination' (147).

What, then, lies behind Coetzee's preoccupation with the presentation of shame in his work? Jonathan Lear suggests that Coetzee's invocation of shame is a means of activating what he calls 'ethical thought'. That is, by allowing us to see episodes of shame in his work, he is 'helping us to see that we are motivated not to see' (Lear 84). Lear's analysis of Coetzee's work agrees with McHahan's premise that shame attaches to one by virtue of one's nationality, independently of one's deeds

[12] Attridge argues that through Coetzee's 'demonstrating the possibility of confessing in the third person' the reader is enabled to 'read the confessional in all Coetzee's fiction, and it is perhaps only an apparent paradox that someone who is known as an extremely private individual should reveal so much (without overtly doing so, of course) in the novels he writes' (152).

(ET 80). However, what Lear brings to the debate on collective shame is how to transform one's sensibilities into positive, effective action, or at the very least, moral reasoning, which he defines as 'ethical thought'. Hence, what remains to be resolved after the inheritance of shame is how to deal with it (80).

Part of the problem lies in the social constructs that allow one to avoid responsibility, to evade the shame that might otherwise mobilise social action. If it is under the gaze of others that one experiences shame, then it is in the interest of the individual that shame be avoided not by avoiding the shameful act but by making it impossible that there should be a public gaze upon the act. As discussed, *Boyhood* often serves as a microcosmic view of the South African state during apartheid. For instance, there is the occasion of the protagonist's birthday celebration at the Globe Café, which would have been '…a marvellous success, were it not for the ragged Coloured children standing at the window looking in on them' (79) Being gazed at invokes a sense of shame, and the protagonist wishes to chase the children away. 'Whatever happens, whether they are chased away or not, it is too late, his heart is already hurt' (73). This scene effectively analogises apartheid legislation, such as the Group Areas Act of 1950 and the Natives Resettlement Act of 1954 amongst other laws, which restricted ownership, residence or forcibly removed the majority of the population to remote areas, so that the consequences of the government's shameful laws, the shameful poverty, the dire living conditions, could not be witnessed by the comfortable suburban white voters. Thus, Lear reads Coetzee's work as a critique of a dialectic responsibility, an attempted awakening of those whose shame lies not only in their unacknowledged complicity, but also in the shame that they wish not to recognise it (ET 80).

Therefore, failure to see how one is implicated in a national shame suggests a motivated structure of not-seeing. For instance, although the average white South

African during apartheid knew that the National Party's laws were immoral, they did very little to act against them. One might argue they were simply being lawful, but this is the point Lear is making: the laws of the country permitted the citizens, merely by being lawful, not to see, not to act, in spite of the shame they may have held. Thus, through the motived structures of legislation, they were allowed not-to-see and, therefore, not-to-act. Lear argues, then, that the presentation of acts of shame in Coetzee's work should be read as an invocation of shame that in turn stimulates one to make this movement away from not-seeing and towards 'ethical thought'.

Lear's notion of 'ethical thought' connects to Ricoeur's second model of *permanence in time*, that is, *keeping one's word*. In the autobiographical novels, occurring over the years that coincide with Coetzee's biographical chronology, from his childhood years in Worcester in 1948 until when he completes his first novel in 1973, we witness how the protagonist perseveres to hold true to his acquired values and thus maintain a sense of self; a continuity of identity in terms of both *who* and *what*. The first ethical value he upholds is his stance on vegetarianism.

> After seeing Ros slaughtering sheep he no longer likes to handle raw meat. Back in Worcester he prefers not to go into butchers' shops. He is repelled by the casual ease with which the butcher slaps down a cut of meat on the counter, slices it, rolls it up in brown paper, writes a price on it. When he hears the grating whine of the bandsaw cutting through bone, he wants to stop his ears. (B 101)

From the slaughterhouse to the butcher's, this glimpse into the protagonist's consciousness provides us with a heightened sense of what the young and impressionable protagonist sees and feels: repelled not only by the butcher's callous, shameless, handling of the meat – the mechanical slapping, slicing, rolling, writing – but also by the cruelty of 'the grating whine of the bandsaw cutting through the bone' (101).

Later, in *Summertime*, the reader sees the effect the earlier moment had on the protagonist's life, not only on his decision to cease eating meat, but also his outlook on his own self-identity. The reader no longer hears the voice of the protagonist, but rather the opinion of Julia, his former lover:

> In *Dusklands* you must recall how much killing there is – killing not only of human beings but of animals. Well, at about the time the book appeared, John announced to me he was becoming a vegetarian. I don't know how long he persisted in it, but I interpreted the vegetarian move as part of a larger project of self-reformation. (58)

According to Attwell, 'Julia's assessment is a form of ventriloquism on Coetzee's part. It is recognizably Coetzee's own judgement, and it is consistent with the importance of confession in his work from the start' (LW 34). Yet it is also the view 'of a young author who is angry about his origins, and angry about the role that his origins have assigned him in the world' (34)

In Lear's view, these episodes in Coetzee's work serve to provoke in the reader a means of seeing. By showing us the scene in the butcher's, and by developing the outsider's estimation of the protagonist's convictions, Coetzee is making us see that whether or not we are actively responsible for certain misdeeds, we are no less complicit in the 'cruel and violent impulses' simply because we partake of the results. Accordingly, '…the fact that meat ends up on our dinner table requires that we remain with, at best, a vague understanding of how it got there' (ET 84).

Another important ethical stance that Coetzee presents consistently across the novels concerns the discriminatory labour practices and laws established during apartheid, concerning in particular what the protagonist suggests is a taboo on whites doing their own dirty work (S 112).

First, in *Boyhood*, we see the origins of what become the principles of the mature protagonist. While on the farm, in the company of his uncle's workmen, the

protagonist is aware of the Coloured man's years of labour at the hands of the white master, working the very earth that is denied him: '…Ros's spade so long has he used it, so often sharpened it, that only an inch or two of steel remains; the wood of the grip is smooth and black with years of sweat' (99). The implications of the phrasing '…black with years of sweat…' is surely intentional on Coetzee's part, even if the full extent of the dark history is lost on the boy.

The fullness of that early foreboding finds its way into *Youth* as similar instances of the inherent social racism quietly surface in the day to day life during apartheid. Prior to the protagonist's move to London we are privy to scenes that the average sheltered white middleclass would not ask questions of, simply because that is how *it* was. John and his friend Paul, walking early one morning in the suburban streets of Diep River, encounter 'a milkman in his horse drawn cart' (16). John with his sensitivity towards the social incongruencies and injustices, but also his fear of the latent consequences, seems to notice what many do not: he seems to see, however, perhaps only because he is looking, or rather looked upon.

> He marvels. All the business he knew nothing about, being carried on while people sleep: streets being swept, milk being delivered to doorsteps! One thing puzzles him. Why is the milk not stolen? …do thieves take pity on milkmen, who are for the most part young and black and powerless? (16)

This passage provides the reader with stark understanding of the protagonist's deep sense of shame in the face of the black milkman, for it is under this man's gaze that he feels ashamed, from whom 'he feels a curious, amused tenderness, emanating: a sense that he must be a simpleton, in need of protection…' (17). Before this man's pity, a man smiling 'so gently as he watches the two of them drink the milk he has given them…', (17) he feels ashamed not only of the immediate state of the country whose cruel laws have created the social and economic divisions between black and white, 'a gulf fixed' that allows 'people like

Paul and himself, with their pianos and violins…' to be 'on this earth, the earth of South Africa, on the shakiest of pretexts', (17) but also his shame extends to the past, the shame he, as a white South African, has inherited, so that 'the ground beneath his feet is soaked with blood and the vast backward depth of history rings with shouts of anger' (17).

This awareness of the socio-economic inequality develops towards a mental shift in the protagonist in the final of the three books. In *Summertime*, the protagonist through his own actions seeks to change the mindset, to break the old taboo of doing one's own dirty work.

> Week after week, using a shovel and a wheel barrow, he mixes sand, stone, cement and water; block after block he pours liquid concrete and levels it. His back hurts, his arms and wrists are so stiff that he can barely hold a pen. Above all the labour bores him. Yet he is not unhappy. What he finds himself doing is what people like him should have been doing ever since 1652, namely, his own dirty work. (7)

The reference to 1652 invites comparison between apartheid's exploitation of black labour and the first Dutch coloniser's exploitative attitude towards the colonised peoples of the time. The protagonist's sense of not belonging, of white intrusion in the country, is again alluded to. However, later in the novel, the notion of shame is inverted in the testimonies regarding the protagonist's stance on black labour. For instance, Julia speaks not of the shame of having others do one's hard labour, but the shame of doing one's own hard labour when there are others there to do it for you.

> What was odd was that it was not customary in those days for a white man to do manual labour, unskilled labour. Kaffir work, it was generally called, work you paid someone else to do. If it was not exactly shameful to be seen shovelling sand, it certainly let the side down, if you know what I mean. (S 21)

Here again, Attwell's analysis of Coetzee's strategy seems valid: that is, Julia's assessment of the protagonist's behaviour is a form of confession on Coetzee's part, a means of calling judgement on himself, but also on others like him. Equally guilty.

Collectively shamed. Thus too, in Lear's reading, these episodes are further instances of how Coetzee helps the reader to see that we are motivated not to see (ET 84). Lear reinforces the principle that while guilt is associated with the voice, if you like, of conscience, shame by contrast requires a gaze. Coetzee's writing provides us with many images to gaze upon and, thus, arguably invites shame upon himself whilst provoking the readers' private guilt, or indeed a sense of shame, in that they are gazed upon through self-reflection.

As the episode with the milkman demonstrates, if we are not merely going to look upon shameful situations, disassociating ourselves from the act, but ourselves participate in that sense of shame, we need some imaginative sense of being gazed upon. Debatably, this gaze cannot come merely from that of an absent audience, namely the reader. Rather, a clear sense of who is gazing upon us is needed if we are to feel the full extent of shame. What Lear believes Coetzee is saying is that we 'need to feel shame under the gaze of someone who we could imaginatively respect' (85). Could this someone be Coetzee himself? Lear argues that it is one's humanity that allows this interchange and that at this point the experience of shame stands as the beginning of 'ethical thought' (86).

Coetzee's more frequent use of the term 'shame' as opposed to the term 'guilt', a public rather than private awareness, suggests an awareness of the reader's presence. Hence, Coetzee's work can in part be read as a confession with the reader assuming the role of confessor, albeit, as Coetzee has pointed out, one unable to grant absolution. Yet, if Lear's reading is correct, Coetzee's work as confession has the added intention of provoking a sense of collective guilt in readers, through the process of reading, and thus awakening a sense of responsibility regardless of whether the actions are theirs. Coetzee's writing, then, stands also as a form of articulated 'ethical thought', which in turn seeks to awaken a sense of 'ethical

thought' in others, moral reasoning to be followed by ethical actions of which Coetzee believes all people are capable.

Conclusion

In my search for J.M. Coetzee in his fictional autobiographies, alongside critical interpretations of his work, I have come closer to understanding the man who is writing, through an appreciation of what and why he is writing.

Coetzee's own verdict that 'all writing is autobiographical' is certainly true of his own extensive fictional and non-fictional oeuvre in that it reveals what Attwell refers to as 'a mode of self-conscious narration' (LW 115). For Coetzee the appeal of metafiction 'has an autobiographical implication in so far as it is about the books being written' (115). Coetzee speaks of reaching the truth about oneself through the process of writing: how it is in the culmination of that writing process that the truth about oneself is revealed. According to Attwell, the 'self-consciousness in the narration marks the place where the need to define oneself is most acute' (115). These affirmations follow those introduced by Ricoeur's theory on narrative: that it is only at the end of one's life narrative that one can fully know one's identity made up as it is by a multitude of stories of and by oneself, a woven fabric of historical and fictional accounts, that produce a patchwork quilt of one's life, that reveals, when one finally steps back, a *narrative identity*, a life lived as well as the story of a life told (OP 187).

According to Attwell, Coetzee's writing process, whose end is the 'attaining of consciousness', is a balance of 'showing that one properly understands one's materials' and 'bearing witness to one's existence in the act of writing' (LW 115). In the autobiographical novels, the historical facts of Coetzee's life interplay with invention, so forging a narrative within which we discern a trinity that is author, narrator, protagonist, a threefold figure bearing an idiosyncratic resemblance to a single identity, namely that of J.M. Coetzee.

What makes this identification possible is a temporal connection, a continuity of *character* and *faithfulness* to selfhood over time. The continuity of *character*

is indicative foremost of what we come to see in the consciousness and behaviour of the protagonist, a *permanence in time* with regards to the aspects of language, race-politics, place, family, sexuality, and vocation; in Ricoeurian terms, the *habits* and *acquired identifications* that are formed and cemented over time across the three books.

On the other hand, the narrator, emerging much like a spirit that filters consciousness transcendentally between the author and protagonist, is manifest in the fictional mode, close third person, present tense narration, distant and impersonal, with language that, whilst emotionally restrained, holds authenticity in the accuracy of the depiction. The author, finally, is revealed through the faithfulness to that which he writes, a perseverance to maintain a narrative form and voice that breathes life into the protagonists, but more importantly the author reveals himself through a faithfulness to why he writes, to the undoubtable 'ethical thought' driving through his work like a steel rod.

While the representation of an individual whose self-conscious awareness of the bearing down of shame reads like confession, what marks Coetzee's autobiographical writing, what distinguishes it from other autobiographical forms, is that the recognition of shame comes without the call for redemption. It is confession without absolution. What Coetzee's novels strive for is an evocation of empathy: by recognising his unrepentant shame, we are reminded of our own. In Lear's words, we are made to see.

This idea is essential to Ricoeur's philosophy and theory of narrative: seeing oneself as another begins a process of understanding one's identity. Coetzee recognises himself by distancing himself from his protagonist, by his chosen fictional modes, and by bringing the testimonies about himself by others into autobiographical form. Writing to find himself, writing to find himself in others, has

the result of having others recognise themselves in him. Bringing readers to a place where they can see themselves as another.

Therefore, in my own process of writing, what began as a search for the truth about J.M. Coetzee, has become a search for a truth about myself. The proximity of our histories as South Africans, the parallels in our social, political, linguistic narratives, served to awaken a self-consciousness in me as I wrote. As I turned to my own creative project, my own form of autobiographical fiction, a self-consciousness emerged in the process of writing, a process that culminated in a truth about myself in relation to others, about my past, about my present, about my identity.

Thus, in the process of writing a novel combining historical narrative with fictional narrative, I developed and came closer to fulfilling my own *narrative identity* – in coming closer to finding J.M. Coetzee, I have come closer to finding myself.

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