Towards a “Weak Poetics”: J. M. Coetzee’s Literary Thinking

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TESI DOCTORAL UPF / 2019

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For my mum

Abstract

This study is aimed at exploring the meaning of *literary thinking* as revealed in J. M. Coetzee's approach to fictional writing. Unlike other prominent figures in contemporary literature, Coetzee has constantly captured the attention of the philosophical community, mainly because of the *non*-conciliatory rapprochement between literature and philosophy that his fiction elicits. Coetzee's "novelistic" engagement with philosophy suggests a mode of thinking that finds its fragile legitimacy in the tentative embedding of textuality in history within the context of a self-conscious appropriation of a hostile tradition – i.e., the western tradition in South Africa. This entails a loss of faith in any founding principle but not an abandonment of a quest for meaning, however problematic. These traits, which form the basis for the emergence of Coetzee's *literary thinking*, are conceived of in terms of a "weak poetics" inspired principally by Gianni Vattimo's philosophical hermeneutics.

Resumen

Este estudio tiene como objetivo explorar el significado del pensamiento literario como se revela en el acercamiento de J. M. Coetzee a la narrativa. A diferencia de otras figuras prominentes de la literatura contemporánea, Coetzee ha captado constantemente la atención de la comunidad filosófica, principalmente debido al acercamiento no conciliatorio entre literatura y filosofía que provoca su ficción. El compromiso "novelístico" de Coetzee con la filosofía sugiere un modo de pensamiento que encuentra su frágil legitimidad en la incorporación tentativa de la textualidad dentro de la historia dentro del contexto de una apropiación aprehensiva de una tradición hostil (la tradición occidental en Sudáfrica). Esto implica una pérdida de confianza en cualquier principio fundador, pero no un abandono de una búsqueda de significado, por problemático que sea. Estos rasgos, que forman la base para el surgimiento del pensamiento literario de Coetzee, se conciben en términos de una "poética débil" inspirada principalmente en la hermenéutica filosófica de Gianni Vattimo.

PREFACE: The Coetzee-Vattimo Encounter

When renowned Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo was invited to give a talk at the University of Cape Town in 2000, J. M. Coetzee was already an internationally acclaimed author (just a year earlier, his eighth novel *Disgrace* had won him his second Booker Prize of his career). There was no prolonged interaction between the two apart from a short but revealing piece written by Coetzee in response to Vattimo's intervention.[1]

While agreeing with Vattimo's criticism of the naive aspirations of a "de-historicized" form of realism, Coetzee picks up on a core contradiction in his closing remarks:

> We can't refuse the news about ourselves – who we are, what world we live in, what value our beliefs have – because, practically speaking – or so it seems to me – that news is backed with such power, material, rhetorical, and psychological, that it no longer seems proper to call it an item of news at all, and seems better to call it a directive or even a dictate. What counts – it seems to me – is not the content of the news but the consequences of rejecting the news. And if what counts is force, why bother to philosophize?[2]

In other words, Coetzee wonders what, if any, the task of thinking should be today, once we accept that the facts and goals of our existence are given within an already constituted horizon of truth which we can neither master nor elude. Let it be noted, in passing, that Vattimo has always been preoccupied with this difficulty ever since his 1983 seminal essay "Dialectics, Difference, Weak Thought," where he outlines the theoretical premises of his *pensiero debole* (weak thought). Could the awareness of drifting along the currents of history "indicate yet another weakness – that of accepting existence 'as it is' and hence one's critical incapacity both in theory and in practice?…. Let us not try to hide that this is a problem…."[3] But, as Vattimo is quick to point out,

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1 Gianni Vattimo's paper, "The Temptation of Realism," can be found in his *Of Reality: The Purposes of Philosophy*, translated by Robert T. Valgenti (New York: Columbia UP, 2016), pp. 67-78. For Coetzee's response see J. M. Coetzee, "Gianni Vattimo, 'The Temptations of Realism': Comments on Paper Presented at UCT 4 September, 2000," *Gianni Vattimo Archives*, Pompeu Fabra University, Barcelona.

2 J. M. Coetzee, "Gianni Vattimo, 'The Temptations of Realism': Comments on Paper Presented at UCT 4 September, 2000," *Gianni Vattimo Archives*, Pompeu Fabra University, Barcelona. p. 3.

3 I have used the English version of the essay to facilitate translation: Gianni Vattimo, "Dialectics, Difference, Weak Thought," *Weak Thought*, edited by Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti, translated by Peter Carravetta (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2012), pp. 39-52. For the Italian version see Gianni Vattimo, "Dialettica, differenza, pensiero debole," *Il pensiero debole*, edited by Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2011), pp. 12-28.

while there is no straightforward way out of this impasse, neither are we to capitulate to reactionary manipulations or to some sort of solipsistic aestheticism.

It is indeed this preoccupation with the task of thinking in an increasingly homogenized global context (in which, as Coetzee says, "what counts is force") that invites a rapprochement between the two thinkers. Their work, although acknowledged and praised world-wide, is still marked by a sense of marginality. While it bears the unmistakable imprint of Heidegger's antifoundationalist critique of Western metaphysics, Vattimo's "weak thought" can be easily placed within the Italian hermeneutic tradition. Yet, unlike Heidegger's more fashionable "offsprings" – I am especially thinking of Levinas, Foucault, and Derrida who pretty much set the tone for the pan-Atlantic poststructuralist debate –, Vattimo's thought has never been fully assimilated into the hegemonic cultural trend of postmodernity and thus represents a challenge and a reminder to postmodernist orthodoxy.[4] A proof of this, as one commentator has noted, is also the scarce use of Vattimo's aesthetics in the "mainstream of literary and cultural studies."[5]

Coetzee, on his part, is also clearly conditioned by and involved with the Western canon but only by means of a distortive, ironic, and self-conscious affiliation.[6] Coetzee acknowledges in fact the marginal and marginalized position he is confined to as a South African and deplores the inevitability of being absorbed into and spoken by the prevailing Western discourse – whichever that may be, including of course Vattimo's own brand of "hermeneutic nihilism." Hence Coetzee's baffling question: How is one to resist, and to what consequences, the rhetorical force of the West from within?[7]

In the context of the encounter, Coetzee's question seems then to take the form of a critique of yet another "directive" – i.e., "hermeneutics as the new *koiné*" – coming from high up and calling on everyone to conform to. And yet, as Coetzee admits, we cannot merely reject it as an unwanted theory but live with it; which also implies that

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4 See Giovanna Borradori, "Recoding Metaphysics: Strategies of the Italian Contemporary Thought," *Recoding Metaphysics: The New Italian Philosophy*, edited by Giovanna Borradori (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1988), pp. 1-26. See also Renate Holub, "Weak Thought and Strong Ethics: The 'Postmodern' and Feminist Theory in Italy," *Annali d'Italianistica*, vol. 9, no. -, 1991, pp.124-143. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/24003383; see especially pp. 128-34.

5 Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago and London: The U of Chicago P, 2015), p. 32.

6 See. For example, David Attwell, "The Problem of History in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee," *Poetics Today*, vol. 11, no. 3, Autumn 1990, pp. 579-615. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1772827.

7 J. M. Coetzee, "Gianni Vattimo, 'The Temptations of Realism': Comments on Paper Presented at UCT 4 September, 2000," *Gianni Vattimo Archives*, Pompeu Fabra University, Barcelona. p. 3.

the new *koiné* is not Vattimo's theoretical discovery or invention but characterizes rather a historical turn.

Vattimo's and Coetzee's responses to this historical turn take different forms yet share a similar concern that could be summarized as follows: How to engage in thinking beyond the leveling, exclusionary, and ultimately violent tendencies we have inherited since Plato? Vattimo pushes for a "weakened" and "weakening" kind of thinking no longer obsessed with its foundation – or lack thereof – and hence capable of gently "turning to new 'purposes,'" as Richard Rorty once put it.[8] Coetzee advocates for a thinking through stories, or what I will call, with Robert Pippin, *literary thinking*. My basic claim is that "weak" and "literary" stand pretty much for the same thing and so Coetzee's fictions ultimately represent instances of weak thinking. Literary thinking, I would venture, is weak thinking at its most "powerful" since ideas are worked through in the tentative rhythm of storytelling as both writer and reader follow the "dialogic dance" of the voices on the page without really knowing where it might lead.

I am convinced therefore that Coetzee's closing question in his response to Vattimo's talk – "why bother to philosophize?" – was and sill is in fact a rhetorical question. A question that can easily take the form: "Why bother to write novels?" – especially "ethically saturated"[9] novels that have been dubbed "philosophical."[10]

Following suit, the motivation behind this study is indeed rooted in the following question: "Why does Coetzee bother to write novels?"

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8 Richard Rorty, "Being That Can Be Understood Is Language," *London Review of Books*, vol. 22, no.6, March 2000, pp. 23-35, www.lrb.co.uk/v22/n06/richard-rorty/being-that-can-be-understood-is-language.

9 See Neil Lazarus, "Modernism and Modernity: T. W. Adorno and Contemporary White South African Literature," *Cultural Critique*, vol. -, no. 5, Winter 1986-1987, pp. 131-55. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1354359, p. 148.

10 Robert Pippin, "Philosophical Fiction? On J. M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*," *Republics of Letters*, vol. 5, no. 1, January 2017, *Arcade*, http://arcade.stanford.edu/rofl/philosophical-fiction-jm-coetzees-elizabeth-costello, see especially p. 8, n.7.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

To me a story is a way of thinking – an archaic way of thinking, non-analytic.
(J. M. Coetzee in interview with Rian Malan)[11]

I am not a herald of community or anything else…. I am someone who has intimations of freedom.
(J. M. Coetzee in interview with David Attwell)[12]

The author's position is the weakest of all.
(J. M. Coetzee in interview with David Attwell)[13]

Half way through John Maxwell Coetzee's 2007 novel *Diary of a Bad Year*, JC, the protagonist, undergoes a change of perspective that he describes as follows: "*I am beginning to put together a second, gentler set of opinions.*"[14] JC – who is the refracted alter ego of J. M. Coetzee himself – makes this announcement at the end of Part One, entitled "Strong Opinions" – a set of public reflections written in an essay-like fashion touching upon a wide range of topics. The second set of opinions of Part Two are "gentler" in that they are more attuned to the contingencies of JC's everyday experience and the fragility of his aging body. Moreover, these "opinions" are literally embedded in the plot, the pages being split horizontally into two or three sections with the bottom sections providing the fictional framework. This formal innovation not only disrupts the customary reading habits but also enables the reader to peep into JC's daily life experience while he supposedly works on his pieces. It also draws attention to the artificiality of the text so as to facilitate a metafictional incursion into the practice of authorship and its relation with authority; a concern explicitly thematized in *Diary* but which has always been present in Coetzee's fiction.[15] Coetzee turns, in fact, the text into

11 Interview with Rian Malan, *Sunday Times*, November 10, 1990, quoted in J. C. Kannemeyer, *J. M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing*, translated by Michiel Heyns (Melbourne, London: Scribe, 2012), p. 472.

12 J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, edited by David Attwell (Cambridge MA/London: Harvard UP, 1992), p. 341.

13 J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, edited by David Atwell (London: Harvard UP), p. 206.

14 J. M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (New York: Viking, 2007), p. 145, emphasis in the original.

15 For a closer examination of the relation between authorship and authority in *Diary of a Bad Year* see David Attwell, "Mastering Authority: J. M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*," *Social Dynamics*, vol.

a *mise en abyme* that invites the reader to reflect on the processes and legitimacy of discourse formation.

Thus JC's yielding his strong opinions to "gentler" opinions, which is further foregrounded by the metafictional tension throughout the book, results in a weakening of the authorial/authoritative voice and the strong claims behind it. The more context we are given the stronger becomes the link between the author as a historical-biographical being and the discursive practices she engages in.[16] "All autobiography is storytelling, all writing is autobiography," says Coetzee in an interview,[17] suggesting that the boundaries between apparently different categories of discourse are breachable, always in the making, always dependent on the speaker's situatedness.

This insight is taken to its extreme consequences as Coetzee often chooses fiction as his mode of address in public. One memorable instance took place in 1997 when Coetzee was invited to deliver the prestigious Tanner Lectures on Human Values held at Princeton University. Coetzee surprised his audience by giving his speech in the form of stories instead of the usual format. The episode did not go unnoticed as philosopher Peter Singer, who was part of the distinguished audience, expressed his perplexity to the point of frustration with regard to Coetzee's rhetorical choice.[18] How is a professional philosopher supposed to properly respond to an intervention that calls into question the very assumptions of argumentative discourse?

The metafictional staging of the act of authoring coupled with the use of fiction in public discourse prove that Coetzee's commitment with literature is as serious as it gets. What Coetzee achieves, in fact, is a merger of the aesthetic and the ethical,[19] which by

36, no. 1, 2010, pp. 214-21. doi: 10.1080/05253395090356257.

16 In relation to this see also Paul Patton, "Coetzee's Opinions," *Strong Opinions: J. M. Coetzee and the Authority of Contemporary Fiction*, edited by Chris Danta, Sue Kossew, and Julian Morphet (New York: Continuum, 2011), pp. 53-61.

17 J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, edited by David Attwell (Cambridge MA/London: Harvard UP, 1992), p. 391.

18 See Chris Danta, "J. M. Coetzee: The Janus Face of Authority," *Strong Opinions: J. M. Coetzee and the Authority of Contemporary Fiction*, edited by Chris Danta, Sue Kossew, and Julian Morphet (New York: Continuum, 2011), pp. xi-xx; and Cora Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," in Stanley Cavell et al., *Philosophy and Animal Life* (New York: Columbia UP, 2008), pp. 43-89.

19 "Seriousness is, for a certain kind of artist, an imperative uniting the aesthetic and the ethical." J. M. Coetzee, *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996), p. 73.

extension also concerns the political and the epistemological.[20] As a result, Coetzee's position is paradoxical as he can only be truly (ethically) responsible for his views as long as he undermines their foundational/strong claims. Any discourse, today, claiming to be foundational would be ethically irresponsible (especially coming from a white South African of Afrikaner descent). Coetzee's choice to articulate his ideas in the form of storytelling is therefore much more than a matter of whim or a rhetorical trick meant to confuse the analytic philosopher; it responds rather to a necessity coming from the "outside," namely, a necessity rooted in the biographical-historical circumstances Coetzee finds himself in.

Coetzee's engagement with literature takes then an existential turn by becoming a necessity that characterizes the very act of thinking. It could even be described as a "metaphysical" necessity that originates in a disposition for freedom rather than certainty.[21] What Coetzee is staging, time and again, in his novels is precisely a questioning of the act of thinking. In doing that Coetzee acknowledges his allegiance to the Western tradition (both philosophical and literary) without however engaging in a mere repetition or a peaceful continuation of it. Storytelling allows Coetzee to invoke and interrogate the grand themes of Western philosophy without ever aspiring to overcome them or refute them. In this respect, as is quite clearly suggested by the citations at the outset, Coetzee's "archaic way of thinking" through stories, which is motivated by "intimations of freedom" and which can only be uttered from a position of weakness, comes strikingly close to the later Heidegger's notion of a thinking that stands in opposition to philosophy understood as metaphysics.[22] But a relation of opposition between thinking and philosophy thusly conceived might still be somewhat misleading. Perhaps a better way to describe Coetzee's notion of thinking is in terms of a "gentler turning to new purposes," as Richard Rorty would put it. It is precisely such a

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20 In a piece on Coetzee and Tagore, Spivak notes that "the discontinuities between the ethical and the epistemological and political fields are tamed in the nestling of logic and rhetoric in fiction." Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee, and Certain Scenes of Teaching." *Diacritics*, vol. 32, n. 3-4, Autumn-Winter 2002, pp. 17-31. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1566443, p. 18.

21 On the different meanings of the "metaphysical" see Gianni Vattimo, "Quale metafisica, quale bisogno?" *Essere e dintorni*, edited by Giuseppe Iannantuono, Alberto Martinengo, and Santiago Zabala (Milan: La nave di Teseo, 2018), pp. 13-23.

22 Martin Heidegger, "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," *On Time and Being*, translated by Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

turning that seems to be symbolically captured, as has been shown above, in JC's (Coetzee's?) abandoning of his strong opinions in favor of "gentler" ones.

This "gentle" critical tension with regard to the "West," which can only emerge from within and is never an end in itself, bears strong affinities with Gianni Vattimo's *pensiero debole* or "weak thought." According to Vattimo's particular view of philosophical hermeneutics, we live in an age in which the thinker can only "prove" her theories by essentially telling a *story*; by engaging, that is, in a mode of thinking that would necessarily run the risk of breaching the standard requirements for rigorous demonstration that are mostly taken for granted. As is the case with Coetzee's commitment to literature, Vattimo's endorsement of hermeneutics is not a matter of subjective choice, but is related to the fact that in the present epoch, philosophy – and by extension thinking – cannot but turn hermeneutic as it must respond to the increasing multiplicity of world-views and the irrevocable waning of the faith in first principles or ultimate goals. Now, by employing the term "story" Vattimo does not mean that philosophy must somehow dissolve into literature,[23] but that philosophy must never lose sight of its own presuppositions (which both limit and enable it) and hence always regard itself as a more or less consistent narrative rather than a systematic elucidation of objective states. Otherwise philosophy would be at risk, according to Vattimo, to either give in, yet again, to the metaphysical temptation of reaching some objective truth or to merely settle for a historicist panoramic view of culture pretending to describe it disinterestedly from a safe distance. In a nutshell, Vattimo – much like Coetzee – finds himself in the paradoxical position of still believing in the responsible and to some extent engaged character of intellectual labor while denying it any Archimedean point.

In light of these introductory remarks, it is quite surprising that Vattimo's "weak thought" has had relatively little impact in the field of Coetzee scholarship.[24] One reason for this might be, as Rita Felski has only rather recently noted, that "the work of the Italian philosopher …, one of the most sophisticated and prolific of present-day

[23] Gianni Vattimo, *The Responsibility of the Philosopher*, edited by Franca D'Agostini, translated by William Cuaig (New York: Columbia UP, 2010), p. 75.

[24] The only exception that I know of is Martin Woessner. See his "Beyond Realism: Coetzee's Post-Secular Imagination," in *Beyond the Ancient Quarrel: Literature, Philosophy, and J. M. Coetzee*, edited by Patrick Hayes and Jan Wilm, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017), pp. 143-59.

hermeneutical thinkers, has barely registered in the mainstream of literary and cultural studies."[25] A further reason is the almost complete monopoly that French poststructuralism has had on literary theory in general and Coetzee in particular. However, Coetzee's work continues to propagate ripples of interference between philosophy and literature that, if confined to a strictly, albeit necessary, deconstructive moment, would wear out their productive potential. As one commentator put it, "Writing such as Coetzee's figures present loss (of meaning, authority, purpose) as proliferation (syntactic, of meanings, choices, alternatives); it plunders the tradition and it carries on."[26] It could be said that the metaphor of weakening in Vattimo alludes, in quite the same way, to a proliferating of interpretations and modes of carrying on. Thus a reading of Coetzee through the weakening lenses of Vattimo's hermeneutics could add yet another nuance to the rapprochement between philosophy and literature that Coetzee's novels both invite and frustrate at every turn. The attempt of this study is to do just that. But before delineating the structure of this thesis, let me place Coetzee in the philosophical panorama by briefly going through some of the main critical works.

The first explicitly philosophical study of Coetzee's fiction appeared in 2010.[27] The collective volume focuses on the ethical questions Coetzee's novels raise and features diverse, well-argued approaches that not only bring thematic aspects into clearer focus, but also explore the potential points of intersection between philosophy and literature. The overall feeling, however, is that the philosophy-literature divide is implied throughout so that they can only look at each other from a distance while essentially following each its own path. At best literature can boost philosophy's imaginative potential; at worst it can act as philosophy's handmaiden by providing useful exemplary instances that would assist philosophy in its search for truth and clarity.

In an essay from 2003 Cora Diamond had already anticipated these limitations.[28] She notes that Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) reads in such a way that any attempt to

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25 Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (U of Chicago P, 2015), p. 32.

26 Regina Janes, "'Writing Without Authority': J. M. Coetzee and His Fictions," *Salmagundi*, no. 114/115 Spring-Summer 1997, pp. 103-121. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40548964, p. 118.

27 Anton Leist and Peter Singer, editors, *J. M. Coetzee and Ethics: Philosophical Perspectives on Literature* (New York: Columbia UP, 2010).

28 The essay "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy" was reprinted in Stanley Cavell et al., *Philosophy and Animal Life* (New York: Columbia UP, 2008), pp. 43-89.

isolate thematic content and bring it within the boundaries of familiar argumentative structures is constantly undermined. This induces a sense of bewilderment and exposure that weakens one's ordinary mode of living and thinking.[29] Nikolas Kompridis incorporates Diamond's insight into political thought and further develops it to show that the kind of response Coetzee's novel elicits is a form of receptivity as answerability emerging from sensuous acknowledgment of one's own vulnerability, rather than from knowledge proportioned by traditional philosophical argument.[30] In *The Philosopher's Dog* Raimond Gaita too takes Coetzee as his model to show how the skillful collusion of form and content in storytelling can productively operate in the realm of meaning and understanding in ways unavailable to science and philosophy.[31] As a matter of fact, Jan Wilm identifies in Coetzee a deliberately decelerating writing pattern that induces a meditative mood incompatible with problem-solving reasoning usually associated with science and most analytic philosophy.[32] There is no doubt that the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry/literature is far from being settled and Coetzee has for a while now been at the very center of the debate. So much so that Stephen Mulhall devoted an entire monograph to the subject back in 2009[33] while another collective study has recently taken the argument even further in light of Coetzee's latest work.[34]

It is under the sway of this increasing philosophical interest in Coetzee that the present study operates. The goal is to provide a preliminary outlook on what has been called "literary thinking" by tackling the processes of authorship and readership, so strenuously explored in Coetzee's work, from the standpoint of philosophical hermeneutics. This will be mainly done by targeting Coetzee's "non-fictional" writing (even though, as we shall see, the distinction between fictional and non-fictional is rather problematic) in an effort to embed its insights in the design of a "weak poetics."[35]

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29 Ibid., p. 58.

30 "Recognition and Receptivity: Forms of Normative Response in the Lives of Animals We Are," in *The Aesthetic Turn in Political Thought* (London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), edited by Nikolas Kompridis, pp. -.

31 *The Philosopher's Dog* (London, New York: Routledge, 2004). Cf. Coetzee's almost identical attitude with respect to science and philosophy in the foreword to Jonathan Balcombe's *Second Nature: The Inner Lives of Animals* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. ix-xii.

32 Jan Wilm, *The Slow Philosophy of J. M. Coetzee* (London , New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).

33 *The Wounded Animal: J. M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy* (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton UP, 2009).

34 Patrick Hayes and Jan Wilm, editors, *Beyond the Ancient Quarrel: Literature, Philosophy, and J. M. Coetzee*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017).

Coetzee once said that "Philosophizing … is an activity unique in that it does not start out by demarcating its territory, putting bounds around itself."[36] The **first chapter** will follow up this claim in the context of storytelling and suggest an answer to what it might mean to "philosophize through stories." Thus, after taking into account the relevant critical outlooks situating Coetzee's *sui generis* brand of (post)modernism[37] (**1.1**), the goal is to show how storytelling breathes life into philosophical topics without explicitly thematizing them or bringing them to closure. While never betraying the playful character of literature, Coetzee's novels raise powerful questions that acquire renewed relevance with every reading. The novel form allows for endless reworkings of apparently worn out content while making full use of the resources of a natural language. Coetzee exploits this freedom in order to redescribe and unsettle the boundaries and nature of discourse (be it philosophical or literary). On the one hand, storytelling allows Coetzee to explore both thematically and formally the problem of truth-telling and hence engage in an oblique critique of the Western tradition in its obsession with truth and final vocabularies. On the other hand, by its very nature, storytelling can never aspire to a "strong" overcoming of Western thinking. But there lies its strength: in Coetzee, the essential assumptions of Western thought are neither confirmed nor disproved, they are invoked, endured, played with, distorted, and ultimately "turned to new purposes" (**1.2**).

As mentioned earlier, Coetzee's choice to write fiction has an unavoidable ethico-political substrate which is related to him being a white South African intellectual of Afrikaner origin living in South Africa during and after the apartheid regime. How, if at all, is one supposed (allowed?) to speak in such a situation? This is the question hovering over the **second chapter**. The dizzying array of possibilities opening up at every step during the process of writing fiction undermines any programmatic intent on the part of the writer. Authorial intention is thus weakened, but not lost. Coetzee's

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35 I owe this concept to Adrzej Zawadzki; see his *Literature and Weak Thought*, *Cross-Roads: Polish Studies in Culture, Literary Theory, and History*, vol. 2, translated by Stanley S. Bill, edited by Ryszard Nycz and Teresa Walas (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2013).

36 Paola Cavalieri, *The Death of the Animal* (New York: Columbia UP, 2009), p. -.

37 Derek Attridge, for instance, settles for "radical modernism" (*J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004)); Jane Poyner for "late modernism" (*J. M. Coetzee and the Paradox of Postcolonial Authorship* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2009)); Linda Hutcheon for a kind of postmodernist fiction she calls "historiographic metafiction" (*Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (Wilfrid Laurier UP ,1980)).

stories do indeed seem to follow their own course, but they are never disjointed from the historical circumstances they ultimately respond to. Coetzee's involvement with reality is neither mimetic nor critical in the traditional sense; it is rather conversational and generative, always careful and caring. Any use of so-called postmodernist narrative strategies (e.g., metafiction, intertextuality, etc.) is never meant to remove the work from its historical context, but, if anything, to further raise awareness of the work's contextuality. A brief survey of the contrasting and polemical critical reception of his novels will help gauge the stakes of Coetzee's literary involvement in such a highly politicized atmosphere along the interplay between textuality and history (**2.1**). One straightforward indication of the difficulty of finding a position from which to speak responsibly yet unauthoritatively is to be found in Coetzee's 1992 essay "Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*: Madness and Rivalry,"[38] which is the subject of section **2.2** Accordingly, Coetzee does seem to agree with Nadine Gordimer who believes that he white South African writer does not have a choice but to occupy the precarious position of the interpreter.[39] However, what most concerns Coetzee is the violent outcomes of interpretation that tend to tame or downright suppress alterity. An experience with literature, in Coetzee's sense, might then reduce such violence as it relentlessly probes the possibilities of self-interpretation (**2.3**).

Such experience with literature nourishing literary thinking would be inconceivable without the reader's participation. The question that **chapter 3** poses then is: How exactly is the reader involved in literary thinking? For Coetzee the work creates an "entry point" through which the reader is immersed in a *living* dialogue with the characters on the page but also, and especially, with herself (or with what he calls her "countervoices"). This kind of relationship between the work and the reader goes beyond any cathartic experience or psychological identification with the characters as it elicits an existential response which cannot but constantly refer back to the reader's own life circumstances. Understood in this way, the reading experience can be neither subjective (e.g., affective stylistics) nor objective (e.g., historicist). As the reader interprets the work she is being interpreted by it. This "process," which Coetzee calls

[38] J. M. Coetzee, "Ersamus' *Praise of Folly*: Rivalry and Madness," *Neophilologus*, vol. 76, January 1992.

[39] See Nadine Gordimer, "Living in the Interregnum," *The New York Review of Books*, vol. 29, no. 21/22, January 1983, pp. -. www.nybooks.com/articles/1983/01/20/living-in-the-interregnum/.

living reading, raises the question of understanding which is beautifully summed up by Heidegger:

"… while a right elucidation never understands the text better than the author understood it, it does surely understand it differently. Yet this difference must be of such a kind as to touch upon the Same towards which the elucidated text is thinking."[40]

Thus in this final chapter I will further explore the nature of literary thinking in the event of reading by taking Heidegger's quote as a premise. This will be done as follows: first, by doing away with the "subject-object paradigm" that still operates, albeit mostly tacitly, in literary theory (**3.1**); second, by placing Coetzee's notion of "living reading" within a slightly altered aesthetics of reception which pivots on the similarity between Coetzee's and Gadamer's understanding of the classic (**3.2**); third, by tackling the problem of "understanding alterity" in its event-like character that such an aesthetics elicits (**3.3**).

The traits of literary thinking hereby delineated will hopefully have prepared the terrain for a reflection on an ethical orientation that, once awakened from the comforting slumber of metaphysical imperatives, will not persist indefinitely in the deconstructive momentum fueled by silences and undecidables. An ethical orientation that would rather enable us to hear, as Coetzee says, "music as sound upon silence, not silence between sounds"[41] and thus still capable of envisaging, albeit provisionally, concrete possibilities of emancipation.

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40 Martin Heidegger, "The word of Nietzsche 'God is Dead,'" *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, translated by William Lovitt (New York: Garland Publishing, 1977), p. 58.

41 J. M. Coetzee, *White Writing* (Yale UP, 1988), p. 81.

1. THINKING THROUGH STORIES

Storytelling is another, an other mode of thinking.
(J. M. Coetzee, "The Novel Today")[42]

One meaningful way to situate J. M. Coetzee within the cultural panorama of our time is to turn to the paradigm of the dissenting white intellectual in postcolonial context. More specifically, to one of the paradigm's defining characteristics: the unsurmountable impasse emerging from the self-conscious belonging to and use of the Western canon coupled with the moral obligation to subvert and rewrite that canon. The consequence being that any form of appropriation of the modernist and/or postmodernist tradition is necessarily warped under socio-political pressures.[43] This is particularly true for Coetzee whose literary and philosophical allegiances are patently European in the context of one of the most disturbing realities in recent history – the Apartheid regime and its aftermath.

The aim of this section is to propose an understanding of this impasse through a reflection on the mode of thinking Coetzee is hinting at in the above citation. I will refer to it as "literary thinking," a phrase I borrow from Richard Pippin who has employed it to stress the importance of narrative form, independently of content, in Coetzee's fiction for the development of moral thinking.[44] I wish to expand on the notion of literary thinking so as to draw upon its affinities with a "weak poetics"[45] inspired by Gianni Vattimo's "weak thought."

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42 J. M. Coetzee, "The Novel Today," *Upstream*, no. 6, 1998, p. 4.

43 For a general overview of the African literary context see Gerald Gaylard, *After Colonialism: African Postmodernism and Magical Realism* (Johannesburg: Wits UP, 2005).

44 Robert Pippin, "Philosophical Fiction? On J. M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*," *Republics of Letters*, vol. 5, no. 1, January 2017, *Arcade*, http://arcade.stanford.edu/rofl/philosophical-fiction-jm-coetzees-elizabeth-costello, see especially p. 8, n.7.

45 Andrzej Zawadzki's is one of the first explicit attempt that I know of to introduce Gianni Vattimo's weak thought in literary theory; see his *Literature and Weak Thought*, *Cross-Roads: Polish Studies in Culture, Literary Theory, and History*, vol. 2, translated by Stanley S. Bill, edited by Ryszard Nycz and Teresa Walas (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2013). Zawadzki, however, uses the concept of weak poetics to describe literary discourse in general (see, for example, p. 126), while I confine it to Coetzee and his idea of literature.

1.1. Which (Post)Modernism?

The point is to think Coetzee's literary endeavor in terms of its problematic affiliation with a project of emancipation both at odds with the logic of modernity and cautious about the relativistic tenets of postmodern discourse. This presupposes a negotiation between the humanistic and anti-humanistic tendencies of the kind of "(post)modernism" Coetzee has been aligned with. By using this term in such a way I am being deliberately vague as there is hardly a consensus regarding the categorization of Coetzee's fiction.[46] I tend, in principle, to be sympathetic towards Derek Attridge's notion of "radical modernism" that he describes as a prevalently anti-humanistic, disruptive, other-oriented form of modernism. Yet I am equally interested in the "constructive," productive, and meaning-disclosing aspect of Coetzee's writing, an aspect that Attridge is tempted to overlook on occasions. I do not think the two postures are incompatible.

Regardless of labels, however, the aspect to be stressed here is the ambivalent position the white South African writer comes to occupy: on the one hand, she cannot harbor revolutionary aspirations – as that would require her to speak for the black majority – and, on the other hand, unlike her Western peers, she does not have the luxury to completely abandon humanist hope for emancipation.[47] The notorious postmodernist distrust of master narratives spurned by the loss of referentiality cannot lead to the repudiation of *all* narratives. A heightened sense of historical contingency orients the discourse beyond the deconstructive moment and towards a retrieval (albeit provisional and precarious) of meaning.[48] Philosophically, this phenomenon finds one of its finest

[46] For an excellent rendering of this difficulty see Derek Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004), especially pp. 1-9, where he briefly discusses several cultural trends Coetzee has been associated with, among which late-modernism, high-modernism, neomodernism, postmodernism.

[47] See Neil Lazarus, "Modernism and Modernity: T. W. Adorno and Contemporary White South African Literature," *Cultural Critique*, vol. -, no. 5, Winter 1986-1987, pp. 131-55. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1354359.

[48] The notion of "retrieval" is an important corrective to the relativistic drive of an antifoundationalist historicism. In ontological terms, Being must be recuperated after the dismantling of the history of ontology – see John D. Caputo, "The Thought of Being and the Conversation of Mankind: The Case of Heidegger and Rorty," *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 36, no. 3, March 1983, pp. 661-85. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/20127878. In epistemological terms, understanding must involve concrete knowledge beyond mere edification – see Rüdiger Bubner, "Hermeneutics: Understanding or Edification?" *Philosophical Topics*, vol. 12, no. - (Supplement), 1981, pp. 37-48. doi:10.5840/philtopics198112Supplement62. In socio-political terms, adherence to existing social

expression in Gianni Vattimo's logic of *Verwindung* (distortion, twisting, recovery) that responds to the decline of modernity *not* by overcoming its crises (e.g., subjectivity, identity, representation, etc.) but by intensifying and recontextualizing them within an always "interested" historical project.[49] Coetzee's storytelling is, to a large extent, I suggest, a *verwunden* way of thinking these crises.

Coetzee's claim that "[t]o me a story is a way of thinking – an archaic way of thinking, non-analytic,"[50] invites a reflection on what it means to think. What is worthwhile about such a reflection is not so much the prospect of finding an answer, but the exploration of the circumstances by which Coetzee has made such a view his signature view.[51] My purpose in what follows, however, is not to engage in a biographical study,[52] but to suggest that the non-analytic, "archaic way of thinking" Coetzee endorses is primarily a response to a sort of historical necessity, regardless of any theoretical allegiance or psychological state of mind; that the defining mark of Coetzee's intellectual disposition is a heightened sense of self-consciousness born out of a position of "privileged marginality" due, at least in part, to a not wholly disadvantageous blend of personal and political circumstances. As has been noted, "Coetzee, marginalized as an Anglicized Afrikaaner, nevertheless grew up as a white South African during Apartheid, with all the social and political benefit brought with that racist sociolegal structure."[53]

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practices must be justified beyond their own impositions – see Richard J. Bernstein, "Philosophy in the Conversation of Mankind," *The Review of Metaphyiscs*, vol. 33, no. 4, June 1980, pp. 745-75. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/20127425.

49 I will further develop this point in the next section. See Gianni Vattimo, "Storicità e differenza," *Essere e dintorni*, edited by Giuseppe Iannantuono, Alberto Martinengo, and Santiago Zabala (Milan: La nave di Teseo, 2018), pp. 337-54. For a further look into Vattimo's hermeneutics in the context of postmodernism see also Giovanna Borradori, "'Weak Thought' and Postmodernism: The Italian Departure from Deconstruction," *Social Text*, vol. -, no. 18, Winter 1987-1988, pp. 39-49. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/488689, and her "Recoding Metaphysics: Strategies of the Italian Contemporary Thought," *Recoding Metaphysics: The New Italian Philosophy*, edited by Giovanna Borradori (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1988), pp. 1-26.

50 In interview with Rian Malan, *Sunday Times*, November 10, 1990, quoted in J. C. Kannemeyer, *J. M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing*, translated by Michiel Heyns (Melbourne, London: Scribe, 2012), p. 472.

51 Coetzee said this in an interview in 1990 (see previous note) but there is no reason to think that he has since changed his mind. In fact, not only does Coetzee continue to write and publish works of fiction, but he even uses storytelling as a form of public address.

52 This has been wonderfully done already by David Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face-to-Face with Time* (Viking, 2015) and J. C. Kannemeyer, *J. M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing*, translated by Michiel Heyns (Melbourne, London: Scribe, 2013).

53 Arthur Rose, *Literary Cynics: Borges, Beckett, Coetzee* (London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 25.

Simply put, the contradictory position Coetzee has come to occupy can be described in terms of an irreconcilable tension between the moral obligation to "speak truth to power," on the one hand, and the awareness of being able to do so precisely because his discourse is "authorized," or even legitimized to a certain extent, by the structures of power it questions, on the other hand. Not only has Coetzee enjoyed, albeit unwillingly and resentfully, the white privilege under and after Apartheid, but he also owes his enormous prestige and influence to the workings of a hegemonic transnational cultural environment to which he has masterfully adapted reaching an immensely heterogenous audience worldwide. But this is not an uncommon feature among leading intellectual figures of our time and is thus by no means specific to Coetzee – he merely works within the established and recognizable conventions of his *métier* as a novelist.

The aspect I want to stress rather is Coetzee's almost obsessive preoccupation with his own complicity in the perpetuation of dominant forms of discourse that ultimately translate into more or less straightforward forms of violence.[54] The self-conscious participation in the processes of discourse formation has always deterred Coetzee from occupying a more visible and engaged position in the public sphere. It has also endowed his fiction with that characteristic touch of *elusiveness* that has brought him praise as well as criticism.[55]

As a result, Coetzee has been linked to the paradigm of the "anxious intellectual" operating in the postcolonial context who must thematize his own failure as an author in order to subvert authority[56]; whose only mode of political involvement is to pursue aesthetic autonomy[57]; and who can only redeem a sense of South African identity by means of an ironic affiliation with the European tradition.[58] What is immediately apparent in these by now classic renderings of Coetzee is the presence of an essential

54 Coetzee's indebtedness to the Western tradition (both literary and philosophical) has been widely acknowledged, but Attwell is maybe the best authority on the subject. See his "The Problem of History in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee," *Poetics Today*, vol. 11, no. 3, Autumn 1990, pp. 579-615. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1772827.

55 The ambivalent reception of Coetzee's work will be discussed in section 1.2.a.

56 See Jane Poyner, "Introduction: Positioning the Writer," *J. M. Coetzee and the Paradoxes of Power in Postcolonial Authorship* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 1-15.

57 See Dominic Head, "The Writer's Place: Coetzee and Postcolonial Literature," *J. M. Coetzee* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), pp. 1-28.

58 David Attwell, "The Problem of History in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee," *Poetics Today* vol. 11, no. 3, Autumn 1990, pp. 579-615. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1772827, see especially pp. 597-602.

contradiction that lies at the heart of any attempt to secure a position from which to speak; a contradiction that not only informs his fictional constructions but seems to be constitutive of Coetzee's very existence. It is precisely the question-begging character of the "initial move"[59] – the move that would set the ground for confidently positioning oneself – that haunts Coetzee. Formally, this matches the structure of irresolvable paradoxes or antinomies that, according to Quine, "bring on the crises in thought" and hence must be "avoided or revised."[60] In Coetzee's case, however, these "crises in thought" turn out to be much more than a problem to be solved in formal reasoning; they are in fact essential rather than obstacles to thinking and, most importantly, qualify his being-in-the-world.

a) The liar paradox

It is therefore not difficult to see that Coetzee's impasse of finding a position from which to speak has the essential traits of a common paradoxical structure known also as the "paradox of Epimenides" or the "Cretan liar paradox." Coetzee is not only aware of this but he gives us important clues about the subtle ways of working through such impasse. In his sophisticated analysis of "Erasmus' 'Praise of Folly': Rivalry and Madness," Coetzee indeed refers to Erasmus' essay as a "massive elaboration of the Cretan liar paradox"[61] that perfectly describes the condition of the writer in a politically dense environment, torn between two apparently irreconcilable responsibilities: one towards her art, the other towards society and history.

Coetzee's interest in Erasmus' piece is hardly a surprise given the political air of South Africa, but I will further elaborate on this point in the corresponding section. For now I only want to draw attention to how close the elusive character of Coetzee's writing

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59 I use this phrase in the same way Gianni Vattimo does in "Dialectics, Difference, and Weak Thought," *Weak Thought*, edited by Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti, translated by Peter Carravetta (Albany: SUNY, 2012, pp. 39-53. There he identifies the difficulty that the "initial move" presupposes for thinking: a difficulty that reveals the hermeneutic vein of any kind of thinking insofar as it has to come to terms with its own always already historically given presuppositions (see especially pp. 39-40).

60 W. V. Quine, "The Ways of Paradox," *The Ways of Paradox and Other* Essays, (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 7.

61 J. M. Coetzee, "Ersamus' 'Praise of Folly': Rivalry and Madness," *Neophilologus*, vol. 76, January 1992, p. 12.

matches what Coetzee himself refers to as the empowering "weakness" of Erasmus' text – a feature that permits Erasmus to occupy an antinomic, "evasive (non)position" which is nevertheless ethically motivated and ultimately politically relevant. As one commentator put it,

> [n]ot unlike Coetzee himself, Erasmus's refusal to take sides has long been a source of controversy. Yet, refusing to insist upon the veracity of one's arguments is itself an ethical action, since it involves renouncing any claim to authority. It is to prefer not to foist one's beliefs – or, for that matter, one's interpretation of history – onto anyone else.[62]

It is indeed an ethical imperative, always paradoxically marked by the doubt of its own legitimacy, that brings Coetzee to say that "the author's position is the weakest of all,"[63] especially "in an age when any transcendental basis for ethics (as for aesthetics) is being denied in the name of politics."[64] What is crucial for the point I want to make is that, for Coetzee, to adopt a position of weakness is the only way to elude complicity with the dominant discourse without appealing to any form of foundationalism. "Complicity," here, would take the form of a tacit acknowledgment of the facts of history that the writer/thinker must *either* faithfully or realistically represent ("supplementarity") *or* radically disrupt through alternative narratological strategies ("rivalry").[65]

In other words, to write "in the name of politics," in Coetzee's case at least, is to comply to an "orthodoxy of opposition" that would ultimately operate – to put it in Vattimo's terms – within the boundaries of a "historicist metaphysics," in the sense of being "up on the times."[66] Once any ahistorical, transcendental grounding for writing and thinking

62 Sam Gilchrist Hall, *Shakespear's Folly: Philosophy, Humanism, Critical Theory* (New York, London: Routledge, 2017), p. 92.

63 J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, edited by David Attwell (Cambridge MA, London: Harvard UP, 1992), p. 206.

64 Ibid., pp. 387-88. Coetzee refers here specifically to Nadine Gordimer, but the statement is perfectly applicable to himself.

65 For the full implications of the notions of "supplementarity" and "rivalry" that Coetzee introduced in a talk from 1987 (published in 1998 under the title "The Novel Today," *Upstream*, no. 6, 1998) see especially David Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: U of California P. 1993), pp. 14-17; Stephen Watson, "Colonialism and the Novels of J. M. Coetzee," *Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee*, edited by Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson (London: Macmillan Press, 1996), pp. 13-36; and Dominic Head, *J. M. Coetzee* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), pp. 10-12.

66 See Gianni Vattimo, "Dialettica, differenza, pensiero debole," *Il pensiero debole*, edited by Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2011), p. 13; for the English version of the essay see "Dialectics, Difference, and Weak Thought" (Albany: SUNY, 2012), p. 39.

(but also or especially for action) is discarded, the challenge, for Coetzee, is then not so much to correspond or to be true – even by means of a negative or oblique critique – to a certain state of affairs but to "imagin[e] a form of address that permits the play of *writing* to start taking place."[67] Such form of address must not be thought of either as a free act or as a representation of historical facts; nor must it be confined to the context of South Africa alone. What it means is essentially a way of thinking that must come to terms with its finitude and historical orientation, that is, with its hermeneutical foundation.[68]

It might be objected here that to refer to a "hermeneutical foundation" comes close to yet another metaphysical – or, even worse, eurocentric – description of a state of being that would not only deflect our attention from the particularity of South Africa but would assimilate its *otherness* through yet another form of cultural colonialism. This is not the case, however, since to suggest the hermeneutical foundation of discourse does not mean to lay down some grounding principles for political or ethical action, but merely to acknowledge an orientation or a direction in thinking that must work through an always already historically qualified horizon of understanding. To do justice to the otherness of South Africa does not mean to abandon the eurocentric view – that would be futile at best, insincere at worst – in fact, Coetzee admits that "[m]y intellectual allegiances are clearly European, not African"[69]; what it means rather is to "weaken" such a view by adopting a disposition in thinking and being that would prepare for something *other* to emerge. One condition for this to happen is to acknowledge a sort of circular interplay between a universal cultural context within which thinking develops – in Coetzee's case, the Western tradition – and the particular time and place to which it responds – South Africa. Any general reflection on the Apartheid and post-Apartheid is bound to be vague and inevitably irrelevant if it does not take as its point of departure the concrete idiosyncratic context of such an unfathomably complex reality such as South Africa's. At the same time, however, we would be literally unable to understand

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67 J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, edited by David Attwell (Cambridge MA, London: Harvard UP, 1992), p. 68 (emphasis in the original).

68 Cf Gianni Vattimo, "Dialectics, Difference, and Weak Thought" (Albany: State U of New York P, 2012), p. 40.

69 J.M. Coetzee, *Dagens Nyheter* 7 December, 2003, quoted in David Attwell, "J. M. Coetzee and the Idea of Africa," *JLS/TLW*, vol. 25, no. 4, December 2009, pp. 67-83. *Taylor and Francis Online*, doi:10.1080/02564710903226684, p. 67.

its uniqueness if we did not refer it to an already familiar, more universal, interpretive framework. What Coetzee seems to worry about then is not to bear witness to how things *are* in South Africa or to preach about how things *should be*. The challenge is rather to find ways of writing / understanding / acting / being – or, in one word, *thinking* – that would embrace such circularity in order to elude violent forms of appropriation.

The fact that the South African context and one's place within it cannot be understood unless is located in a wider tradition of thought is demonstrated not only by Coetzee's tribute to Erasmus of Rotterdam – one of the founding figures of European humanism – but, perhaps more relevantly, by Nadine Gordimer's appropriation of one of Antonio Gramsci's most oft-cited remark, to allude to the late-Apartheid years. The epigraph to her 1981 novel *July's People* reads: "The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms." To state the obvious, Gordimer's context is quite different from Gramsci's: she writes from the position of an internationally acclaimed white novelist during late-Apartheid, while Gramsci writes from a fascist prison as a communist activist and refers of course principally to the political climate in Italy between the two world wars. And yet Gramsci's bleak diagnosis of interwar Italy applies perfectly to South Africa, the defining trait being that of *waiting* – a condition of stasis, an apathetic interlude stretching between the old and the new. It must be added that for Gramsci the interregnum points to a moment of *crisis*[70] that he associates, somewhat paradoxically, with a state of stagnation that impedes change; contrary, that is, to what the word's etymology would indicate: a "decisive point" or a "turning point" forewarning imminent change.

It becomes clearer now that this critical phase of stagnation reaches well beyond the problem of elaboration and overcoming of contradictions in formal reasoning. What it describes rather is the neutralizing effects of an ontological condition characterized by a "lack of emergency"[71] that conjoins different historical epochs. In this sense it can be

[70] Here is the full sentence in a slightly different translation: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born: in this interregnum, morbid phenomena of the most varied kind come to pass." Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, vol. 2, edited and translated by Joseph A. Buttigieg (New York, Columbia UP, 1996), pp. 32-33.

[71] Cf Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, translated by Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999), pp. 87-88 (§60). See also Gianni Vattimo,

said that Gramsci's interregnum extends not only to late-Apartheid South Africa but also to the present, "end of history," state of our global village. One excellent proof of this is the work of Chilean-born contemporary artist Alfredo Jaar who draws upon figures such as Gramsci and Beckett (another master of waiting) to address the challenges of the present. As a matter of fact, his most recent artistic intervention, entitled "I Can't Go On, I'll Go On" – a tribute to Samuel Beckett's 1953 novel *The Unnamable* –, perfectly captures the contradictory nature of a critical lack of emergency that seems to characterize our times.[72] And since our concern here is Coetzee's writerly endeavor to find a mode of address in times of ontological stagnation, it is helpful to recall as well one of Beckett's (who is also one of Coetzee's acknowledged "teachers") even more incisive formulation of the impasse: "The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express."[73]

To recapitulate, I have tried to show so far that Coetzee's "non-analytic, archaic way of thinking" is characterized by a constant doubling back on itself that never loses sight of the question of its beginnings – that is, the historically qualified, living experience that constitutes the condition of its possibility. As such, it can only be enacted in a question-begging fashion without, for this reason, being reduced to a mere logical vacuum. As thinking now must operate in an age of waning first principles and under the aegis of the manifold – that is, in a "post-modern," after-the-death-of-god age ruled by what Reiner Schürmann, following Heidegger, calls the "an-archy principle"[74] – it can no longer claim an ethereal position from which to hector over the realm of concrete existence. As a result ethical and political action can no longer be subordinated to a thinking that would somehow yield true knowledge. If any knowledge is to be achieved, that knowledge would depend on the disclosing capacity of thinking, that is, on its dealings with freedom and idiosyncrasy rather than truth and objectivity. Thinking, therefore,

"Insuperable Contradictions and Events," *Being Shaken: Ontology and the Event*, edited by Michael Marder and Santiago Zabala (London, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 70-76.

72 See Alfredo's Jaar in interview with *The Guardian*, August 1, 2019, by Dominic Rushe, www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/aug/01/alfredo-jaar-artist-interview-change-the-world-pinochet-chile-edinburgh.

73 Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, edited by Ruby Cobn (New York: Grove Press, 1984), p. 139.

74 A purposefully contradictory phrase as *arche* here stands for principle. See Reiner Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987), pp. 4-6.

must acquire an aesthetic valence that would enable it to dwell in contradictions rather than reconcile them. Once the faith in objective knowledge is abandoned and, as a result, language is exonerated from its descriptive/correspondist function, fiction can become indeed a bearer of truth. As Coetzee puts it in his critique of Thomas Nagel, "[o]ther such knowledge may be true [– other than 'true, real knowledge' –], but its truth is the truth of fictions."[75]

Far from relegating truth to the realm of fancy or arbitrariness, the "truth of fictions" alludes to an understanding of aesthetics that can no longer merely conform to what traditionally has been its conciliatory, cathartic, contemplative function. Instead, it is precisely by revealing its aesthetic vein that thinking can come to terms with the "an-archic" nature of existence and thus become truly hermeneutical in the sense of "grant[ing] what is singular and unrepeatable an open field."[76] This being said, it is not surprising that such a thinking would find in the novel, which is according to George Orwell "the most anarchical of all forms of literature,"[77]its privileged mode of expression.

b) The hermeneutical circle

Now, if the only way available to Coetzee to subvert authority while being an authority is to find a relevant, ethically charged position from which to speak by eluding straightforward positioning, then the strength of such an endeavor can only be found in the weakness of fictional discourse. While there are many commentators who have alluded, in different ways, to the paradoxical, deliberately self-undermining nature of Coetzee's storytelling,[78] let me only briefly mention some of the more explicit attempts before stating my final point about the circular relationship underlying it. Jane Poyner associates the staging of the paradox of authorship in Coetzee's fiction with an ethical imperative to escape the relations of power ensnaring South Africa. Correspondingly, the political (the public sphere) must be qualified by the ethical (the private sphere) in

75 See J. M. Coetzee and Arabella Kurts, *The Good Story* (New York: Viking, 2015), p. 136.
76 Gerald L. Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992), p. 17.
77 George Orwell, "Inside the Whale," *Inside the Whale and Other Essays* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1940), p. 173.
78 See especially section 1.2 for an exposition of different views on the political implications of Coetzee's paradoxical condition.

order to gain any relevance; hence a seemingly apolitical stance turns radically political.[79] (Andrew Van der Vlies makes roughly the same point when he says that Coetzee engages in "a kind of studied anti-politics [that] is precisely political."[80]) In a different light, for Arthur Rose, Coetzee is a "literary cynic" who uses "genres of paradox" to engage in a deconstruction of privilege that is only possible through an accommodation with privilege;[81] while for Leist and Singer, Coetzee is a skeptic whose "intellectual attitude of *paradoxical truth seeking*" ends up in a "never-ending spiral movement that at no point leads to 'full' truth."[82]

These are interesting readings no doubt, but they all tacitly assume that Coetzee's use of paradox is part of a *strategy*, a conscious manipulation of narrative technique meant to yield desired results. But if we take seriously Coetzee's views on writing we can ascertain that the condition of possibility for what he calls an "archaic way of thinking, non-analytic" comes closer to a sort of avowal of ignorance than strategic planning: a "step back" that makes possible, as it were, a shift of focus from the declared intentionality of the writer/thinker to the disclosing capacity of what is being written/thought. "[Y]ou write because you do not know what you want to say," admits Coetzee.[83] Or, as when he cites South African playwright Athol Fugard: "So often the paradox in writing: discover your beginning when you reach the end."[84] And again: "The feel of writing fiction is one of freedom, of irresponsibility, or better, of responsibility toward something that has not yet emerged, that lies somewhere at the end of the road."[85] Freedom becomes therefore also the ground for truth: "Writing," Coetzee goes on, "involves an interplay between the push into the future that takes you to the blank page in the first place, and a resistance…. Out of that interplay there emerges, if you are lucky, what you recognize or hope to recognize as the true."[86]

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79 Jane Poyner, *J. M. Coetzee and the Paradoxes of Power in Postcolonial Authorship* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

80 Andrew van der Vlies, *Present Imperfect: Contemporary South African Writing* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017). p. 53.

81 Arthur Rose, *Literary Cynics: Borges, Beckett, Coetzee* (London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).

82 Anton Leist and Peter Singer, "Introduction: Coetzee and Philosophy," *J. M. Coetzee and Ethics: Philosophical Perspectives on Literature*, edited by Anton Leist and Peter Singer (New York: Columbia UP, 2010), p. 7 (emphasis in the original).

83 J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, edited by David Attwell (London: Harvard UP, 1992), p. 18.

84 Ibid., p. 372.

85 Ibid., p. 246.

86 Ibid., p. 18.

What this means is that the self-contradictory structure of the Cretan liar paradox underlying, as shown so far, Coetzee's "archaic thinking" is in truth an enactment of the *hermeneutical circle* – as understood in the philosophical tradition of Heidegger, Gadamer, and Vattimo. More than a well-devised strategy or method to prove a point, the paradoxical circularity of thinking seems to be the enabling condition for understanding in general. So much so that it can be traced back as early as Plato, as Richard McDonough shows in a fairly recent piece[87]: it was Plato who used imagery in order to prove the inadequacy of imagery in the quest for truth; it was Plato, again, who used literary devices, i.e. dramatic dialogue, to demonstrate the untrue and immoral nature of the "poetical," in all its forms – from poetry to visual arts. This is not to say that a thinker such as Plato was not aware of the quite obvious contradiction. McDonough, in fact, suggests that Plato's dialogues can be seen as the first conscious enactment of the hermeneutical circle. My point, however, is that what Plato teaches us is not a strategy to be employed at our choosing, but the inevitability of contradiction in the act of thinking and understanding. The same is true, I claim, for Coetzee's "choice" to think through stories.

But the question-begging character of the hermeneutical circle enabling understanding rather than hindering it is perhaps nowhere better captured than in Nietzsche's aphorism 481 of *The Will to Power*: "…. No, facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations…. but even this is interpretation."[88] Vattimo is indeed quite transparent on this point: "It is obvious that many of the most characteristic theses of Nietzsche, above all the statement 'there are no facts, only interpretations,' can be quoted as evident examples of a hermeneutic philosophy."[89]

It is no surprise then, as Tzvetan Todorov acknowledges, that

87 Richard McDonough, "The Liar Paradox in Plato," *Meta: Research in Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Practical Philosophy*, vol. 7, no. 1, June 2015, pp. 9-28, www.metajournal.org//articles_pdf/01-mcdonough-meta-techno.pdf, see especially pp. 17-23.

88 *The Will to Power*, edited by Walter Kaufmann, translated by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books 1967), p. 267 (§481). Also: "Supposing that this also is only an interpretation – and you will be eager enough to make this objection? – well, so much the better." Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), pp. 30-31 (§22).

89 Gianni Vattimo, "Nietzsche and Contemporary Hermeneutics," *Nietzsche as Affirmative Thinker*, edited by Yirmiyahu Yovel (Dordrecht, Boston, Lancaster: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1986), p. 59.

> Coetzee's real inspiration … is Nietzsche. It was Nietzsche who declared that there are no transcendental values, only wills to power; and that life is the supreme value; and that right is but one force among others. It was Nietzsche, too, that concluded that truth does not exist, that there are no facts, there are only interpretations, which are more or less powerful. Coetzee agrees with all this.[90]

Coetzee agrees indeed with all this, but one crucial element must be added to refine Todorov's reading. In order to "complete" the hermeneutical circle and hence be consistent with the "weak," self-undermining position Coetzee is bound to occupy, the statement that "there are no facts, there are only interpretations" must recognize itself as only an interpretation, as Nietzsche clearly suggests. Otherwise, we are back where we started: in the realm of metaphysical descriptions of the structure of being.[91]

What I hope to have shown so far is that the "weakening" implications of Coetzee's literary thinking, which might be said to qualify to a certain extent his (post)modernism, rest on a self-conscious staging of contradiction in response to historically qualified circumstances. Having lost its foundational[92] and epistemic[93] functions and with no grand synthesis in sight, thinking turns to the tentative, unassuming rhythm of storytelling, against the background, as we shall see, of a relaxation of the compulsion to truth and an aversion towards final vocabularies. Such a development raises the question of the nature of authorial authority and the event of understanding in reading.

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90 Tzvetan Todorov, "Tyranny's Last Word," *The New Republic*, no. 18, November 1996, quoted in Alena Dvorakova, "Coetzee's Hidden Polemic with Nietzsche," *J. M. Coetzee and Ethics: Philosophical Perspectives on Literature*, edited by Anton Leist and Peter Singer (New York: Columbia UP, 2010), p. 362.

91 See Gianni Vattimo, *Introduzione a Nietzsche* (Bari: Laterza, 1990), p. 97.

92 Cf Heidegger on the task of thinking in the epoch of the closure of metaphysics: "the thinking in question remains slight because its task is only of a preparatory, not of a founding character. It is content with awakening a readiness in man for a possibility whose contour remains obscure, whose coming remains uncertain." "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," *On Time and Being*, translated by Joan Stambaugh (London, New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 60.

93 The knowledge that stories provide is always contingent to the situation and self-exposing in character. Similar to Gadamer's "*Sichverstehen*: knowing one's way around." *Truth and Method*, translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum Publishing Group, 2006), p. 251.

1.2. The Compulsion to Truth

Whether Coetzee is a philosopher disguised as a novelist or vice versa has little or no interest; what is undeniable is that his fiction engages relentlessly with the Western philosophical tradition. Coetzee has described Beckett as portraying characters "condemned to a purgatorial treadmill on which they rehearse again and again the great themes of Western philosophy."[94] One could surely make the same assertion about Coetzee himself. My intention at this stage is not so much to identify the philosophical themes in themselves – as I will deal with some of them in the next sections – but to explore the nature of this "philosophical rehearsing" in the context of the rapprochement between literature and philosophy that is implied in literary thinking.

My basic claim is that Coetzee uses fiction in order to engage in a particular kind of philosophical discourse: more precisely, in a kind of philosophizing that can only be articulated through stories so that it can constantly reinvent itself in order to disclose meaning. As we have already seen, the novel form, which is the medium Coetzee has chosen to tell his stories, is a mode of thinking in itself. For Coetzee "[p]hilosophizing … is an activity unique in that it does not start out by demarcating its territory, putting bounds around itself."[95] As such it shares that element of indeterminacy with novel writing that has been praised by novelists and theorists alike. Kundera, for example, believes "that the novel can say something that can't be said any other way. But just what this specific thing is, it is very difficult to say."[96] Henry James's "definition" of novels as "large loose baggy monsters" is, in my view, by far the most compelling,[97] although Jonathan Culler's more academic take will do too: "The novel includes the parody of the novel and the theory of the novel. The essence of literature is to have no

94 J. M. Coetzee, *Inner Workings: Literary Essays (2000-2005)* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 169.

95 J. M. Coetzee, "On Appetite, the Right to Life, and Rational Ethics," in Paola Cavalieri, *The Death of the Animal: A Dialogue* (New York: Columbia UP, 2009), p. 119. Coetzee's idea of philosophizing echoes, perhaps unintentionally, Kant's distinction between philosophy as rational system of thought (which is desirable but unattainable according to Kant himself) and philosophizing as a less ambitious thinking, forever in the making – see Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Metaphysics: From Parmenides to Levinas*, translated by Lukas Soderstrom (New York: Columbia UP, 2012) p. 158.

96 Milan Kundera and Ian McEwan, "An Interview with Milan Kundera (1984)," translated by Ian Patterson, reprinted in *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*, edited by Malcolm Bradbury (London: Fontana Press, 1990), pp. 205-21, p. 217.

97 Quoted in Steven Moore, *The Novel: An Alternative History* (London, New York: Continuum, 2010), p. 34.

essence, to be protean, undefinable, to encompass whatever might be situated outside it."[98] This same indeterminacy is captured as well in Coetzee's own idea of writing, but with an added ethical touch that will gradually become more evident as we move forward: "The feel of writing fiction is one of freedom, of irresponsibility, or better, of responsibility toward something that has not yet emerged, that lies somewhere at the end of the road."[99]

In what follows, I will explore the assumptions motivating this indeterminate "responsibility toward something that has not yet emerged" that seems to characterize Coetzee's writing/philosophizing and align it with a "weak poetics." While I will be borrowing from various sources, my investigation will essentially follow the lead of two interrelated trends of thought in contemporary philosophy: Richard Rorty's neopragmatism and Gianni Vattimo's "weak thought." The goal is to show how the still theoretical promptings of Rorty and Vattimo are being realized in practice in Coetzee's storytelling. If, as Vattimo suggests, the hermeneut's only way to prove her theories is by telling stories,[100] then Coetzee is the hermeneutic philosopher par excellence. By the end of this section I hope to make emerge a sense of what Coetzee's philosophizing might mean in the context of the "quarrel" between philosophy and literature, so that it can also serve as a premise for the next chapters.

I will try to develop my argument along two interconnected themes that I see as constituting the common ground for the two ways of critical engagement with the Western philosophical tradition I have been hinting at: Rorty and Vattimo's way, which is direct and argumentative, working, as it were, from within the "game," by generally following (albeit creatively and wittily) the established jargon and methodologies of academic discourse; and Coetzee's way, which is indirect and oblique, alluding to and exploiting the rules of the game while blurring and distorting them at the same time.

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98 Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1982), p. 182.

99 J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, edited by David Attwell (London: Harvard UP, 1992), p. 246.

100 Gianni Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy*, translated by David Webb (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), p. 12.

The first theme the two modes of critique – let us call them, for now, the philosophical and the literary – converge on is a concern with or even a distaste for the *compulsion to truth* that, according to both Rorty and Vattimo, has been the defining feature of Western thought since its beginnings. This apparently ineradicable "disease" has been given various names: *metaphysics*, pure and simple, or *will to power*, or *ontotheology*, or *phallogocentrism*, etc. There is no real "cure" for the disease, but there are ways of coming to terms with it, ways to think through it and live with it. This brings me to the second theme I want to focus on in discussing Coetzee. What are the forms in which the "metaphysical disease" manifests itself? and To what extent, if any, is it surmountable? Both Rorty and Vattimo agree that metaphysics, as they understand it, cannot be overcome as that would imply falling back on a logic of overcoming which is indeed essentially metaphysical. "One lives metaphysics as the possibility for a change, the chance that it might twist in a direction that is not foreseen in its own nature."[101] Metaphysics can then be distorted, altered, and reoriented; or, in a word, *verwunden* (from the German *Verwindung*, literally distortion or twisting, but also recovering from an illness) – a concept Vattimo initially borrows from Heidegger but that eventually makes his own.[102] Coetzee, I think, not only engages in the conversation with and against the Western tradition along the anti/post-metaphysical lines drawn by Rorty and Vattimo, but he brings the conversation to its extreme consequences. His choice to use prose fiction in such a distinctive way[103] as the medium itself of the conversation – or, which is the same, the medium of thinking – is more than just a playful subverting of the metaphysical residue lingering at the core of any serious, truth-oriented discourse; it is above all the embodiment of a timely need to undergo change, to weaken, alter, and distort the crystallized vocabularies through which the world has been interpreted.

One of the first attempts (that I know of) to align Coetzee's fiction with an antifoundationalist thinking in the likes of neopragmatism and weak thought was Linda Hutcheon's.[104] True, back in the 1980s, her interest in Coetzee was only incidental to the

[101] Gianni Vattimo, "'Verwindung': Nihilism and the Postmodern in Philosophy," *SubStance*, vol. 16, no. 2, 1987, pp. 7-17. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3685157, pp. 12-13.

[102] Ibid.

[103] Jan Wilm notes that the crafty embedding of a "certain density of allusion and ambiguity" within a limpid straightforward style is particularly Coetzeean. *The Slow Philosophy of J. M. Coetzee* (London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 17.

[104] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York, London: Routledge, 1988).

much broader scope of delineating a "poetics" of postmodernism[105] – as was her interest in Rorty and Vattimo –, but what is important for my purposes here is her insistence on Coetzee's problematic relation to historical truth. In *Foe* (1986) – a "postmodernist" rewriting of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* – Coetzee problematizes the act of narration by enabling certain narrative voices while suppressing others.[106] Read within the context of colonialism/postcolonialism, and particularly within the context of the South African apartheid regime, the political implications are obvious: Which is the true (hi)story and by whose authority? In this light the distinction between the novelist and the historian is not as sharp as one may be inclined to think. Their styles may differ but they both respond to the "real world" by first choosing their "facts" and then filling the gaps in between.[107] Coetzee has indeed noted that the pretension to be true to fact in both autobiography and history "invokes a fairly vacuous idea of truth."[108] Or, as Rorty and Vattimo would say – backed by Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, Derrida, and others –, historical truth is based on facts that only become facts within an already constituted interpretive horizon.

But by far the most compelling and focused analogy to date between Coetzee's literature, on the one hand, and Rorty's and Vattimo's philosophical views, on the other, has been drawn by Martin Woessner.[109] He argues that the privileging of imagination over reason (Rorty) and of interpretation over description (Vattimo) is essential to Coetzee's fictionalized probing of the ethical. For the ethical emerges neither as a result of a clear grasp of the real nor of an escapist repudiation of it, but rather of a working

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105 She only refers to Coetzee's *Foe* (1986) and even mistakes Coetzee's middle name for Michael instead of Maxwell.

106 The story is now told mainly through the voice of a female narrator who is stranded on Cruso's (sic) island. Friday, however, is tongueless so his story can never be told.

107 In his *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1973), Hayden White also stresses the imaginative element involved in the historian's craft, but sometimes he still seems to draw too sharp a line between literary fictions as mere inventions and historical works as based on real events. See, for example, p. 6, n. 5.

108 J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, edited by David Atwell (London: Harvard UP, 1992), pp. 17-18.

109 See his "Coetzee's Critique of Reason," in *J. M. Coetzee and Ethics: Philosophical Perspectives on Literature* (New York: Columbia UP, 2010), edited by Anton Leist and Peter Singer, pp. 223-47 and "Beyond Realism: Coetzee's Post-Secular Imagination," in *Beyond the Ancient Quarrel: Literature, Philosophy, and J. M. Coetzee* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017), edited by Patrick Hayes and Jan Wilm, pp. 143-59.

through the real by means of a humbler, other-oriented imagination.[110] Reality is not there to conform to or to escape from, but rather to be used.

Here is Coetzee's view on the reality-fiction relation:

> From what I write it must be evident [...] that I don't have much respect for reality. I think of myself as using rather than reflecting reality in my fiction. If the world of my fictions is a recognizable world that is because (I say to myself) it is easier to use the world at hand than to make up a new one.[111]

Rorty does not show much respect for reality either. Not only should philosophy – which is but a kind of writing delimited by a certain tradition – abandon its foundationalist, epistemic aspirations, but so should any discourse that pretends to accurately describe the world as it *really* is. As long as the only way to make sense of ourselves and the world around us is through language, any attempt to determine a word-world correspondence on the basis of which to build a theory of knowledge and truth is self-contradicting, as it implies a stepping outside language. The representationalist view of language, as Rorty calls it, is but part of a long compulsion to truth which has afflicted Western culture since its beginnings. Any discourse functions as a series of moves in a language game, and any related idea of truth as "objectivity" has nothing to do with how things are in themselves, but rather originates within the tapestry of practices and beliefs belonging to a certain historical interpretive community.[112] (Rorty's own discourse is of course no exception.) William Egginton brings the point home:

> As obvious as this idea may seem to us, it is not universal and has not always existed. That is not to say that, at other times, people took for granted that there was no objective reality, and that everyone simply had his or her own version. Rather, the very distinction between objective

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110 See especially his "Beyond Realism: Coetzee's Post-Secular Imagination," in *Beyond the Ancient Quarrel: Literature, Philosophy, and J. M. Coetzee* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017), edited by Patrick Hayes and Jan Wilm, pp. 147-48.

111 J. M. Coetzee and Arabella Kurtz, *The Good Story* (New York: Viking, 2015), p. 69.

112 Rorty tackles this topic in many of his writings and in many different ways. For my purposes, however, I especially suggest two essays from his *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1982): "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing," pp. 90-110 and "Is There a Problem with Fictional Discourse?" pp. 110-39. See also Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1980).

> reality and subjective versions of that reality is itself historically and culturally specific, and not one that every culture at every time has had at its disposal.[113]

As I see it, Coetzee's use of reality or of the "world at hand" in his storytelling seems indeed to deliberately operate below or above such distinctions. In such a way, the possibility for meaning is opened up in accordance to the "tendency of words to call up other words, to fall into patterns that keep propagating themselves."[114] In the same way, stories feed on older stories only to engender newer ones through continuous alterations and redescriptions of the "world at hand" allowing us to reweave, as Rorty would say, our web of beliefs and desires. Or, to borrow from Roberto Unger's view of art, storytelling "loosens the established sense of reality in the very course of making it more subtle. The world of meanings that it reconstitutes is never quite the one with which it started."[115] Thus reality opens up to possibilities never imagined before as we are immersed in what Kundera calls "the fascinating imaginative realm where no one owns the truth and everyone has the right to be understood."[116]

It is in this light – of a gradual weakening of the compulsion to truth – that we should, I claim, understand Coetzee's suspicion about traditional philosophy and its language operating under the tyranny of reason-controlled argument.[117] He aims instead for a language beyond such constraints that engenders "weak" truths; truths that only emerge, tentatively, through acts of interpretation.

But let me place these reflections within the more inscribed space of Coetzee criticism. I will try to "free" Coetzee from a certain interpretive vocabulary that I find to be unhelpful (not wrong). I have chosen Pieter Vermeulen as my "dueling" partner because

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113 William Egginton, *The Man Who Invented Fiction* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp. 171-72.

114 J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Atwell (London: Harvard UP, 1992), p. 18.

115 Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *Passion: An Essay on Personality* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), p. 141.

116 Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, translated by Linda Asher (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 165, quoted in Richard Rorty, "Trotsky and the Wild Orchids," in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 20.

117 I think Coetzee's distaste for philosophy can be summed up in Rorty's words: "The novelist sees us [the philosophers] as Voltaire saw Leibniz, as Swift saw the scientists of Laputa and as Orwell saw the Marxist theoreticians – as comic figures. […] The novelist's substitute for the appearance-realty distinction is a display of diversity of viewpoints, a plurality of descriptions of the same events." "Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens," in *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1991), p. 74.

he makes a very convincing point in suggesting that Coetzee's basic concern has always been – especially as it emerges from his later novels – to "be true to fact."[118] My own interpretation of Coetzee involves, of course, a questioning of just this view. Vermeulen draws on Coetzee's observations on the relation between truth and writing to imply that "unlike the truth to fact [...] which consists in the correspondence of a representation to the world as it is, the truth of writing entails the creation of a new worldly reality, a new fact that can, 'if you are lucky,' be recognized as the true."[119] Moreover, this assertion is seemingly supported by Coetzee's prior distinction between two kinds of truth: a truth to fact and a "higher" truth – "...we should distinguish two kinds of truth, the first truth to fact, the second something beyond that; and that, in the present context [i.e., autobiography] we should take truth to fact for granted and concentrate on the more vexing question of a 'higher' truth."[120] So far then, Vermeulen seems to be in the right, as Coetzee does indeed make his point about truth – truth in autobiographical writing at least – by first saying that we *should* distinguish between "higher" and factual truths. But it is at this point where Vermeulen plays a trick on us with an opportunistic sleight-of-hand. In a very "untrue-to-fact" manner, he simply ignores the next paragraph in Coetzee's answer in order to stress the notion of fact on the basis of which truth must ultimately be thought of. Had Vermeulen quoted in full he would have got into trouble, as Coetzee promptly wonders:

> But what is truth to fact? You tell the story of your life by selecting from a reservoir of memories, and in the process of selecting you leave things out. To omit to say that you tortured flies as a child is, logically speaking, as much an infraction of truth to fact as to say that you tortured flies when in fact you didn't. So to call autobiography – or indeed history – true as long as it does not lie invokes a fairly vacuous idea of truth.
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> Therefore, instead of trying to distinguish between kinds of truth, let me come at the question from a different angle.[121]

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118 Pieter Vermeulen, "Being True to Fact," in *J. M. Coetzee and Ethics*, edited by Anton Leist and Peter Singer (New York: Columbia UP, 2010), pp. 269-89. Very briefly, Vermeulen's point is that both rational discourse and fictional writing are inadequate when it comes to provide an ethical orientation whose first and main concern must be to acknowledge the undeniable fact of human and animal pain.

119 Ibid., p. 274.

120 J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, edited by David Atwell (London: Harvard UP, 1992), p. 17.

121 Ibid., pp. 17-8.

The last sentences make it clear that distinguishing between kinds of truth is basically a futile exercise and that trying to be true to fact can only lead to a "vacuous idea of truth."

Vermeulen insists, nevertheless, that Coetzee's later novels are an "attempt to 'be true to fact'" since they are no longer concerned with the "higher," literary truth of his early work, but try, resignedly, to acknowledge their inadequacy to represent the irreducible, "quasi-ineffable fact of suffering." It is not difficult to see that Vermeulen's discourse is underwritten by the positing of the existence of a brute reality that neither rational discourse nor fictional writing is capable of penetrating or to "adequately respond to."[122]

But what, I wonder, is the point of these contentions? (I repeat, my intention is not to disprove Vermeulen's point but to understand its implications, even beyond Coetzee.) Not only, as we have seen, is the higher-factual truth distinction unproductive, but to talk about "quasi-ineffable facts" and inadequate vocabularies incapable of representing them is, to say the least, excessive. It is true that Coetzee acknowledges the limits of fiction while confessing his being overwhelmed by all the suffering in the world,[123] but to infer from this that his "new" concern is to be true to fact is quite a leap. My claim is that when Coetzee refers to "the fact of suffering in the world" he is merely expressing a shared belief about human and animal susceptibility to pain, not a fundamental truth about human and animal nature or a universal imperative to acknowledge the "quasi-ineffable fact of suffering." To see that someone or something is in pain and decide to act (or not) upon it, we do not need to acknowledge any "quasi-ineffable fact," as we do not need to adequately represent "hungerness" in order to eat.

If Coetzee had really meant that fictional writing is inadequate or inefficient when it comes to describing reality he would have long ago started writing moral pamphlets or scientific treatises, or, more likely, he would have stopped writing at all. Instead, as we

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122 Pieter Vermeulen, "Being True to Fact," *J. M. Coetzee and Ethics*, edited by Anton Leist and Peter Singer (New York: Columbia UP, 2010), pp. 278-79.

123 "Let me add [...] that I, as a person, as a personality, am overwhelmed, that my thinking is thrown into confusion and helplessness, by the fact of suffering in the world, and not only human suffering. These fictional constructions of mine are paltry, ludicrous defences against that being-overwhelmed, and, to me, transparently so." J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, edited by David Attwell (London: Harvard UP, 1992), p. 277.

know, Coetzee has never stopped writing fiction. My main point here is that Coetzee simply does not think in these terms. As we have seen earlier, Coetzee admits he does not "have much respect for reality." And I take this to mean that we should stop trying to represent reality as it *really* is – which also means that there is no point, either, in denying it or resigning to it. Worrying about the possibility or, for that matter, impossibility of accurately describing "irreducible facts" – or "brute facts," as Searle would call them – can only lead either to a Wittgensteinian silence doctrine or to an obsessive search for a final, purely denotative vocabulary, which are both symptoms of the aforementioned compulsion to truth.

Readings such as Vermeulen's are in grips of the distinction between a vertical and a horizontal systems of references that correspond, respectively, to philosophy and literature. The distinction is Arthur Danto's. Let me briefly explain in what it consists: Danto's point is that since we are unable to somehow place ourselves outside language, we cannot establish neutral criteria to distinguish between the different uses of language. Thus we cannot say that there is a *vertical* use of language (proper to science and philosophy, a language which is truth-oriented and refers directly to things in the world) and a *horizontal* use of language (proper to poetic language, which is self-sufficient and self-contained, unburdened by the referential fallacy and operating within a purely inter/textual dimension). Danto notes indeed that philosophical reality (and truth), the form of human life, and the form of literature (the way of writing) are so intimately embedded that no such distinctions are tenable. Danto proposes, however, a "Z coordinate" that would leave the fiction/truth distinction behind and focus on the way literature addresses (or concerns) the individual reader beyond both the universality of science (that strives for universally valid rules) and the particularity of historiography (that focuses on unique successions of events as they supposedly happened). The event of understanding cuts through the universal/particular distinction in that the text is universally understandable but only within the particular situatedness of the reader.[124]

[124] "I am struck by the fact that philosophers seem only to understand vertical and literary theorists … only horizontal references. On this co-ordinate scheme it is difficult to locate literature in the plane of human concern at all. Clearly we need a z-coordinate, must open a dimension of reference neither vertical nor horizontal reference quite reveal, if we are to get an answer." Arthur Danto, "Philosophy as/and/of Literature," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, vol. 58, no. 1, September 1984, pp. 5-20. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3131555, p. 13.

The interference between philosophy and literature traced by Danto's "Z coordinate" is also tackled by Stephen Mulhall who directly relates it to Coetzee's fiction.[125] Mulhall builds his point around the debate between philosophers Cora Diamond and Onora O'Neill on the role of literature in moral discourse. Mulhall sides with Diamond against O'Neill's view that literature is limited to modes of assertion and persuasion that cannot aspire to general convictions about morality because literature is fundamentally restricted to inwardness and the private sphere, a feature that prevents it from producing valid arguments which can only be formulated on the basis of facts. Thus literature can, at best, only deepen already held convictions or enforce already established theories through its exemplificatory function.

This view is based on the Wittgensteinian incommensurability in ethics that leads either to moral conservatism or moral relativism and seems to keep with Danto's distinction between vertical and horizontal understandings of the use of language. Diamond's, and by extension Mulhall's, ultimate point is quite straightforward: Since there are no neutral criteria to formulate an appropriate mode of thinking about morality (or of *thinking* in general), one cannot take argumentative language and its implied attention to facts to be the *only* way to moral emancipation. Since we cannot agree unambiguously on what stands as *the* facts and on which facts matter, the point is not to try to uniformize our mode of attention according to factual data but to be able to explore and expand our modes of attention in such a way as to enable us to "discover" facts that were previously unnoticed.[126] Literature seems to contribute then to open up modes of reflection and understanding that operate beyond the distinction between conservatism and relativism in morality by reworking of the familiar to probe into the possible.

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125 Stephen Mulhall, *The Wounded Animal: J. M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy* (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton UP, 2009), see especially pp. 1-18.

126 "[I]t is not that the point of the kind of attention we give lies in what we find out; it is rather that what we can find out is conditioned by the kind of attention we give." Ibid., p. 8.

Besides Nietzsche's[127] and the later Wittgenstein's[128] skepticism regarding language's capacity to correspond to factual reality, there is Rorty's well-known aversion towards final vocabularies. Any attempt to "tie language to the world" in order to "hook us on to reality"[129] is a reflection of the stultifying compulsion to truth that has tormented Western culture since its Platonic past. Coetzee shows a similar attitude, albeit less vehement than Rorty's, towards aspiring to an ideal representational language when he subtly mocks the seventeenth century English rationalists whose aim

> was to establish a language free of associations, a language fit to be used by philosophers and scientists. The language that the scientific heirs of the Royal Society use today looks to us fairly pure, but only because it is based so heavily on Greek words, whose connotations are thoroughly lost to us (*electricity* from *electron*, but who can say what this word, which denoted a precious-metal alloy, called up in the mind of Odysseus?).
>
> (And what of my own response to *electric*, forever corrupted by the passage of "doom's electric moccasin" – Emily Dickinson?)[130]

The desire for a "language free of associations" – which ultimately amounts to a desire for "a world without language"[131] – betrays the old Platonic drive (now attributable to science) to distinguish between the real world and the world of appearances. But Nietzsche has already shown that once the "real world" – i.e., the metaphysical world – is discarded, the illusory world vanishes as well,[132] and therefore the distinction itself is

[127] "As if all words were not pockets into which now this and now that has been put, and now many things at once!" Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals & Ecce Homo*, edited by Walter Kaufmann, translated by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p. 180.

[128] "Instead of pointing out something common to all that we call language, I'm saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common in virtue of which we use the same word for all – but there are many different kinds of *affinity* between them. And on account of this affinity, or these affinities, we call them all 'languages'" (p. 35, § 65, emphasis in the original). "[W]e see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: similarities in the large and in the small" (p. 36, § 66). "I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than 'family resemblances'" (p. 36, §67). Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, revised fourth edition by P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

[129] "Is There a Problem with Fictional Discourse?" in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1982), pp. 110-39.

[130] Paul Auster and J. M. Coetzee, *Here and Now: Letters 2008-2011* (London: Faber and Faber, 2013), pp. 87-8 (emphazis in the original).

[131] Cf Coetzee's reflection on desire in popular culture where he notes that the desire for an authentic, origianal, Edenic world is characterized by a "hidden yearning […] for an umediated world, that is, a world without language." *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, edited by David Attwell (London: Harvard UP, 1992), pp. 137-38.

[132] *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, edited by Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, translated by Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005), pp. 169-70. See also

useless. What we are left with is the anarchic world of our fictions which is no longer constrained by an outside reality (be it the hovering reality of metaphysics or the brute, underlying reality of science) but by the elasticity of our imagination. As Roberto Unger puts it, "the very practice of imagination discredits the idea of an absolute frame of reference even when it is precisely such an absolute reality that we are trying to imagine."[133] It enables us to place reality between inverted commas and engage in "context-breaking activities" by challenging the very assumption of the existence of universal or natural contexts.[134] When Coetzee exhorts us to "imagine the unimaginable"[135] he alludes, I take it, to a stepping beyond the constraints of the familiar, the predictable, and the probable into the realm of the possible. To enhance the contrast between the sense of possibility and the sense of reality described so far, I will resort to young Ulrich's (Robert Musil's arguably most intriguing character) both powerful and beautiful imagery that nearly got him expelled from school: "God himself probably preferred to speak of His world in the subjunctive of possibility [...], for God creates the world and thinks while He is at it that it could just as well be done differently."[136]

To speak of the world in the subjunctive of possibility is to interpret it and distort it, to weaken its language, that is, to prevent the fossilization of the system of metaphors through which we make sense of it: in a word, to *verwinden* it. *The* world thus emerges as an *other* world. It is this, I claim, the meaning of the interplay of freedom and responsibility Coetzee refers to (the "responsibility toward something that has not yet emerged, that lies somewhere at the end of the road"[137]).

Gianni Vattimo's interpretation of Nietzsche's aphorism in *Introduzione a Nietzsche* (Bari: Laterza, 1990), pp. 81-91. For a Nietzschean take on Coetzee see Tzvetan Todorov, "Tyranny's Last Word," *The New Republic*, vol. -, no. -, November 1996, pp. 30-34.

133 Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *Passion: An Essay on Personality* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), p. 161.

134 See ibid. Similarly, Bruns notes that "Context is social rather than logical and is therefore alterable and variable, as in the case of conversation." Gerald L. Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992), p. 114.

135 "J. M. Coetzee in Conversation with Peter Sacks," *Lannan Foundation*, 8 Nov. 2001, video, https://lannan.org/events/j-m-coetzee-with-peter-sacks/.

136 Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, translated by Sophie Wilkins and Burton Pike (London: Picador, 2011), p. 14. Coetzee has written two critical essays on Musil: "Robert Musil, *The Confusions of Young Törless*," in *Stranger Shores: Literary Essays, 1986–1999* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2001), pp. 88-104; and "Robert Musil's Diaries," in *Inner Workings: Literary Essays, 2000–2005* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), pp. 104-22.

137 J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Atwell (London: Harvard UP, 1992), p. 246 (my emphasis).

Final vocabularies abhor the subjunctive mood, along with the indeterminate, the contingent, the groundless. On the contrary, there is nothing final about stories. Storytelling lacks both the yearning for the essential and the transcendental sometimes found in poetic or religious explorations (the higher truth),[138] on the one hand, and the dispassionate presumptuousness of scientific inquiry (the factual truth), on the other. Such fictional constructions, then, make a claim on us, the readers, in such a way that instead of giving us the power to take control over them and refer them back to familiar interpretive frames, these texts take that power away from us so that we are being exposed to them and interpreted by them.[139] Instead of comfortably making sense of them from above by following ready-made reading methods we are being read by them in unpredictable ways: "One understands by getting into the game, not by applying techniques."[140] Similar to Bruns's view of hermeneutics, storytelling is "anarchic" in the sense that it "tries to grant what is singular and unrepeatable an open field."[141] The meaning of *reality* itself loses therefore its objective aura as it can only be "understood" through *exposure*, that is, relative to a certain someone in a unique situation at a determinate time. "There is no making sense at a distance; one must always work out some internal connection with what one seeks to understand."[142]

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138 I reckon Rorty makes a similar point when he refers to "certain forms of art (when not construed romantically and transcendentally as a peep into another world) and certain forms of religion (when not construed as an encounter with a pre-existing power that will rescue us)." Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism Without Method," in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1991), p. 74.

139 See Gerald L. Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992), p. 154.

140 Ibid., 116.

141 Ibid., 17.

142 Gerald L. Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992), p. 252.

2. WRITING WITH(OUT) AUTHORITY

The stories we write sometimes begin to write themselves, after which their truth or falsehood is out of our hands and declarations of authorial intent carry no weight.

(J. M. Coetzee, "What Philip Knew")[143]

The law of the work transcends the process of production, the conscious will of the artist and the work insofar as it is formed.

(Gianni Vattimo, *Art's Claim to Truth*)[144]

If, as I have suggested in the previous section, the philosophical bent of Coetzee's storytelling is conducive to the weakening of the metaphysical compulsion to truth latent in Western culture, on one hand, and to the subsequent reclaiming of the "world at hand" through altering redescriptions of it, on the other, then it is time to reflect upon the role of the author in this process. More specifically, upon the way the tension between authorship and authority is played out in Coetzee's literary thinking.

Now, it is well-known that Coetzee's overwhelming success (both critically and commercially) in the West is due mainly to his "European-ness." The problems his novels raise ring familiar to the European reader such as myself, but this comes at a great risk: namely, the ignoring of Coetzee's "African-ness." I am aware that this kind of distinctions are problematic to begin with but the more one reads of and about Coetzee the more one realizes that what is essentially at issue throughout his writing is his "African-ness" or, rather, his "South African-ness." By this I mean that it is especially by exploring this ambiguous contrast in Coetzee that we can better grasp the challenges of authorship in South Africa. But in order to more effectively introduce my point, allow me a brief detour.

[143] J. M. Coetzee, "What Philip Knew," *The New York Review of Books*, no. 18, November 2004, pp. 4-6, quoted in Karina Magdalena Szczurek, "Coetzee and Gordimer," *J. M. Coetzee in Context and Theory*, edited by Elleke Boehmer, Robert Eaglestone , and Katy Iddiols (London, New York: Continuum, 2009), p. 36.

[144] Gianni Vattimo, *Art's Claim to Truth*, edited by Santiago Zabala, translated by Luca D'Isanto (New York: Columbia UP, 2008), p. 97.

Upon reading Leist and Singer's introduction to *J. M. Coetzee and Ethics* (2010)[145] we rest contended and self-assured as we are given a succinct but comprehensive, clear-cut description of Coetzee's place in the contemporary intellectual panorama. We are told that philosophers find Coetzee's fiction particularly appealing because it enacts (1) "an intellectual attitude of *paradoxical truth seeking*" conveyed through a writing style permeated by (2) "an unusual degree of *reflectivity*." Moreover, the allegorical-existential readings that such textual and intellectual practice invite are always subordinated to (3) "an *ethics of social relationships*." As Coetzee pushes these three "typically philosophical" characteristics to their limits throughout his fiction, he engages in what Leist and Singer call a "dialectics of the margin."[146] It follows that Coetzee's fictional explorations are not only relevant within the multifaceted debate between knowledge-oriented and literature-inclined philosophers – a distinction that, to my ears, still rings of Plato's poetry-related insecurities – but further informs the discrepancies within the latter group. As Leist refines the distinctions we come to find out that Coetzee pertains, more or less, to the group of archaic postmodernists who – unlike the "players" and the "pragmatists" whose concerns are linked to the possibilities within the Western culture – "suggest a return to a precultural state."[147]

While such characterizations may be helpful to a certain extent, my purpose here is not to test their accuracy or usefulness. What I do want to note, however, is the quasi-lack of reference to South Africa – the country Coetzee so torturously evokes in his writings and interviews.[148] Leist and Singer's only hint with respect to Coetzee's South Africanness is related to the condition of writing under a repressive regime. But this is not saying much since there have been many writers writing under all sorts of repressive

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145 Anton Leist and Peter Singer, "Introduction: Coetzee and Philosophy," *J. M. Coetzee and Ethics: Philosophical Perspectives on Literature*, edited by Anton Leist and Peter Singer (New York: Columbia UP, 2010), pp. 1-15.

146 Ibid., pp. 6-9 (emphases in the original).

147 See his "Against Society, Against History, Against Reason: Coetzee's Archaic Postmodernism" in ibid., pp. 197-222.

148 See, for example, Coetzee's remarks about South Africa in "Remembering Texas," an interview with David Attwell collected in *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, edited by David Attwell (London: Harvard UP, 1992), pp. 335-43; but also and especially his fictionalized auto-biographies (or *autre*-biographies): *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (1997), *Youth: Scenes from Provincial Life II* (2002), and *Summertime* (2009).

regimes. Apartheid and its aftermath should perhaps deserve, unfortunately, a special mention.

My point is only that the strain of authorship permeating Coetzee's writing is not so much theoretically informed as it is historically grounded. Theory does, of course, play an important role but it only acquires substance within the purgatorial circumstances of South Africa. Ultimately, Coetzee's literary enterprise is a reaction to the numbing effects of violence in all its forms; and as such it is prompted by the question of freedom rather than the constraints of truth. Hence its affinities with an antifoundationalist, postmetaphysical, yet meaning-oriented, thinking that also revolves around the problem of violence. A thinking that, not surprisingly, acknowledges the importance of literature precisely because it favors interpretation over description while never forgetting its historical motivations and affiliations.

The underlying premise of this section is that Coetzee's philosophizing storytelling as delineated so far can only be understood and understand itself within the contingencies of its own time and place. In fact, Coetzee's fictioneering never loses sight of its *raison d'être* as it constantly turns upon itself while being contended between a disenchanted awareness of its own limitations[149] and a restrained hope for salvation.[150] This self-reflexive movement enacts a performative questioning of authority at all levels of literary discourse – authorial, textual, and readerly. As it will gradually become clearer, such a movement corresponds to the *modus operandi* of "literary thinking" – its outcome being neither a narcissistic contemplation of its beautiful impotence nor a resolute display of concrete alternatives. What it accomplishes rather is a state of vulnerable readiness to undergo a "hermeneutical experience," that is, a "breakdown of a world that requires a radical reinterpretation."[151] This presupposes a conflation of the aesthetic with the ethical and the political that constitutes the *ontological bearing* of a

[149] "Let me add [...] that I, as a person, as a personality, am overwhelmed, that my thinking is thrown into confusion and helplessness, by the fact of suffering in the world, and not only human suffering. These fictional constructions of mine are paltry, ludicrous defences against that being-overwhelmed, and, to me, transparently so." J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, edited by David Attwell (London: Harvard UP, 1992), p. 277.

[150] "I am someone who has intimations of freedom (as every chained prisoner has) and constructs representations – which are shadows themselves – of people slipping their chains and turning their faces to the light." J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, edited by David Attwell (London: Harvard UP, 1992), p. 341.

[151] Gerald L. Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992), 156.

kind of literary thinking that, I claim, finds its finest expression in Coetzee's storytelling.

I will try to develop my argument along three steps. First, I will briefly look at some of the main trends in Coetzee scholarship that seem to revolve around one fundamental concern, namely the impossible position of the white writer/intellectual in South Africa. How is the white public intellectual supposed to respond, if at all, to the restlessness of a society still haunted by the echoes of the apartheid regime? As fairly recent debates prove it[152], this is a serious issue concerning all white South Africans, but particularly white public intellectuals – and Coetzee seems indeed to be the paradigmatic example. Moreover, his lack of explicit political engagement, his reclusiveness as a public figure, his writerly allegiance to the European canon, and, last but not least, the metafictional character of his writing that frustrates any direct associations with any concrete situation or political program have placed Coetzee in the eye of the storm.[153] But, as we shall see, Coetzee's apparent distancing from the South African situation may very well be politically motivated. David Attwell – arguably one of Coetzee's most sympathetic and sharpest critic – has inspiredly referred to Coetzee's novels as "situational metafictions," that is, fictions that, by way of their self-reflexive character, position themselves in a rapport of complementarity with historical discourse, beyond direct opposition or mere supplementarity. My aim will be to show that a large part of the enormous body of critical studies that has followed is, to a greater or lesser extent, constituted of insightful variations on this theme.

Second, I will turn to Coetzee's 1992 essay "Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*: Madness and Rivalry" as perhaps the clearest expression of his relentless concern with the fragile autonomy of intellectual life caught between socio-political forces. Coetzee praises Erasmus' extremely subtle political engagement despite the risk of being subjected to

[152] See the uproar created by Samantha Vice's "How Do I Live in This Strange Place?" *Journal of Social Philosophy*, vol. 41, no. 3, Fall 2010, pp. 323–342 and "Reflections on 'How Do I Live in This Strange Place?'" *South African Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 30, no. 4, pp. 503-518. *Taylor and Francis Online*, doi:10.4314/sajpem.v30i4.72112.

[153] For an intellectual biography of Coetzee as reflected in his novels see David Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face-to-Face with Time* (Viking, 2015). For a more conventional, factual-based biography of Coetzee the man see J. C. Kannemeyer, *J. M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing*, translated by Michiel Heyns (Melbourne, London: Scribe, 2013).

crude manipulations. I will argue that Coetzee's conclusions illuminate his own positioning within the highly politicized atmosphere of South Africa.

Third, I propose that Coetzee's cautious engagement with history/reality through fiction is in complete agreement with a form of aesthetic commitment whose ethical implications cannot, at least in South Africa, be separated from the political. Coetzee makes it his duty as a writer to preserve a sense of possibility by making full use of the potentialities available to novelistic discourse. As Nadine Gordimer has it, the white South African writer does not have a choice but to occupy the precarious position of the interpreter;[154] an interpreter, I would add, who has to tread carefully though, constantly on the watch-out for the violent outcomes of interpretation. As a matter of fact, Coetzee's probing of the boundaries of imagination is "other-oriented,"[155] always wary of hermeneutical violence. To be sure, the point is not to remain in awe of alterity through endless deferral of meaning and elaborate experimentation with language. Coetzee, it seems to me, is more interested in exploring the uncertainty of meaningfulness rather than the certainty of meaninglessness as he embarks – along with the reader – on a dialogic literary journey that, as Regina Janes puts it, "figures present loss (of meaning, authority, purpose) as proliferation (syntactic, of meanings, choices, alternatives)."[156] In ontological terms (so my argument goes), Coetzee's storytelling amounts to an *experience with literature* that sets in motion transformative processes of self-understanding affecting the "world at hand."

2.1. The White South African Intellectual

In 1993 David Attwell published *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, a book-length study examining Coetzee's first six novels and in which he coined the phrase "situational metafiction" to describe Coetzee's particular narrative style. Attwell observes that Coetzee's writing is traversed by an avowed indebtedness to

[154] See Nadine Gordimer, "Living in the Interregnum," *The New York Review of Books*, vol. 29, no. 21/22, January 1983, pp. -. www.nybooks.com/articles/1983/01/20/living-in-the-interregnum/.

[155] I am borrowing from Martin Woessner, "Beyond Realism: Coetzee's Post-Secular Imagination," *Beyond the Ancient Quarrel: Literature, Philosophy, and J. M. Coetzee*, edited by Patrick Hayes and Jan Wilm (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017), see especially pp. 147-48.

[156] Regina Janes, "'Writing Without Authority': J. M. Coetzee and His Fictions," *Salmagundi*, no. 114/115 Spring-Summer 1997, pp. 103-121. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40548964.

the Western literary canon and theory, and yet is also thoroughly marked by Coetzee's ambivalent sense of identity[157] matured under the deforming weight of history in South Africa. On one hand, Coetzee's training as a linguist under the influence of structuralist and post-structuralist theory in both literature and philosophy has endowed his writing with a degree of self-awareness that is always scrupulous about its own workings. As a writer, Coetzee knows that he is the one inhabiting the narrative discourse and not the other way around – a realization that drives him to raise uncomfortable questions regarding agency and the legitimacy of any kind of discourse. It is this quality of Coetzee's writing that places him in a "post-liberal" perspective, beyond the self-indulgent benevolence of the committed liberal writer. On the other hand, Coetzee's meta-fictional explorations are not mere exercises in textuality as that would only amount to a harmless metropolitan aestheticism; rather, they have allowed him to come to terms with an indelible sense of guilt afflicting, for obvious historical reasons, many, if not all, white South Africans. According to Attwell, then, Coetzee's is a *sui generis* postmodernism whose ethico-political force stems from its situated, marginal character. His meta-fictional constructions are deeply engaged in a tragic conversation with a recognizable violence-ridden postcolonial context. So much so as to render any polarization of text and history, or of the imaginative and the real, impossible.[158] Attwell's insightful treatment of the "problem of history"[159] has since set the stage for interesting critical debates within the field of Coetzee criticism.

To better bring my argument into focus, I will distinguish (very loosely) between two categories of commentators: I will call them the "doubters" and the "sympathizers." The doubters display a kind of "knowingness"[160] that keeps them on guard against the seductions of postmodern rhetoric. Their undeclared fear is that Coetzee is essentially an impostor hiding his political cowardice behind skilfully constructed imageries. They

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157 Coetzee sees himself as a "doubtful Afrikaner" – see his e-mail correspondence with his friend Hermann Giliomee reproduced in English in J. C. Kannemeyer, *J. M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing*, translated by Michiel Heyns (Melbourne, London: Scribe, 2013), p. 557.

158 See also Rita Barnard's essay-review of Attwell's book: "'Imagining the Unimaginable': J.M. Coetzee, History, and Autobiography," *Postmodern Culture*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1993. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/pmc.1993.0044.

159 See David Attwell, "The Problem of History in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee," *Poetics Today*, vol. 11, no. 3, Autumn 1990, pp. 579-615. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1772827.

160 I borrow the term from Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Blackwell, 2008). By "knowingness" she means "a stance of permanent skepticism and sharply honed suspicion" that is fairly common in literary criticism (p. 3).

think that Coetzee's tireless attempt to convey the failures of imagination to grasp the silence and silencing of the other is ultimately a failure in itself. Instead of imagining positive forms of resistance, Coetzee limits himself to depicting moments of bewildered exasperation before the ineffable other.[161] And this can be reduced to a "psycho-pathology" of Western life in general (continuous with but beyond the context of Afrikanerdom) that feeds on a facile opposition between the evil intruder and the innocent primitive. As a result, a more thorough examination of the political and economic motivations underpinning the colonial /imperial enterprise yields to an abstracted fascination with a metaphysics of power and violence.[162]

Coetzee, the doubters complain, is too allegorical, too concerned with his own whiteness, too imbued in European high culture to productively confront the realities of South Africa. For, in his novels at least, Coetzee seems to always grant the monopoly on imagination to white people, or to the "First World" people; and it is precisely the thematizing of their incapacity to imagine otherness that conceals a rhetoric of authenticity drawing on the old distinction between "European" and "African." Somewhat paradoxically, however, Coetzee's political quietism seems to be in line with an "aesthetic of liberalism" enhancing the homogenizing tendencies of global capitalism.[163] Worse still, his failure to give voice to the oppressed and the dispossessed is part of an ethnocentric discourse, still inscribed in a metaphysics of conquest, that shuns intersubjective dialogue and thus denies the "New South Africa" a future of inclusion and genuine hybridity.[164] In fact, Coetzee's anti-climatic, deferred endings – or "zero endings" – close off any option for emancipation or hope for the future.[165] Instead of taking seriously his role as a "dissenting colonizer" and engage in a more materialist criticism of the legacy of colonialism in South Africa, Coetzee indulges in tormenting

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161 Cf, for example, Mark Mathuray's reading of *Foe* (1986) in "Sublime Abjection," *J. M. Coetzee in Context and Theory*, edited by Elleke Boehmer, Katy Iddiols, and Robert Eaglestone (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 159-73.

162 See Peter Knox-Shaw's analysis of *Dusklands* (1974) in "*Dusklands*: A Metaphysics of Violence," *Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee*, edited by Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson (London: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 107-18.

163 See Kenneth Parker, "The Postmodern and the Postcolonial," *Critical Perspectives on J. M.* Coetzee, edited by Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson (London: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 82-102.

164 See Benita Parry, "Speech and Silence in the Fictions of J. M. Coetzee," *Critical Perspectives on J. M.* Coetzee, edited by Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson (London: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 37-63.

165 Elleke Boehmer, "Endings and New Beginnings, South African Fictions in Transition," *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970-1995*, edited by Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), pp. 43-55.

explorations of his own Hamletian complex.[166] The doubters acknowledge, of course, the good intentions behind Coetzee's (self-)doubting position but are just not satisfied with it.

The sympathizers' arguments are perhaps more varied, but they finally converge in what I will call, for lack of better words, a "theory of the beyond" – to which I also adhere albeit by different means. The sympathizers share the doubters' fundamental concern, that is, the troubled interaction between textuality and history that problematizes to the extreme the relation to alterity on one hand, and the legitimacy of envisaging future possibilities on the other. Needless to say, in South Africa these issues are particularly relevant as they immediately acquire political overtones. Unlike the doubters, however, the sympathizers retain the hope to find in Coetzee ways of bridging the textuality/history gap and leave behind the binary oppositions it entails. Coetzee's storytelling would, they suggest, take us beyond the paralyzing impasse of self-reflexivity by the very staging of the limits of imagination; without, however, providing ready-made solutions or alternatives. Let me elaborate.

It is David Attwell, again, who best summarizes the sympathizers' guiding lines of thought. In a piece from 1998[167] he reads Coetzee's *Age of Iron* against Benita Parry – one of the doubters' main voices – to show that Coetzee's self-undermining narratological strategies are actually more effective in establishing a rapport with alterity that would form the basis for a future ethical community; more effective than, for example, Nadine Gordimer's straightforward oppositional narratives. According to Attwell, in a place like South Africa the duty of the writer is to emancipate literature from an agonistic confrontation with history. The responsibility of the writer is then to cultivate her freedom even if that entails the undermining of her own authority. And that is exactly what Coetzee does as he unsettles the conventions of discourse formation by problematizing the act of narration itself. It is precisely by eluding the pressures of traditional political commitment that writing such as Coetzee's stimulates the ethical

[166] See Stephen Watson, "Colonialism and the Novels of J. M. Coetzee," *Critical Perspectives on J. M.* Coetzee, edited by Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson (London: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 13-36.

[167] David Attwell, "'Dialogue' and 'Fulfilment' in J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*," *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970-1995*, edited by Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), pp. 166-78.

imagination in order to put forward a social vision that would refrain from forcing otherness into familiar frames of representation. Or, as Gerald Gaylard puts it, "Coetzee does not seem to advocate any overt social politics; his politics consists in a reflexivity which is ceaselessly vigilant and questioning."[168]

Coetzee's literature is symptomatic of what Mike Marais calls the "ontogenetic anxiety" of an intellectual who finds it almost impossible to negotiate between the obligation to protest against an unbearable historical legacy and the autonomy of artistic expression.[169] In this context the exploration of modes of silence – as "spaces of withholding" – are indicative neither of submission nor of merely passive resistance; rather, they uncover failures of representation that create breaches in the dominant discourse.[170] But a complete break with the languages of representation and the familiar forms of dissension, which are passed along via the liberal humanist tradition, would lead to serious contradictions. Hence Coetzee's texts retain the universalizing impulse of allegory along with their myth-making quality while, at the same time, parading their artificiality – i.e., their status as texts.[171] While more theory-inclined sympathizers tend to see in Coetzee's masterful handling of textuality the deployment of protective strategies meant to preemptively disarm inauthentic, overpowering readings of his texts[172], I would rather stress the historical motivations behind Coetzee's "literariness." It is not so much the preservation of the texts' authenticity that preoccupies Coetzee, but the felt dilemma of finding a position from which to respond to concrete events. The challenge is to create a literary space where the aesthetic can bear the mark of the

168 Gerald Gaylard, *After Colonialism: African Postmodernism and Magical Realism* (Wits UP, 2005), pp. 181-82.

169 Michael Marais, "Death and the Space of the Response to the Other in J. M. Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg*," *J. M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual*, edited by Jane Poyner (Ohio: Ohio UP, 2006), pp. 83-98.

170 See Michael Marais, "The Hermeneutics of Empire: Coetzee's Post-Colonial Metafiction," *Critical Perspectives on J. M.* Coetzee, edited by Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson (London: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 66-81.

171 See Teresa Dovey ("*Waiting for the Barbarians*: Allegories of Allegories") on Coetzee's "third" mode of allegorical discourse and Graham Huggan ("Evolution and Entropy in J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*") on the mythomorfic dimension of Coetzee's texts in *Critical Perspectives on J. M.* Coetzee, edited by Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson (London: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 138-49 and pp. 191-206, respectively.

172 Cf. Katy Iddiols, "Disrupting Inauthentic Readings: Coetzee's Strategies," *J. M. Coetzee in Context and Theory*, edited by Elleke Boehmer, Katy Iddiols, and Robert Eaglestone (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 185-96.

political without succumbing to it; where, as Huggan and Watson squarely put it, "police brutality and postmodernism cohabit."[173]

One defining trait of such a literary endeavor is the setting to work of dialogism. At this point, many among the sympathizers take heed, quite predictably, of Bakhtin's seminal study of the novelistic discourse.[174] They do so prudently, however, as they never fail to warn against the pitfalls of an ahistorical formalism. Carrol Clarkson perhaps best exemplifies this tendency as she draws on Coetzee's own use of Bakhtin[175] to trace the dialogic interplay of voices in his novels. Her point is that Coetzee's formal preoccupations are performative of his ethical seriousness as a writer. The ethical here emerges as the dialogic awakening of countervoices within the authorial consciousness, a consciousness now stripped away of any strong claim to truth or authority. At a deeper level, Coetzee's self-conscious authorship is articulated along a strenuous dialogue with the Western literary and philosophical canon, which he attempts to weaken precisely by acknowledging its influence. The underlying concern enabling such a dialogue is again the problematic rapport with otherness: To what extent and on whose authority is the "other" representable in the language of the West? Coetzee does not have an answer to this, but, as Derek Attridge suggests, his novels address this issue by "claiming admittance" to the Western canon only to then challenge it from within.[176] Instead of ascribing them to a certain tradition, Coetzee's works can be said to contribute to the formation of an idiocanon (Attridge's term) that disrupts the filiative adherence to the West while exploiting its resources, albeit problematically, through affiliative processes.[177] Coetzee's enactment of the dialogic imagination on different levels of

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173 See their introduction to *Critical Perspectives on J. M.* Coetzee, edited by Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson (London: Macmillan, 1996), p. 1.

174 M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: U of Texas), 1981.

175 In her *J. M. Coetzee: Countervoices* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), Clarkson refers to three pieces in which Coetzee tackles Bakhtin's theory of the novel: "Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky," *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, edited by David Attwell (London: Harvard UP, 1992), pp. 251-93; "Breyten Breytenbach and the Reader in the Mirror," *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996), pp. 215-32; "Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years," *Stranger Shores: Essays 1986-1999*, (London: Secker and Warburg, 2001), pp. 114-26.

176 See Derek Attridge, "Oppressive Silence: J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* and the Politics of Canonisation," *Critical Perspectives on J. M.* Coetzee, edited by Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson (London: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 168-86.

177 Cf David Attwell, "The Problem of History in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee," *Poetics Today*, vol. 11, no. 3, Autumn 1990, pp. 579-615. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1772827 (see especially pp. 600-02).

discourse subscribes, no doubt, to a pattern of affiliation to the Western cultural tradition but also marks an ironic distancing from it. Given the trying circumstances of South Africa, this amounts to a disenchanted form of engagement whose only prospect is to prepare the way for the unexpected; that is, for an unlikely but possible coming into being of a genuinely hybrid community – as also alluded to by the deferred endings of Coetzee's novels.[178]

2.2. The Erasmian Non-Position

To further clarify (or perhaps complicate) Coetzee's "situation" I will now look at his "Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*: Madness and Rivalry" as I consider it arguably the most compelling delineation of Coetzee's preoccupations with authority and the dynamic of power relations. Before I proceed, allow me to quickly anticipate my point by noting an apparent contradiction in Coetzee's view of fiction writing. Take the following assertions: "Whereas in the kind of game that I'm talking about, you can change the rules if you are good enough. You can change the rules for everybody if you are good enough. You can change the game"[179] and "The author's position is the weakest of all"[180] or, in the same vein, "The stories we write sometimes begin to write themselves."[181]

It would appear then that the "fictioneer" is either enshrouded by some sort of demiurgic aura or she is a puppet in the hands of her own creations. But I do not think the either/or construction is of any help in this context since strength can only be understood in terms of weakness, and vice versa. As I see it, to "change the game"

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178 See Patricia Merivale, "Audible Palimpsests," *Critical Perspectives on J. M.* Coetzee, edited by Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson (London: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 152-65; and Graham Pechey, "The Post-Apartheid Sublime: Redescovering the Extraordinary," *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970-1995*, edited by Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly (Cambridge UP, 1998), pp. 57-73.

179 J. M. Coetzee during a writers' workshop in Lexington, Kentucky, March 6, 1984, cited in Allen Richard Penner, *Countries of the Mind: The Fiction of J. M. Coetzee* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1989), epigraph.

180 J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, edited by David Attwell (London: Harvard UP), p. 206.

181 J. M. Coetzee, "What Philip Knew," *The New York Review of Books*, November 2004, pp. 4–6, cited in Karina M. Szczureck, "Coetzee and Gordimer," *Coetzee in Context and Theory*, edited by Elleke Boehmer, Katy Iddiols, and Robert Eaglestone (London: Continuum 2009), p. 36.

means neither to negate the already established game nor to impose another game. It means to let oneself be played by the game in such a way as to be ready for unexpected occurrences during the play that would eventually bring alterations to the game itself. If we restrict this reasoning to the functioning of an aesthetic theory the consequences might not amount to much, but if we bring ethics and politics into play – and this seems to be unavoidable, at least in South Africa – then the outcomes are quite serious. The writer/interpreter living – as Nadine Gordimer quoting Gramsci famously put it – in this interregnum where "the old is dying, and the new cannot be born"[182] is in need more than ever to find a very *strong weak* position from which to speak. It is in this context of oppressive stagnation that the role of the writer occupying such an elusive position becomes ethically and politically relevant. If, as Vattimo suggests, the "only possibility of freedom" is not a more accurate description of reality but "a fictionalized experience of [it],"[183] then the tenets of weak thought can indeed be productively read into Coetzee's understanding of and engagement with fictional writing. In fact, I will argue that Coetzee's endorsement of an "Erasmian (non)position" through writing is acted out in the interplay of strength and weakness, which also describes the movement of literary thinking. Next, I will try to elucidate the notion of non-position as it emerges from Coetzee's essay and refer it back to Coetzee himself.

Coetzee concludes his essay as follows : "The power of [Erasmus'] text lies in its weakness – its jocoserious abnegation of big phallus status, its evasive (non)position inside/outside the play – just as its weakness lies in its power to grow, to propagate itself, to beget Erasmians."[184] The oxymoronic innuendo of this sentence very accurately conveys the difficulty of aligning the classic Erasmian text with a consistent theoretical view and, as we will see, with a concrete political position. The argument is quite complex and goes beyond the prospect of my inquiry here, so I will just limit myself to a succinct overview.

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[182] See Nadine Gordimer, "Living in the Interregnum," *The New York Review of Books*, vol. 29, no. 21/22, January 1983, pp. -. www.nybooks.com/articles/1983/01/20/living-in-the-interregnum/.

[183] Cf Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala, "'Weak Thought' and the Reduction of Violence: A Dialogue with Gianni Vattimo," translated by Yaakov Mascetti, *Common Knowledge*, vol. 8, no. 3, Fall 2002, pp. 452-63. *Project Muse*, muse.jhu.edu/article/7632, p. 453.

[184] J. M. Coetzee, "Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*: Rivalry and Madness," *Neophilologus*, vol. 76, January 1992, p. 16.

Coetzee sets out to show that both a Foucauldian critique of reason as ultimately the expression of a discourse of power and a Lacanian critique of the "subject supposed to know" on behalf of the unconscious are destined to fail as they both end up *speaking* in the name of silence. The self-conscious awareness of the cleft between speech and silence – or what Coetzee also calls the inside/outside economy – which seems to haunt modern philosophy is not enough to prevent the assimilation of silence/otherness into speech/sameness. Moreover, Coetzee makes use of Girard's anthropological theory of desire to show that even if it were somehow possible to occupy a "neutral" position beyond speech and silence – or, more specifically, beyond reason and madness in the case of a Foucauldian reading of Erasmus – from which to be able to speak the truth without being caught within the rivalry of opposing discourses; that is, even if such a constantly self-undermining (non)position were attainable, there would always be the risk to enter the Girardian economy of mimetic desire and thus become a model and ultimately a rival for someone else's discourse. In fact, as Coetzee clearly demonstrates, the Erasmian paradoxical strategy of political non-positioning is far from being immune to the assimilation into contrasting political discourses. But what concerns or rather fascinates Coetzee, as I at least see it, is not the capacity of the Erasmian "discourse" to bluntly resist assimilation, but its "slipperiness," its wavering quality that defers full assimilation. To put it crudely, the Erasmian discourse is too weak to resist assimilation, but at the same time it is its very weakness that allows it to "slip" outside any assimilating discourse. To use the terminology that suits my purposes I would say that Erasmus' praise of folly, as understood by Coetzee at least – that is, the prospect of inhabiting a (non)position both "mad" enough as to never be taken at face value by any serious discourse and *not* "mad" enough as to merely be ignored or suppressed by any serious discourse –, invites an analogy with Heidegger's "praise" of Being (*Sein*) over beings (*Seiende*).[185] Similarly to Erasmus' folly, Heidegger's Being can never occupy a position that would allow it to be grasped, secured, and made sense of. The truth of folly seems to work in the same way as the truth of Being – in the sense of disclosing

[185] Heidegger's influence on Coetzee is acknowledged by Andrew Van der Vlies: "[Coetzee's] working notes, from 1981-82, for the essay that became 'Idleness in South Africa,' later the first chapter of *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (1988), include quotations from Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Nietzsche (under the heading 'The problem of boredom'). None of these thinkers is ultimately cited in *White Writing*, however…" *Present Imperfect: Contemporary South African Writing* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017), p. 56.

positions from which the truth can be spoken anew. I cannot overstate that the focus here is on "disclosing" rather than on "truth."

2.3. The Sense of Possibility

It should be clear by now that Coetzee's aesthetic commitment is pivotal to his ethico-political stance. To find a space beyond a polarized view of textuality and history means to leave behind, once and for all, the neo-Kantian distinction between aesthetic experience and the domain of knowledge and action.[186] This is not to say that art is now subservient to "cultural politics," but that it primarily operates at an existential or ontological level; which also implies a retreat from "actuality into possibility."[187] It is in these terms that I would like to qualify the ontological bearing of art within the experience with literature instilled by Coetzee's storytelling.

Before developing this point in relation to Coetzee and stress the relevance of such an approach, let me dwell for a moment on the meaning of the ontological bearing of art. I wish to start by invoking Martin Heidegger's seminal insights into the origin of the work of art.[188] With the risk of watering down the awe-inspiring terminology, I would venture to say that the moral of Heidegger's "aesthetics" is that the work of art, while being born out of the midst of human – all too human – practices, transcends its world by instituting new configurations of meaning enabling different modes of being. It goes without saying that the transformative potential inherent in the work of art cannot be accounted for neither by the rules governing an already established aesthetic theory nor by the artist's sheer creativity. The work of art is inseparable from the constantly evolving history of its interpretations (I will deal with the so-called "concretization" of the work in the next section) and thus it first needs to be recognized as such by an already constituted understanding of art at a given time and place. But the criteria underlying this very understanding are altered and redefined precisely as the work

[186] Cf Gianni Vattimo, *Art's Claim to Truth*, edited by Santiago Zabala, translated by Luca d'Isanto (New York: Columbia UP, 2008), pp. 161-63.

[187] Cf Slavoj Žižek's understanding of philosophy, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 1993), p. 2.

[188] Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Off the Beaten Track*, edited and translated by Julian Young Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), pp. 1-56.

"intrudes" into and alters the recognizable world. The outcome of such a "circular" understanding of art is two-folded. On one hand, the work of art acquires an authority beyond both authorial intention and prescriptive aesthetic criteria. On the other, it is now impossible to see the work of art as an independent object to be contemplated and evaluated independently of the web of practices, beliefs, interests, etc. that constitutes human life. If we turn to literature we could simplify all this by saying, with Sartre, that "novels are written *by* men and *for* men"[189] or, with Wordsworth, that the poet "is a man speaking to men."[190]

Under these considerations, it becomes clearer why we should, as Gerald Bruns suggests, via Gadamer, substitute the question "How does art happen?" for the question "What is art?"[191] Instead of an object of investigation, the work of art becomes a world-disclosing event – i.e., a happening – that only obeys its own rules and principles and distorts pre-existing configurations. It is in this sense that Gianni Vattimo speaks of the "law of the work" governing both its creative process and reception. This is the *truth* that art can aspire to, a truth that can only emerge from a temporary lack or suspension of founding principles[192] – similar to what I will later call, with Coetzee, a *non-position*. It is indeed the sense of possibility that is being sharpened in the process of artistic production, in general, and in writing fiction, in particular. It is the possibility itself of something *other* to emerge, "something" which is not yet a "thing" to be secured analytically. It is the opening itself toward otherness.

While referring to the novelistic discourse, Milan Kundera puts it in less fancy, more efficient terms: "The novel can say something that can't be said any other way. But just what that specific thing is, it is very difficult to say."[193] I believe this pretty much sums up the "truth" of art or, better, its ontological bearing. But to refer to the *truth* of art

189 Jean Paul Sartre, "François Mauriac and Freedom," in *Literary and Philosophical Essays*, translated by Annette Michelson (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p. 25 (emphasis in the original).

190 William Wordsworth, "Preface to *The Lyrical Ballads*," *Arts Education Policy Review*, vol. 105, no. 2, 2003, pp. 33-36. *Taylor and Francis Online*, doi:10.1080/10632910309603461, pp. 34-35.

191 Gerald L. Bruns, *On the Anarchy of Poetry and Philosophy: A Guide for the Unruly* (New York: Fordham UP, 2006), p. 34.

192 Gianni Vattimo, *Art's Claim to Truth*, edited by Santiago Zabala, translated by Luca d'Isanto (New York: Columbia UP, 2008).

193 Milan Kundera and Ian McEwan, "An Interview with Milan Kundera (1984)," translated by Ian Patterson, reprinted in *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction*, edited by Malcolm Bradbury (London: Fontana Press, 1990), pp. 205-21, p. 217.

might sound misleading since what is really at stake here is to draw attention to the hermeneutical nature of truth as revealed in art and indeed see "truth as the hermeneutic consequence of art's ontological bearing."[194] As "aesthetics is absorbed into hermeneutics" the "experience of art is an experience of meaning"[195] whose event-like occurrence is contingent upon "grant[ing] what is singular and unrepeatable an open field."[196] I cannot stress this point enough, as it directly bears on Coetzee's troubled relationship with alterity, which is constantly threatened by the violence of representation. If there is any possibility to bridge the textuality/history gap in Coetzee and envisage a productive, yet unassuming, dialogue with alterity, then this possibility must be derived from a "hermeneutization" of his storytelling rather than from the endless deconstructive probing of its assumptions. If we entertain the hope, as Coetzee does, that storytelling can lead us, tentatively, towards something we might "recognize as the true"[197] while always cherishing our "intimations of freedom,"[198] then hermeneutics seems indeed to be the appropriate approach to Coetzee's fiction.

To sum up, in Coetzee's case authorship is doubly relevant: not only as the object of Coetzee's own "academic" concerns, but also for the understanding of the ethical and political tensions at play during the tumultuous recent (and not so recent) history of South Africa. As a white South African intellectual, Coetzee occupies a both privileged and delicate position – a position of authority fated to deconstruct its own authority. It is an impossible position Coetzee self-consciously struggles with through the medium of his fiction. What fictional writing seems to enable is a serious mode of speech deprived of an authoritative voice. With the loss of authority comes a special kind of responsibility, in the form of a caveat that, within certain historical circumstances, traditional forms of engagement through literature might come across, at best, as deluded or, at worst, as complicit, albeit unwittingly, with the powers that be. Responsibility must then be thought anew, this time in terms of the freedom "the literary life" provides. It goes without saying that this implies the emergence of an ethical

194 See Gianni Vattimo, *Art's Claim to Truth*, edited by Santiago Zabala, translated by Luca d'Isanto (New York: Columbia UP, 2008), p. xiii.
195 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gadamer in Conversation. Reflections and Commentary*, edited by R. E. Palmer (New Haven, Conn.: Yale UP, 2001), pp.70-71.
196 See Gerald L. Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992), p. 17.
197 Cf J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, edited by David Attwell (London: Harvard UP, 1992), p. 18.
198 Ibid., p. 341.

approach that can only be understood in its relation to the aesthetic. Here is Coetzee's view of the matter in an interview with David Attwell:

> I would say that what you call "the literary life," or any other way of life that provides means for interrogation of our existence – in the case of the writer fantasy, symbolization, storytelling – seems to me a good life – good in the sense of being ethically responsible.[199]

Such an embedding of the ethical and the aesthetic in Coetzee – which unwittingly also verges on the political – is, as Clarkson rightly suggests, crucial to modes of existential interrogation that would otherwise remain unavailable to us.[200] In fact, Spivak had already observed, with an eye on Coetzee, that "the discontinuities in the ethical and the epistemological and political fields are tamed in the nestling of logic and rhetoric in fiction."[201] While Clarkson traces Coetzee's concerns with an ethics of writing back to his early structuralist phase, what I have been trying to suggest is that Coetzee's understanding of novel writing is necessarily part of a larger claim that invokes the ontological bearing of art.

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[199] J. M. Coetzee and David Attwell, "An Exclusive Interview with J. M. Coetzee," cited in Carroll Clarkson, *J. M. Coetzee: Countervoices* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 2.

[200] See Carroll Clarkson, *J. M. Coetzee: Countervoices* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 2.

[201] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee, and Certain Scenes of Teaching." *Diacritics*, vol. 32, n. 3-4, Autumn-Winter 2002, pp. 17-31. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1566443.

3. LIVING READING

Once a book is launched into the world it becomes the property of its readers, who, given half of chance, will twist its meaning in accord with their own preconceptions and desires.

(J. M. Coetzee, "What Philip Knew")[202]

The thought I want to advance is that literature is not universal in the sense of being about every possible world insofar as possible, as philosophy in its nonliterary dimension aspires to be, nor about what may happen to be the case in just this particular world, as history, taken in this respect as exemplificatory science, aspires to be, but rather about each reader who experiences it.

(Arthur Danto, "Philosophy as/and/of Literature")[203]

Hermeneutics encourages not objectification but listening to one another – for example the listening to and belonging with (Zuhören) someone who knows how to tell a story.

(Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Foreword" to *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*)[204]

I have suggested so far that the demarcating lines between philosophy and literature are being blurred in Coetzee's fiction. Storytelling becomes a way of thinking no longer constrained by a metaphysical notion of truth yet thoroughly engaged, nevertheless, with the modes the world is being made sense of. A way of thinking and interpreting the world that has not been freely chosen from among others but that has, to a certain extent, imposed itself upon Coetzee as the most appropriate form of responding to particular historical circumstances. One major consequence of such a

[202] J. M. Coetzee, "What Philip Knew," *The New York Review of Books*, no. 18, November 2004, pp. 4-6, quoted in Karina Magdalena Szczurek, "Coetzee and Gordimer," *J. M. Coetzee in Context and Theory*, edited by Elleke Boehmer, Robert Eaglestone , and Katy Iddiols (London, New York: Continuum, 2009), p. 36.

[203] Arthur Danto, "Philosophy as/and/of Literature," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, vol. 58, no 1, September 1984, pp. 5-20. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3131555, p. 15.

[204] Hans-Georg Gadamer in the foreword to Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, translated by Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale UP, 1994), p. xi.

philosophical/literary orientation has been the self-reflexive dismantling of his own authority as a writer – an essential condition for the emergence of the figures of alterity populating his novels. As we have seen, it is not easy, and perhaps even counterproductive, to try to locate the exact cause of such a demand for alterity that seems to characterize Coetzee's writing. It surely has a "transcendental" ring to it, something that has to do with the writer's vocation to probe the unfathomable depth and reach of words. Theory, too, no doubt, plays a significant role for Coetzee – the erudite scholar and literary critic who knows all the tricks in the book and does not shy away from putting them to good use. Yet all that would come off as artificial and ultimately vain if it were not for the fact of Coetzee being a white intellectual in South Africa, a place built on the relentless suppression of alterity.

So much for the writing process. Now what about the act of reading? Let us turn to what has been one of the ongoing core questions of most recent (and not so recent) literary theory: namely, what is actually happening when we engage or are engaged by words on a page? While a blunt distinction between "production" and "reception" with regard to literary texts is no longer tenable, as one process necessarily implies the other and neither of them is completely passive or active,[205] I do feel that one important aspect needs to be stressed. To put it crudely, the reading process, while never bereft of the deconstructive alertness that gives it that edgy, "against the grain" quality, is first and foremost meaning-oriented and therefore aimed at *understanding*[206]. In what follows I will try to elucidate what I mean by "understanding" with regard to reading in general and literature in particular, and, most importantly, how it connects to Coetzee's own view of the reading process.

During a fairly recent written exchange with psychoanalyst Arabella Kurts, Coetzee unabashedly discriminates "dead reading" from "living reading." The former, he says, comes off as a "barren, unappealing experience" while the latter strikes him as a "mysterious affair"[207] since

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[205] This aspect is thoroughly explored by the proponents of an aesthetics of reception, see especially the works of Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss.

[206] My views on the topic are to a great extent influenced by the reading of Hans-Georg Gadamer.

[207] Cf. Gadamer's view of reading literature: "a miracle takes place: the transformation of something alien and dead into total contemporaneity and familiarity." *Truth and Method*, translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 156.

> it involves finding one's way into the voice that speaks from the page, the voice of the Other, and inhabiting that voice, so that you speak to yourself (your self) from outside yourself. The process is thus a dialogue of sorts, though an interior one. The art of the writer, an art that is nowhere to be studied though it can be picked up, lies in creating a shape (a phantasm capable of speech), and an entry point that will allow the reader to inhabit the phantasm.[208]

There are plenty of elements in this short, straightforward paragraph that arouse our theorizing instinct. Reading literature is aligned with maybe the most "natural," commonsensical experience of all: that of being alive. As with life (even intended in the biological sense), when it comes to reading we seem to be unable to make complete sense of it; something indeed mysterious seems to be going on. It feels as if the questioning *of* living/reading (in both the objective and subjective senses of the genitive) can never be exhausted. This idea is clearly hinted at by the overused and abused notion of dialogue. But we have to tread carefully: what we are dealing with here is a dialogue *of sorts* and an *interior* one; which also implies, of course, an nth incursion into the well-trodden yet forever elusive territory of the self, the other, and everything in between. Moreover, participation in this "dialogue of sorts" is only granted through what would at first appear to be a mere reworking of the familiar identification process ("inhabit[ing] the phantasm"). I do not think, however, that Coetzee is referring to a merely therapeutic encounter with the text prompted by bouts of cathartic cleansing. What the text does, rather, is only to offer an "entry point," a sort of invitation for the reader to join in – a gamble of sorts, not unlike having been dealt a hand in a poker game. The reader is then spoken to by the voice from the page, which also turns out to be, mysteriously, the reader's own voice. She is now part of the dialogue, or better, she *is* the dialogue, yet oblivious as to its whence and whither.

"Living," "voice," "speech." I doubt that Coetzee's choice of words is fortuitous. If writing and reading are fundamentally intertwined processes[209] and are both

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[208] J. M. Coetzee and Arabella Kurts, *The Good Story: Exchanges on Truth, Fiction and Psychotherapy* (New York: Viking, 2015), p. 179.

[209] "Analogous to the dialogue between the reader and the reader's fiction of the writer, in living reading, is the dialogue between the writer and the writer's fiction of the reader that belongs to the experience of writing." J. M. Coetzee and Arabella Kurtz, *The Good Story: Exchanges on Truth, Fiction and Psychotherapy* (New York: Viking, 2015), p. 179. See also Linda Hutcheon who had already anticipated this point in her explorations of metafiction: "What has *always* been a truism of fiction, though rarely made conscious, is brought to the fore in modern texts: the making of fictive worlds and the constructive, creative functioning of language itself are now self-consciously shared by author and reader." *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 1980), p. 30 (emphasis in the original).

mysteriously involved in the emergence of what Coetzee also refers to as the truth,[210] then his attitude towards literature seems now to be at odds with his former overtly Derridean allegiances. Take, for instance, the following assertion from a 1992 interview: "To me […] truth is related to silence, to reflection, to the practice of *writing*. Speech is not a fount of truth but a pale and provisional vision of writing."[211] Are we then supposed to find truth in the words' mute signifying or in the living, interior but other-oriented dialogue they arouse? What are we to make of this apparent inconsistency? Has Coetzee dialectically overcome the subversive deconstructive moment by integrating it along a reconciling, dialogic metaphysics?

I do not think that is the case. Notions such as "living," "voice," "speech," "dialogue" (along with "origin," "identity," "meaning," "truth," "understanding," etc.) will forever be tainted by the aporia-ridden play of *différance*. There is no way of undoing it and yet the deconstructive élan has long run out of steam. Once unburdened from the yoke of representation and correspondence, words no longer seem happy to just point, endlessly, to one another, but appear to somehow be actively and productively involved in what we routinely call the meaning of our lives (only that "meaning" should be understood here in its verb form, as a "becoming," rather than as a noun; but more of this as I go along). Resigned suspicion thus gives in to new forms of enchantment that are no longer grandiose in scope but tentative, contingent, finite – closer to the realm of the *living*, that is. The stakes are high, however, as words now operate within an ontological dimension where the lines between the aesthetic, the ethical, and the epistemic are irreversibly blurred. The battle is once again fought over the claims of the "other." How are we supposed to "accommodate" otherness, if at all, in our hermeneutical endeavor? And what is there to learn from the encounter with literature – that seemingly privileged realm of words – when it comes to dealing with the other? Whatever the answers to these questions, one observation should be made from the start: no matter how we think of alterity, it always seems to be dependent on (an) *us* – on a particular group of people at a certain time and place trying to make sense of their lives. It is in this context that I believe Coetzee's conjoining of "living" and "reading" does a great job at connecting the dots and perhaps help us get over the deconstructive hangover.

[210] The guiding idea of the exchange between Coetzee and Kurts cited above is the constant intersection between fiction and truth in the making of a literary work as well as our own lives.

[211] J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, edited by David Attwell (London: Harvard UP, 1992), pp. 65-66 (emphasis in the original).

3.1. The Subject-Object Paradigm

The common, even naive, understanding of the act of reading can be illustrated along the overwrought but still alive subject-object paradigm: we, the readers, are of course the active subjects, and texts are objects to be passively disposed of. The text is a source for incrementing knowledge by providing new information for us to acquire. Understanding is considered to be successful as long as the meaning/message of a given text is grasped in accord with the author's intention. Literary theory – with Heidegger's unquestioned yet not always acknowledged assistance[212] – has nevertheless long dispelled such crass superstition. But let me very schematically go through some versions of it before I move on.

In the case of authorship and authorial intention things get complicated when the text "comes" from a different epoch or/and place. The meaning of the text is bound to be distorted as we are unable to recreate the same historical or topological conditions in order to put ourselves in the author's shoes and have an accurate awareness of her intentions. But even if we discard the relevance of the author – as we must if we deal, for example, with anonymous texts – and we only focus on the sociocultural context surrounding the text's both production and reception, we can still be misled. How can we be sure that what we know about a particular age or/and place is entirely accurate and complete so as to be able to reconstruct the correct meaning of the text, even beyond or against the author's intentions? But if the attempt to root the meaning of the text in either the psychological life of the author or the social structure underpinning both text and author turns out to be ultimately futile, we can also turn our analytic eye to language as *langage* – that other great unsolved mystery of humanity. In the end, to state the obvious, texts are made up of words and words do tend to fall into patterns, and patterns into complex structures that seem to elude human control. To the point that we are no longer sure if it is us speaking the language or the other way around. The text, together with both the author and the reader, is now held fast in the structured tentacles of language. Make no mistake, the subject-object paradigm is still securely in place, it has just undergone a reversal. Language is now the real subject disposing of us and our

[212] See, for example, Martin Heidegger's debunking of the "subject-object schema" in *Ontology: The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, translated by John van Buren (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999), pp. 62-64.

texts as mere pawns caught up in its workings.[213] The views I have been hinting at correspond roughly to three interpretive frames in literary theory: psycologistic, ideological, and structuralist, respectively.

Perhaps, then, we should not bother trying to elucidate neither the particular motivations moving the author, nor the societal or linguistic structural pressures, and just focus on the text itself as a self-enclosed entity. Without, as yet, abandoning the subject-object paradigm let us see what happens if we put the text at the center of the debate. There are two ways to go. We either take the text to signify by itself, that is, to possess an intrinsic meaning that can, even if only ideally, be deciphered, understood, and then handed down to generations to come; or else, anything goes: that is, the text is still a self-enclosed entity but since we will never be able to access it, there is no "true" meaning to it apart from whatever suits us. As we can see, the subject-object divide cannot but reproduce, time and again, the sterile dance between objectivism and relativism.[214]

3.2. Beyond an Aesthetics of Reception?

Once the subject-object paradigm is dissolved we are indeed rid of a significant cluster of hermeneutical problems. But what are we then left with? If the author-text-reader sequence – which, as we have seen, invites discriminating emphases on its constituting

[213] See David Carroll, *The Subject in Question: The Languages of Theory and the Strategies of Fiction* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982). Carroll identifies two opposing phases in the theory of the novel – the phenomenological and the structuralist – that end up being the flipsides of the same coin: "The speaking subject is displaced, placed in the context of the code, but nonetheless reinserted in a position of dominance…. The subject is anchored in its 'true' place, in the closed, communication system language is assumed to constitute" (p. 24). "The truth of *discours* is that *discours* is the truth, the source and context of 'human time' [i.e., diachrony (as historical time) is absorbed into synchrony (as the spatial structure of language)] and of *being*, the context of all human experience" (p. 23, emphasis in the original). Much in the same vein David Caute identifies two fallacies corresponding to two trends in literary criticism (the marxist and the ultra-modernist or structuralist): the extrinsic fallacy, which is content-oriented and aimed at the socio-cultural factors informing a given text, and the intrinsic fallacy, which conceives of the text as a self-contained configuration of signs. Needless to say, both approaches are highly suspicious of each other. *The Illusion: An Essay on Politics, Theatre and the Novel* (London: André Deutsch, 1971), see especially chapter four ("Form, Content, Meaning"), pp. 145-63.

[214] For an enlightening depiction of the symbiotic relation between objectivism and relativism – which are both sustained by the chimera of foundationalism – and a timely appeal for an anti-foundationalist form of either a "fallibilistic objectivism" or a "nonsubjective relativism" see Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Practice* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1991).

elements – does not hold any longer, then how are we to proceed? Still, books are being written and read every day, so something "interesting" must be *happening* – mark that word! – to make writers worth their while and keep readers hooked.

Now, one aspect literary theorists all seem to agree on is that whatever happens during the production and reception of a text can neither be prospectively predicted nor retrospectively explained. Moreover, a neutral, purely descriptive look at why and how we write and read is also excluded right from the start since the mirage of objectivity, understood in terms of a "God's-eye-view" perspective, has long lost its appeal (this view holds true even with regard to what have traditionally been considered matter-of-fact, knowledge-based practices: see, for example, Kuhn, Fayerabend, or even Popper on the tentative nature of scientific inquiry, which is also confirmed by the recent, mind boggling breakthroughs in particle physics and astronomical physics). One important consequence of such a development is that the act of reading can only be conceived in its "singularity." Every time we engage a text something *happens* to us (each of us): we are summoned by an event of understanding during which the categories of author, text, and reader – along with all their foundationalist implications – collapse into the "here and now" of the act of reading. Any emergence of meaning during the encounter with the text is now constrained by the reader's idiosyncratic web of beliefs, desires, and expectations, which is at once both recognizable and unique but also, most importantly, indefinitely alterable.

If we stop at this point it is not difficult to detect the familiar contours of an aesthetics of reception – a theoretical approach to literary texts that has been masterfully developed and exploited particularly by Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser. My intention, however, is to move beyond it or at least to productively confront two of its assumptions that correspond, roughly, to Jauss and Iser, respectively. While they humbly recognize Hans Georg Gadamer as their master, they both seem to ultimately fail to follow through with Gadamer's fundamental insight: that is, that the event of understanding, which emerges out of the anarchic to-and-fro fueling the hermeneutical circle, is

universal[215] and *ontological*[216] in character – two big words that can be subsumed without any great loss under the contingent and finite (or temporal) "category" of what I mean to call, with Coetzee, the *living*. But let me proceed slowly.

a) Contra *Jauss*

In Jauss's case I would like to draw attention to the "problem" of historical distance when it comes to the understanding of literary texts – or, I would even venture, of any kind of texts. Jauss seems to imply, against Gadamer, that we ultimately do need a method, deployable within the boundaries of an aesthetics based on a the study of literary history, if we want to overcome the time lapse between the moments of the text's production and reception. His objection is based on the contention that Gadamer's concept of *Wirkungsgeschichte* (a term translated into English in Jauss's piece as the "principle of the history of impact" but which might be better rendered as "the principle of history of effect"[217] or "effective history"[218]) is essentially at odds with Gadamer's view of the classic work of art as that which "speaks in such a way that it is not a statement about what is past – documentary evidence that still needs to be interpreted – rather, it says something to the present as if it were said specifically to it."[219] If the "classical" seems to be speaking directly and unproblematically to us, or so Jauss's argument goes, why should we bother with the history of its reception and its ongoing effect on our understanding? Jauss complains, in fact, that "Gadamer wants to elevate the concept of the classical to the prototype of all historical contact between past and

[215] See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 469-84, and Jean Grondin, "The Universality of the Hermeneutic Universe," *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, translated by Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale UP, 1994), pp. 120-23.

[216] "Ontological" here alludes to an *existential* mode of knowing that cannot constitute the basis for an aesthetic theory. See Martin Heidegger, *Ontology: The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, translated by John van Buren (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999), pp. 6-16.

[217] See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 299.

[218] See Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, translated by Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale UP, 1994), p. 113.

[219] *Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method*, translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 290. Here is also the original: "Klassich ist […] was also derart sagend ist, daβ es nicht eine Aussage über ein Verschollenes ist, ein bloβes, selbst noch zu deutendes Zeugnis von etwas, sondern das der jeweiligen Gegenwart etwas so sagt, als sei es eigens ihr gesagt." *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 1, *Hermeneutik I: Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1990), pp. 294-95.

present."[220] As far as literature is concerned, it is implied, understanding is achieved through "knowledgeable criticism" steeled through the stubborn nitpicking of scholarly labor: as if a fifteen year-old were never able to enjoy, let alone understand or be "interpreted by," say, a Shakespear's play. I am not alluding to that particular age group in a random fashion. Here is Coetzee at fifteen:

> One Sunday afternoon in the summer of 1955, when I was fifteen years old, I was mooning around our back garden in the suburbs of Cape Town, wondering what to do, boredom being the main problem of existence in those days, when from the house next door I heard music. As long as the music lasted, I was frozen, I dared not breathe. I was being spoken to by the music as music had never spoken to me before.[221]

The similarity between Coetzee's experience with Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* at fifteen and Gadamer's description of the classic work of art is remarkable. It seems indeed, *pace* Jauss, that a work of art can speak to one in such a way "as if it were said specifically to [one]." Coetzee uses his boyhood experience to draw a distinction between two ways of looking at art works, "the transcendental-poetic and the sociocultural,"[222] while privileging the former. But if this is the case how are we to account for the mediating role of history and tradition Jauss is, with good reason, so worried about? I think, however, the contradiction is only apparent.

Jauss seems to believe that the classic artwork's capacity to directly address the present moment – as Gadamer has it – or the "transcendental-poetic" experience with art – as Coetzee calls it – automatically excludes historical mediation. But what Gadamer and Coetzee mean, I reckon, by the transcending of historical distance in the encounter with the work[223] is not that the work possesses some kind of ineffable essence that endures unchanged in time. That would imply that the work "says" or means the same thing to anyone at any time. Rather, the opposite is true: the apparently "unmediated" encounter with the work is possible precisely because the work does *not* possess any meaning in itself or any essential property. It is not constrained by any intrinsic essence or "value in

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220 Hans Robert Jauss and Elizabeth Benzinger, "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," *New Literary History*, vol. 2, no. 1, Autumn, 1970, pp. 7-37. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/468585. See especially pp. 20-21.

221 J. M. Coetzee, "What is a Classic," *Stranger Shores: Literary Essays 1986-1999* (New York: Viking, 2001), p. 8.

222 Ibid.

223 It should be mentioned that both Gadamer and Coetzee refer to the notion of the *classical* or the *classic*, respectively. I prefer to use the term "work" as it has a more general ring to it and thus easier to relate to the event of understanding in its universal and ontological character.

itself" that can be elucidated through historical investigation. Here Gadamer's famous notion of historically effected consciousness (*Wirkungsgeschichte Bewußtsein*) might be useful as it helps us see that *my* understanding of a work is not parasitic on the work's historical effects (effects which *I*, the subject, am supposed to know and appropriate beforehand) but that understanding happens without me really "knowing"; it emerges, that is to say, out of an indistinguishable interplay of my enabling prejudices and whatever issue or question the work raises (the subject matter).[224] In short, the meaning of a work is not *there* for me to decipher – not even by studying the history of its effects –, and neither is *mine* to dispose of. Meaning, in its verbal progressive form, just *happens* to me every time I am being engaged by the work (even by the same work at different moments in time).

Coetzee could not be clearer on this point. He, in fact, explicitly warns against "invoking any idealist justification of 'value in itself' or trying to isolate some quality, some essence of the classic, held in common by works that survive the process of testing." The issue rather is "How does such a conception of the classic manifest itself in people's lives?"[225] The focus is then *not* on the work, as an object to be investigated historically at different stages in its reception (as Jauss still seems to imply), but on the work's concrete existential bearing on the reader's life. And this confirms Jauss's fears and brings us indeed to "the point where Gadamer wants to elevate the concept of the classical to the prototype of all historical contact between past and present."[226] If understanding is irremediably rooted in the historical here and now of the interpreter then it must be universal and ontological in character. And the same must occur when it comes to understanding a work of art. There can surely be a difference in degree but not in kind (more of this later).

That is why aesthetic knowledge and historical awareness are only secondary, albeit significant, phases in the event of understanding of a work. Knowledge and reflection are byproducts, as it were, of what is already understood. In fact, as Gadamer points out,

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[224] See Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, translated by Joel Weinsheimer (Yale UP, 1994), pp. 113-15.

[225] J. M. Coetzee, "What is a Classic," *Stranger Shores: Literary Essays 1986-1999* (Viking, 2001), pp. 15-16.

[226] Hans Robert Jauss and Elizabeth Benzinger, "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," *New Literary History*, vol. 2, no. 1, Autumn, 1970, pp. 7-37. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/468585, p.21.

"the power of effective history does not depend on its being recognized."[227] In this sense understanding can be said to work "transcendentally," it is universal in its reach and ontological in its essence: *to live is to understand*. Aesthetics is then necessarily absorbed into hermeneutics and ontology.

b) Contra *Iser*

But we are not done, as yet, with the chameleonic guises of the aesthetics of reception. This time I will follow, up to a point, Stanley Fish – the main exponent of affective stylistics – who mounts a fierce criticism of Wolfgang Iser's aesthetic theory.[228] Not unlike Jauss, Iser also takes heed of Gadamerian hermeneutics and seemingly places the reader/interpreter at the center of his approach. Without the reader's active contribution there is not even so much as an aesthetic object to talk about. The work's main attribute is its incompleteness: an unpredictable array of gaps and indeterminacies that stretch the reader's coherence-building faculties to the extreme, but not before leaving her bewildered, estranged, defamiliarized, and in the midst of a forever shattered horizon of expectations. Iser calls all this *Konkretization*. That being said, it would not be a gross oversimplification to say that Iser's entire project relies on statements such as the following: (1) "This possibility of verification that all expository texts offer is, precisely, denied by the literary text. At this point there arises a certain amount of indeterminacy which is peculiar to all literary texts, for they permit no referral to any identical real-life situation"; or, (2) "indeterminacy is the fundamental condition for reader participation"; or (3) "[literature] facilitates … anxiety-free access to the inaccessible"[229]; or (4) "[literary texts] do not correspond to any objective reality outside themselves."[230]

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227 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 300. "Aber aufs Ganze Gesehen, hängt die Macht der Wirkungsgeschichte nicht von ihrer Anerkennung ab." *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 1, *Hermeneutik I: Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1990), p. 306.

228 See Stanley Fish's review of Iser's *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*: "Why No One's Afraid of Wolfgang Iser," *Diacritics*, vol. 11, no. 1, Spring 1981, pp. 2-13. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/464889. For Iser's reply see "Talking like Whales: A Reply to Stanley Fish," *Diacritics*, vol. 11, no. 3, Autumn 1981, pp. 82-87. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/464516.

229 Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins UP, 1989), pp .7, 10, 280, respectively.

230 Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," *New Literary History*, vol. 3, no. 2, Winter 1972, pp. 279-99. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/468316, p. 281.

Following Iser one could then describe literature as a *non-expository* writing practice (1) unconcerned with *objective reality* (4) and whose essentially *indeterminate* character (2) elicits the reader's participation in *the inaccessible* (3). So far so good but there lies the rub: Iser's phenomenological approach to reading is ultimately held together by the old metaphysical assumption that there is a brute reality out there (whether accessible or not it makes no difference) constantly nagging at us. In fact, as Fish acutely notices, the determinacy/indeterminacy distinction, which lies at the heart of Iser's understanding of the literary, brings along a whole array of other problematic distinctions: unmediated (immediate)/mediated access to reality, given/supplied (interpreted), perception/ideation, ordinary/fictional language, expository (denotative)/non-expository (connotative) texts, and so on.[231] It turns out, then, that the specter of *adequatio* has never left the house, nor has the subject-object paradigm been displaced.

As with Jauss, we cannot but meet Iser's theory with the same objection: once aesthetics is absorbed into hermeneutics and ontology, all the above-mentioned distinctions lose their grip. The literary, whatever we make of it, can no longer be opposed to the non-literary. Anything we say and write is indeed "literary," or nothing is. We are unable to switch between the literary and the non-literary because we lack the criteria to know where to draw the line. Granted, Iser is right to suggest that to smell a rose is not the same as to read about it, but that does not change the basics. What Iser seems to forget is that we always deal with the "already interpreted."[232] Even primal senses such as taste or smell are always already embedded in (if not determined by) our interpretive orientation.[233] There is literally nothing outside interpretation or, which is the same, outside language. Which does not mean that everything is contained within the established linguistic structures but merely that everything that has been, is, and is to be can only be made sense of through language. This is, at least, what I believe Gadamer's

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231 Stanley Fish, "Why No One's Afraid of Wolfgang Iser," *Diacritics*, vol. 11, no. 1, Spring 1981, pp. 2-13. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/464889, especially from p. 6 onwards.

232 Rüdiger Bubner argues quite convincingly that one can never "reflect on *what simply exists*, but on *what has been interpreted*." *Essays in Hermeneutics and Critical Theory*, translated by Eric Matthews (New York: Columbia UP, 1988), p. 55, emphasis in the original. And that is the whole meaning of a radical awareness of one's own temporality: one is so intimately "bound" to one's time and place that interpretation can never take place at a subsequent moment in time; it has always already happened.

233 Iser very seriously reminds us, for example, that "one should not confuse reality with the interpretation of reality." Wolfgang Iser, Norman N. Holland, et al., "Interview: Wolfgang Iser," *Diacritics*, vol. 10, no.2, Summer 1980, pp. 57-74. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/465093, p. 72. Fair warning, but how would one tell (or should I say interpret?) the difference? One is always too late on the scene, as it were.

famous dictum – "*Being, that can be understood, is language*" (Gadamer's emphasis) – alludes to. But here a further essential clarification, which is indeed supplied by Gianni Vattimo, is badly needed: English, unlike German, needs a comma after "Being" in order to render the more radical meaning of the universal and inescapable reach of language in our understanding of being.[234] Otherwise Iser is right: language only goes so far and there is a "something" or a "nothing" out there independent from it. (But, again, assertions such as these, as much as they are intuitive and maybe even useful depending on the situation, are not necessarily incorrect but wrongheaded: much like looking at the stars, wondering what was there before the Big Bang? – which is of course only the faint echo of the mother of all metaphysical wondering: "Why is there anything at all, rather than nothing?")

The literary/non-literary distinction is then yet another tribute on the altar of *adequatio* and ultimately ends up being a mere variation on the subject-object paradigm discussed above. What it moreover implies is the existence or, at least, the possibility – albeit never realizable – of a metalanguage. Because it is only by securing once and forever the *real* meaning of words and the way they hook us on to reality that we can have a glimpse at what the non-literary might mean. On this point, Coetzee made it quite clear that he does not believe in a "language free of associations,"

> a language fit to be used by philosophers and scientists. The language that the scientific heirs of the Royal Society use today looks to us fairly pure, but only because it is based so heavily on Greek words, whose connotations are thoroughly lost to us (*electricity* from *electron*, but who can say what this word, which denoted a precious-metal alloy, called up in the mind of Odysseus?).
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> (And what of my own response to *electric*, forever corrupted by the passage of "doom's electric moccasin" – Emily Dickinson?)[235]

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[234] "*Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache*." Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 1, *Hermeneutik I: Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1990), p. 478. In German the comma is there too, but only for grammatical purposes. So it leaves the sentence ambiguous. In English, the omission of the comma, which from a translation point of view is grammatically justified, changes the meaning radically. (In the English version of *Warheit und Methode* the comma is indeed omitted. See *Truth and Method*, translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London, New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 470, and the newer, revised edition (London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 490.) Vattimo has masterfully pointed out the philosophical implications of such an apparently insignificant grammatical discrepancy between German, on the one hand, and English, French, and Italian, on the other. See his "Histoire d'une virgule Gadamer et le sens de l'être," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, vol. 54, no. 213 (3), September 2000, pp. 499-513. *JSTOR*. www.jstor.org/stable/23955761 and "Storia di una virgola," *Vocazione e responsabilità del filosofo*, edited by Franca d'Agostini (Genoa: Il Melangolo, 2000), pp. 58-60.

[235] Paul Auster and J. M. Coetzee, *Here and Now: Letters 2008-2013* (Faber and Faber, 2013), pp. 87-88.

Note how, for Coetzee, not only words have an "objective"[236] history exceeding our control but, at the same time, they always "come" to us as already "corrupted," impure, charged with idiosyncratic implicatures.

True, what we have come to call imaginative writing, or fiction, or poetry, etc., and lump together under the category of *the literary* is indeed different from other types of discourse, but *not* in the sense that the literary is a special case of or opposed to "proper" or "ordinary" discourse. Rather, the fact that words seem to constrain, warp, shape, but also indefinitely enrich our understanding of what we are and what we do makes all types of discourse literary in essence. The difference between a shopping list and a poem merely lies in the different bearing each has upon us, not in some inherent property each possesses. In fact, a shopping list can easily become a poem depending on the hermeneutical situation one finds oneself in.

3.3. Understanding Alterity

The non-literary/literary distinction brings me to the final and crucial part of this chapter. If we take seriously the radically ontological and universal character of understanding as suggested by Gadamer and fully clarified by Vattimo, I would now go so far as to even loosen the initial distinction that Coetzee makes between "living reading" and "dead reading."

Coetzee once famously said that "All autobiography is storytelling, all writing is autobiography."[237] Writing is therefore always reconducible in one way or another to the (hi)story of one's own life, which ultimately gives it the storytelling character. (It must be stressed: *all* writing, even, say, a scientific treatise in marine biology). In a similar vein I would venture to say that *all* reading is "living reading" insofar as the reader has a living (hi)story behind her. Insofar, that is, she is appropriated in an event of understanding that does not depend on her conscious choosing. We are always already involved in understanding – even misunderstanding is an act of understanding.

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[236] "Objective" not in the sense that words might be pointing to neutral descriptions of how things are, but in that words come "before" us, enabling us to *say*, again and again, how things are.

[237] J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, edited by David Atwell (London, Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1992), p. 391.

As with Heidegger's ontological difference, the point is not so much to make distinctions (e.g., between *Sein* and *Seiendes*, or authenticity and inauthenticity) but to keep the question of the difference alive. We are never completely in the realm of beings; that is, being can never be completely forgotten; it is not up to us. Being is always "available," as it were, precisely because of the radical contingency in space and time that characterizes our being-in-the-world, which is also nothing but the relation itself between "us" and whoever or whatever is around us. As I see it, being is that sense of possibility that is not a "thing" or a presence, but somehow haunts whatever is and happens at any time, and that "forms the chance element in the sphere of what can be otherwise."[238] What we can do is to acknowledge and cherish this latent murmur of possibility and actually listen to it and let ourselves be attuned by it. Or else we can fear it and resent it, and try to keep it to a minimum. There is of course an ethical ring to all this, which seems to be lacking in Heidegger and is rather weak in Gadamer, but which Vattimo picks up.[239] If there is any "ethical decision" to be made on our part, it concerns precisely our willingness or disposition to be attuned in and by this indistinct vibration. ("Latent murmur," "indistinct vibration"? I am obviously struggling, even ridiculously so, to find the right word for "it." But I am in good company: recall Heidegger's skirmishes with "**B**eing," "being," ~~Being~~, and so on.)

It is in these terms that I want to understand Coetzee's distinction between "dead" and "living" reading and any ethical lesson it might teach. Living reading is always available to us, we are always in its reach, as it were, but we must not forget that. This is the only suggestion I can think of that can inform an "ethics of reading." An ethics of reading, however, that cannot emerge against a background of academic seriousness constantly kept in check by suspicion and critical prowess. Expressions of joy, lust, hatred, anxiety, desire, pain, anguish, admiration, etc. – even, or especially, in their most vulgar forms – leading, more often than not, to deeply idiosyncratic projections or sheer

[238] Rüdiger Bubner, *Essays in Hermeneutics and Critical Theory*, translated by Eric Matthews (New York: Columbia UP, 1988), p. 227.

[239] On the potentially ethical implications of Heidegger's understanding of being primarily as *finitude*, see Jean Grondin, "La persistance et les ressources éthiques de la finitude chez Heidegger," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, vol. 93, no. 3, July-September, 1988, pp. 381-400. *JSTOR*. www.jstor.org/stable/40902993. Similarly, Reiner Schürmann takes inspiration in Vattimo's "weak thinking" to explore the role that the later Heidegger's radical temporalization of being might play in a post-metaphysical ethics eased out of either existentialist or historicist assumptions. See "Deconstruction Is Not Enough: On Gianni Vattimo's Call for 'Weak Thinking,'" *Weakening Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Gianni Vattimo*, edited by Santiago Zabala (Montreal, Quebec: McGill-Queen's UP, 2007), pp. 117-30.

misunderstanding must necessarily play a part too; and an important one if we do not want to part ways with the *living*. This

a) The spell of the Other

One of the sharpest literary theorist to have tackled the ethical implications of reading, also and especially in the context of Coetzee criticism, is Derek Attridge. His highly praised *The Singularity of Literature* (2004) was inspired to a certain extent by his reading of Coetzee's fiction. The book engages in a general reflection on the nature of literature, but is even more revealing if read in tandem with his *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (2004), which is a critical study of Coetzee's first eight novels.

Now, my interest in Attridge is two-folded. I will begin by acknowledging some of his invaluable insights into the understanding of literature in general and Coetzee in particular, with a special focus on his Derrida-inspired outlook. At a later stage in my argument, my intention will be to set Attridge's readings as far as possible apart from the underlying deconstructive framework and bring them into the more hopeful and "living," albeit quaky, realm of hermeneutics. My reasons to do so are not so much rooted in the non-literary/literary distinction lurking at every turn in Attridge's treatment of what he calls the "event of literature" or the "event of reading." That is because he seems to use the distinction carefully, mostly aware of its pitfalls. My issue is rather with the overall feel of "seriousness," not to say, with Rorty, "knowingness,"[240] that sometimes seeps into his otherwise enlightening readings.

As suggested at the beginning of the chapter, all bets are placed on the slippery concept of *alterity* – a concept that has, ironically, generated an inexhaustible and profitable source of inspiration for a wide range of professional connoisseurship. Attridge is aware of this as he warns against a consecration of alterity in the Levinasian "*tout autre est tout autre*" fashion. Recognition plays a fundamental part in the "event of opening" initiated by the work's singularity. Singularity – Attridge's core concept – is not to be

[240] "Knowingness is a state of soul which prevents shudders of awe. It makes one immune to romantic enthusiasm." Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country* (London, Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1998), p. 126.

confused with uniqueness or novelty. The irrupting force of alterity that gives the work its singularity can only "operate" in the act of reading and thus is dependent on the reader's faculty of recognition. The emergence of alterity is bound then to singular acts of reading that "repeat" the work productively. (Notions such as Derrida's *iterability* and Iser's *concretion* seem to inform Attridge's understanding of singularity.)

And yet again we bump into familiar theoretical patterns, albeit peppered with new ingenious terminology. In order to be "truly" other and hence singular, Attridge tells us, the work must transcend to a certain extent (but *not* completely) both the psychological motivations of the author and the sociocultural constraints underpinning it. Moreover, its singularity is only revealed in the concrete realization of the work through reading. But the work's coming into being as singular can neither be the reader's exclusive prerogative since that would merely amount to a bland process of assimilation into sameness that would actually rob the work of its singularity. An alien, perturbing element must thus be introduced from the "outside" in order to unsettle and alter the reader's interpretive framework. The scare quotes are needed because "outside" does not refer to an outer dimension pertaining to the work itself and waiting to be discovered or perceived by the reader, but to the mutual appropriation between work and reader unsettling both. (Attridge is indeed quick to note that the "otherness" of the aesthetic experience is "neither a Platonic Form nor a Kantian *Ding an sich*."[241] Surprisingly though, while he does acknowledge in passing Gadamer's influence,[242] he makes no direct mention of his notion of *Erfahrung*, which, to my mind, pretty much sums up Attridge's whole point.)

According to Attridge, the singular belonging-together of work and reader in the event of reading is achieved through an "alert passivity" allowing for "creative" or "hospitable" readings. This results in a sense of responsibility or answerability both *to* and *for* the other – that is, an availability towards the other's demand and an involvement in the other's emergence.

The work is therefore truly singular as long as it stages or performs the "creation of the other," in both the objective and subjective senses of the genitive. Meaning (in its verb form, as a continuous, ateleological process) is thus to be enacted time and again in the

241 *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 76.
242 Ibid., pp. 141-42.

act of reading. Any distinction between form and content is bound to fade away as they are both irremediably entangled in the creation of meaning in the moment of reading.

As compelling and up-to-date as Attridge's arguments are, I cannot but feel that something does not add up. To begin with, as I have hinted at above, the non-literary/literary divide is never completely washed away and everything Attridge says bears its scent. As a case in point, in a more recent contribution[243] he takes up the old philosophy versus literature dispute and heavy-handedly deploys it in the context of an ethical-oriented reading of Coetzee. Do not get me wrong, I generally agree with the direction Attridge's argument is going, which could be epitomized in the last sentence of the essay – "It is literary writers like J. M. Coetzee, and not philosophers or critics, who 'return the living, electric being to language' and thus open the reader to the possibility of ethical conversion"[244] –, but I do take issue with the build-up. Attridge seems to think that there is something profoundly special about literature, something he tautologically calls literature *as literature* that possesses an "extra-rational force of absolute openness to the other" allowing for a "radical break with traditional moral norms."[245]

I must say I find Attridge's choice of words quite surprising, to say the least. Especially if compared to his previous, almost Gadamerian, outlook delineated in *The Singularity of Literature,*[246] where reading literature seemed to have more to do with the idiosyncratic processes of recognition enabled by the reader's "idioculture": that unique blend of "both familiarity and alterity, both recognition and strangeness,"[247] which also implies that "absolute alterity, as long as it remains absolute, cannot be apprehended at all; there is, effectively, no such thing."[248] So why then still insist on "extra-rational forces," "absolute openness to the other," or "radical breaks"? To me, Attridge's final pronouncement in his most recent piece (which does not however constitute a break

243 "'A Yes without a No': Philosophical Reason and the Ethics of Conversion in Coetzee's Fiction," *The Ancient Quarrel*, edited by Patrick Hayes and Jan Wilm (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017), pp. 91-106.

244 Ibid., p. 106. Note, however, how the focus seems to be again on the writer, the originating mind, rather than on the reader.

245 Ibid., pp. 105, 99, respectively.

246 Attridge in fact draws a parallel between a responsible reading of a literary work in its singularity and a judge's response to a legal case, both being marked by an interplay of recognition and inventiveness (pp. 128-29); a view that brings to mind Gadamer's notion of application: "the work of interpretation is *to concretize* the law in each specific case – i.e., it is a work of *application*." *Truth and Method*, translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London, New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 325.

247 Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 82.

248 Ibid., p. 30.

from his previous more nuanced work) – i.e., philosophy is "bad" because rational, literature is "good" because extra-rational – is merely a reverberation of the non-literary/literary distinction and demonstrates, once again, the relentless grip metaphysics has on anything we say. Which is even more surprising as Attridge opens his essay with a quote from Derrida that does all but prove his overall point. Here is the epigraphic citation from Derrida: "Are we obeying the principle of reason when we ask what grounds this principle that is itself a principle of grounding? *We are not – which does not mean we are disobeying it either*."[249] *Contra* Attridge, I would readily translate this into Rortyan as: Why even bother with the whole rational/non-rational or extra-rational talk (and, by extension, with the non-literary/literary distinction) in the first place?

But let me get back for a moment to Attridge's more "Gadamerian" take on the matter as theorized in his *The Singularity of Literature*; a take I am definitely more sympathetic towards but which I still find unsatisfying. Very schematically, Attridge's general push is to bring literature back into the human, all too human, realm of human needs, desires, and interests. But in doing so he has to make some pretty compromising concessions for a "*différance*-oriented" critic. He must in fact smear the other-oriented holy shroud surrounding "serious" literature and make it look too little too ordinary for some tastes. As expected, this has caused some raised eyebrows among the staunchest, alterity-worshipping deconstructionists. Take Michael Marais, for instance – another distinguished Coetzee critic – who complains that Attridge is not radical enough in his treatment of alterity. He finds Attridge's attempt to "accommodate the other" suspicious because it runs the risk of smothering the "excess" that the literary text, in its inherent incompleteness, brings forward and which is the sole condition for the arrival of the other.[250] Here, of course, I side with Attridge as I believe the "excess" Marais talks about has less to do with the text itself and more to do with the reader's "idiocultural response to the text" (to use Attridge's phrasing); or with each reader's different understanding of the text (to use Gadamer's); or with the reader's "countersignature" (to use Derrida's).

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[249] Derrida cited in Derek Attridge, "'A Yes without a No': Philosophical Reason and the Ethics of Conversion in Coetzee's Fiction," *The Ancient Quarrel*, edited by Patrick Hayes and Jan Wilm (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017), p. 91 (my emphasis).

[250] Michael Marais, "Accommodating the Other: Derek Attridge on Literature, Ethics, and the Work of J. M. Coetzee," *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2005, pp. 87-101, doi:10.1080/1013929X.2005.9678222.

However, notwithstanding Marais's fears, Attridge never quite abandons literature's other-worldly, almost saintly vocation. In fact, he is too worried, and with good reason up to a point, that too many concessions would open the door for utilitarian or instrumental readings of literary texts that would deprive the literary of *the literary* itself.[251] What this leads to is again a kind of a leap out of the ordinary that seems to be the privilege of the few. The shift towards the hermeneutically situated reader is somehow delayed as the "meaning" of the literary seems to spawn along a path leading from the "work's inaugural power"[252] – which sounds suspiciously close to some form of Heideggerian post-*Kehre* mysticism[253] – to the critic's close and informed reading exuding joy-killing whiffs of ethicalizing zeal.

It is only by keeping the non-literary/literary divide alive – along with its rational/non-rational corollary – that I can make sense of Attridge's almost desperate praise of *the literary*. He, in fact, goes to great lengths to warn against any reading that would disregard the self-subverting essence of literature by privileging its "exemplary force." On this point he takes issue with Martin Woessner and Alice Crary, whose attempts, each in its own way, to see literature as contributing to the loosening of the concept of rationality, and hence extend it to the whole spectrum of human life and practices, are deemed insufficient.[254] According to Attridge, we seem to miss the point of what "serious" literature is all about if we merely let ourselves be inspired by or excited with a good novel; or if, god forbid, we dare think of a message or a meaning it might hint at. (I must quickly clarify, however, that I do not mean to suggest by this a return to an

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[251] See Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 13. By this Attridge urges us to refrain from historical or political readings of literature. But I am not sure if it is actually possible to purge the literary and our readings of the historical and the political. Unless what he means is, more specifically, to be wary of thesis writers and critics or propagandistic/agitational literature. But that goes without saying. Cf. David Caute, *The Illusion: An Essay on Politics, Theatre and the Novel* (London: André Deutsch, 1971), pp. 67-68.

[252] Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 80.

[253] For a deft illustration of the role of art in Heideggerian ontology, see Gianni Vattimo, *Arte e verità nel pensiero di Martin Heidegger* (Turin: Giappichelli Editore, 1966).

[254] See Derek Attridge, "'A Yes without a No': Philosophical Reason and the Ethics of Conversion in Coetzee's Fiction" in *Beyond the Ancient Quarrel: Literature, Philosophy, and J. M. Coetzee*, edited by Patrick Hayes and Jan Wilm (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017), pp. 98-99. The essays in question are Martin Woessner, "Coetzee's Critique of Reason" and Alice Crary, "J. M. Coetzee, Moral Thinker," which appeared in *J. M. Coetzee and Ethics: Philosophical Perspectives on Literature* (New York: Columbia UP, 2010), pp. 223-46, and pp. 249-68, respectively. Both Woessner and Crary stress the importance of imaginative writing in altering and widening our moral vocabularies. Attridge, however, retains both readings as still instrumental because, instead of acknowledging literature's "deeper" calling, they end up subordinating literature to ethics by focusing on literature's "exemplary force."

"intuitive" or "affective" stylistics, or a thematic criticism. My intention is only to stress, as one critic has done, the altering effect of fiction on *my* life, with all the cultural or socio-political implications that might entail.[255] But this altering effect – or conversion, in Attridge's more mystical terms – has little to do with literature's capacity to access some "extra-rational" compartment in my brain, or with my capacity to switch from non-literary to literary language whenever I please.) As a matter of fact, some commentators have indeed grown impatient with so much "seriousness." In a review of *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, Brian May observes that by charging against any allegorical or even "naive" readings of literary texts in general and Coetzee in particular, Attridge comes close to a "mode of critical anxiety that prevents much from being said."[256] In much the same vein, Lucy Graham stresses the role of allegorical readings in keeping the work in touch with its historical background and away from aestheticism,[257] while Gerald Gaylard deplores the fact that "the Levinasian version of alterity that Attridge offers is in danger of becoming a hermeneutic orthodoxy"[258] killing any trace of *jouissance* we might derive from Coetzee's oeuvre.

Notwithstanding his good intentions, in the end Attridge's relentless insistence, on the one hand, on the alterity-generating singularity of literature – with Coetzee being his author of reference –, and, on the other hand, on our, the readers', burdensome responsibility towards it, comes close to defying the master himself. Here is Coetzee:

> Our ears today are finely attuned to modes of silence…. Our craft is all in reading *the other:* gaps, inverses, undersides; the veiled; the dark, the buried, the feminine; alterities…. It is a mode of reading which, subverting the dominant, is in peril, like all triumphant subversion, of becoming the dominant in turn. Is it a version of utopianism (or pastoralism) to look forward (or backward) to the day when the truth will be (or was) what is said, not what is not said, when we hear (or heard) music as sound upon silence, not silence between sounds?[259]

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255 Cf Thomas Pavel's brief but enlightening *Comment écouter la littérature* (Paris: Collège de France/Fayard, 2006). Take this passage, for example: "Évasion! Dira-t-on. Oui, évasion. Évasion imaginaire, salutaire. Salutaire précisément parce qu'elle n'a pas effectivement lieu. Et parce que, à l'occasion de la visite dans tel monde de la fiction je suis amené à méditer sur l'élément idéal qui s'y révèle et qui – miracle! – m'éclaire, à sa manière, non pas tant sur l'époque de Néron ni sur celle de Louis XIV, que sur l'univers dans lequel *je* vis" (p. 29, emphasis in the original).

256 Brian May, "Reading Coetzee, Eventually," *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 48, no. 4, Winter, 2007, pp 629-38. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/27563773, p. 638.

257 See Lucy Graham's short review of Attridge's "J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event in Research in African Literatures," vol. 37, no. 4, Winter 2006, p. 240.

258 Gerald Gaylard, "J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event by Derek Attridge," *English in Africa*, vol. 33, no. 1, May 2006, pp. 151-56. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40399028, p. 156.

259 J. M. Coetzee, *White Writing* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1988), p. 81 (emphasis in the original).

This might come as a shock for any good-intentioned literary scholar who is trained in the ever-subverting play of *différance*, in awe with the Levinasian Other, and soaked in postcolonial sensibilities. Is Coetzee advocating for a reactionary return to the mother of all metaphysical sins: the phono/phallogocentric presence? Not quite. Put your Gadamerian Vattimo-refracted lenses on for a moment and Coetzee's words will make perfect sense. In the same way that there is no being outside our understanding of words, there is also no music outside our hearing of sounds. Truth cannot be but a matter of intelligible, or on the way to become intelligible, words and sounds. Therefore any talk about the unsaid or the unsayable adorned with radical breaks or leaps into the "extra-rational," or whatever grandiose subversion, runs the risk of turning empty and eventually dogmatic.

I am echoing here Frank Lentricchia's piercing but liberating objections to the de Manian-inflected American deconstructionism. The "goal" of literature is not to point allegorically, negatively, and ironically – as the early de Man thought – to the unbridgeable gap between words and the world itself – a view that ultimately translates the *pour-soi/en-soi* ontological dualism onto aesthetics by investing literature with the paradoxical but demystifying insight into a no longer binding, inaccessible reality – that is, a view that amounts to yet another stable metaphysical description upheld between the existentialist's anxiety-ridden élan for freedom and the Nietzschean *ressentiment* towards the "*es war*." Nor is literature supposed to thematize – as the "post-existentialist," now Derridean de Man thought – its own inauthenticity by asserting time and again the awareness of its own fictionality beyond any pretense of revealing deep-seeded meanings – a view that ends up, of course, in an endless deferring of meaning pointing no longer to the gap between something and something else, but to the gap pure and simple as an all-pervading boundless absence.[260] But, as Lentricchia clarifies, the whole point of Derrida's "il n'y a pas de hors-texte" announcement is not that we are

[260] Lentricchia is particularly harsh on De Man whom he sees as the self-proclaimed guru of literary criticism. In De Man's view the essential trait of the "literary" is the staging of the transcendental undecidable moment preceding any linguistic expression so that any master reading or privileged discourse is undermined right from the start. Surprisingly, though, de Man's ends up being the ultimate master reading that, in fact, takes the literary as *the* privileged discourse. See "Paul De Man: The Rhetoric of Authority," *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980), pp. 283-317. Or, as Mark Edmundson more effectively puts it: "After the first de Manian reading, there is, in a certain sense, no other"; "no matter where he starts, he ends up in the same place." *Literature Against Philosophy, Plato to Derrida: A Defence of Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), pp. 59, 80, respectively.

forever caught in the now merrily disengaging, now resentfully nostalgic dance of signifiers on the abysmal edge of an unfathomable void or ontological "nothing." In fact, the free-play of signifiers does not happen *in* the world, but embodies the free-play *of* the world; which also means that "freedom" is never a matter of pure will, but always "oriented" along an ateleological concatenation of historical epochs .[261] Or, in Gadamerian terms, there is no being out there waiting to be understood through the free-play of our language games; rather, our language games are being constituted along the free-play of being.

Attridge is of course too well-versed in detecting the mistreatments of Derridean poststructuralism to fall in such gross metaphysical trappings, but the ethicalizing quality and professional seriousness he enfolds literature in betrays a fear of inauthenticity, which tends to work, more often than not, as a conversation stopper. The stress on singular and non-allegorical readings is meant to keep at bay any form of hermeneutical violence or will to mastery – which is indeed a noble endeavor. But the unwillingness to take hermeneutical risks breeds anxiety and dulls excitement. I for one cannot see how the "negative" or "deconstructive" effects of being interpreted by the work in the appropriative event of reading can be divorced from their "positive" or "constructive" counterparts. Is any irruption of alterity even possible at all by only being subjected, as readers, to the defamiliarizing shocks, world-dismantling thrusts, and self-undermining jests of the literary?[262] Must not a *living* experience with literature, if living at all, necessarily also include the simple pains and pleasures derived, *in primis*, from reading *with* the grain, not *against* it (even if this means turning a charitable eye to various forms of underreadings, overreadings, misreadings, and so on)? This is not an escapist move as it does not accomplish a removal from "real life"; if anything, it alludes to what "real life" is all about. If you allow me a somewhat pedestrian analogy, the living experience of reading a novel should not feel that different from falling in love. And here "falling" is the key word: the unpredictable and awe-inducing alteration of one's own world and self, accompanied nevertheless by sheer excitement and eagerness. An experience that makes one indulge wholeheartedly in all kinds of

[261] See especially the "History or the Abyss: Poststructuralism," *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980), pp. 157-210.

[262] I am moving close here to what Rita Felski refers to as "enchantment": "Possessing some of the viscerality of shock, enchantment has none of its agitating and confrontational character; it offers rapturous self-forgetting rather than self-shattering." *Uses of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p. 55.

misreadings, ranging from the tenderly innocent to the pathetically ridiculous to the profoundly life-changing. An experience in which the "othering" of the self is unthinkable without the seizing of the other, and vice versa. In this sense, all "readings" (literary or sentimental) must be instrumental or utilitarian to some extent, without necessarily being irresponsible.

But Attridge keeps insisting that a responsible reader must never place her "primary interest somewhere other than literature."[263] And I keep failing to understand what kind of reader (informed, attentive, canny, or otherwise) opens a book, say a novel, with the declared intention of knowingly classifying and subordinating (so much for the extra-rational) her interests so that she can be exclusively responsible for and to *the* literary.[264] It is like trying to bring oneself, or should I say punish oneself, to the point of watching a soccer game from the standpoint of the referee, that is, without rooting for either team. Not only does this sound to me as the most perverse form of instrumentality, but as just plain sad. On the contrary, I would dare say that, in order to be in any way relevant to *me*, a literary text should have a significant bearing especially on my "extra-literary" interests, whatever those might be.

All this to finally make a rather simple point which has been aired under different guises in the works of critics such as Mark Edmundson, Thomas Pavel, Dorothy Allison, Rita Felski, and others. The point being that whatever moves us towards reading books that we have come to call literature cannot, under any circumstances, exceed the realm of what *we care about*. And what we care about, while closely related to what we believe to be true (epistemology) and to the way we behave in society (ethics), is nevertheless

[263] In a nutshell, what Attridge means by this is merely that we should not treat a literary text as some kind of an instruction manual for how to behave or do politics. While I do not see who would disagree on this point, that does not mean either that there is a special task – even the task of having no tasks – a literary text is "called on to perform" and which, of course, is only detectable by the keen eye of the initiated. The moment you assign special tasks the game is rigged. See *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 13.

[264] "Le lecteur qui m'intéresse ici n'est celui qui *étudie* le texte, mais celui qui s'y *abandonne.*" Thomas Pavel, *Comment écouter la littérature* (Paris: Collège de France/Fayard, 2006), p. 16 (emphasis in the original). This is indeed the kind of reader I am interested in too, even though I am not sure you can even begin studying a text without first "giving yourself" to it. What I mean by this is merely that any attempt to keep in check your guiding interests when approaching a text is bound to backfire on you. As Mark Edmundson has it, "to the degree that you read a text analytically, to the degree that your terminology claims to encompass it, claims to know the text better than it knows itself, to that degree you give up the possibility of being read by it." *Literature Against Philosophy, Plato to Derrida: A Defence of Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), p. 128.

irreducible to either. As Harry Frankfurt has suggested,[265] our capacity for caring cannot be determined in advance according to logical or causal patterns pertaining to compartmentalized fields of inquiry such as epistemology or ethics, or, I would add, aesthetics. It rather seems to operate at an existential level, persistent in time, and preceding our conscious will to choose, while involving, disturbing, and breaching all "fields of knowledge" at once. It orients our attention outside our *selves* and towards the "object" cared for through a movement of passivity that is liberating rather than coercive. Frankfurt calls this "volitional necessity." A clinical phrasing that strikes right to the point even though I prefer Heidegger's more speculative tone as he describes the fore-structure of understanding underlying *Dasein*'s being-in-the-world in the ecstatic movement of disclosure and appropriation.

If we switch now onto the plane of literary theory it follows that there is no way we can decide, *pace* Attridge, to care about the literary for its own sake. What comes first is always *my* story, with *my* cares and worries and hopes and dreams, not the story in the book. And the story *I* bring to the story in the book is so very different from *yours*. This is how I want to understand Mark Edmundson's contention that all literature does is to affirm the "sense of human diversity"[266]; or Thomas Pavel's insistence that "le sens [d'une] oeuvre est remis à nos soins."[267]

Any attempt to enthrone the literary above the "petty" realm of human affairs or separate it from other disciplines cannot but collude with what Edmundson calls the disenfrachisement of art that has been present in Western thought since Plato. In fact, for Dorothy Allison "God or history or politics or literature or the belief in the healing power of love, or even righteous anger" are indistinguishable as far as they give meaning to our lives: "Sometimes I think they are all the same. A reason to believe, a way to take the world by the throat and insist that there is more to this life than we have ever imagined."[268]

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265 Harry G. Frankfurt, "The Importance of What We Care About," *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), pp. 80-94.

266 Mark Edmundson, *Literature Against Philosophy, Plato to Derrida: A Defence of Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), p. 179.

267 Thomas Pavel, *Comment écouter la littérature* (Paris: Collège de France/Fayard, 2006), p. 39.

268 Dorothy Allison, "Believing in Literature," *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class and Literature* (London: Pandora, 1995), p. 181.

Neither is there a “great danger” befalling literature if we are not “scrupulous” or “ethical” enough in our readings, as Attridge seems to fear.[269] In fact, Rita Felski complains that “Recent work on the ethics of reading has intensified this inclination to think of texts as fragile quasi-persons that should be handled with kid gloves.”[270] Her point is that texts, especially literary texts, should be met with an air of excitement rather than anxiety. To read responsibly is to let oneself be enchanted by the words on the page, not to get suspicious about them.[271] Even a hardcore “deconstructionist” like J. Hillis Miller has gone so far as to suggest that critical reading, “especially in its ‘deconstructive’ mode,” has “contributed to the death of literature.”[272]

To suggest now that the view I have been expounded so far might hint at a turn in literary criticism – a “postcritical” turn, as Rita Felski might call it[273] – would far exceed the scope and ambitions of my endeavor. I would much rather think of it as a return to something that has been neglected in literary studies, something that Richard Rorty simply calls the “inspirational value” of literature.[274] This is not to say, as Attridge worries, that literature should only be treasured for its “exemplary force” at the service of moral philosophy or social engineering, but simply that self-transformation can only occur as a result of being swept off one’s feet in the moment of reading, independently of any professional expertise.

Indeed Attridge is at his best when he talks about his own experience with Coetzee’s novels, with “no guarantee that it coincides with the way anyone else experiences [them].” Since any knowledge gained in the process is, “inevitably, colored by the reader’s personal situation and history. Doing justice to a work of literature involves doing justice at the same time to who, where, and when we are.”[275] He seems to be at his worst though when he stands in awe of the literary *per se* as some kind of portal into another dimension only perceivable by the knowing gaze of the few. It is this sort of

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269 Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 13.
270 Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2015), p. 114.
271 See especially chapter 2 in her *Uses of Literature* (Malden MA, Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), pp. 51-76.
272 J. Hillis Miller, *On Literature* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 125-26.
273 See her *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2015).
274 See Richard Rorty, “The Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature” in his disturbingly visionary *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (London, Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1998), pp. 125-40.
275 Derek Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004), pp. 45-46.

mood that brings Attridge to the point of suggesting, for instance, that Coetzee's novels "can be read as a continued, strenuous enterprise in acknowledging alterity…"[276] The irony is that such assertions are meant to discourage, with good reason, reductive allegorical readings of the political or philosophical kind,[277] but ultimately end up converging in a totalizing, meta-allegorical reading that leaves no room for other readings: any other reading turns out, in fact, to be essentially a misreading.

A brief case in point. Coetzee's *Disgrace* has been famously read by Gayatri Spivak as a relentless exercise in *counterfocalization*.[278] Which means that, by forcing the reader to see the world through the eyes of David Lurie – who is the main character and the "focalizing consciousness" in the novel –, what Coetzee actually does is to deny Lucy – Lurie's daughter – focalization and thus provoke the reader to actively engage with her, that is, to participate in what Attridge has referred to as the "continued, strenuous enterprise in acknowledging alterity." This is a "rhetorical signal," Spivak tells us, only meant to be perceived and appreciated by the "canny reader." Now, I wonder, what is there left for the not so canny readers such as myself who are gullible enough to actually think that *Disgrace* is mainly about David Lurie; those readers who have fallen in love with *Disgrace* without suspecting that such a thing as "counterfocalization" even existed?

If *Disgrace* has had any bearing on my life – and it must have had, otherwise I would not be writing this – it is not because I was bullied into estrangement by the inaudible voice of alterity, but because I heard, and was deeply disturbed by, Lurie's voice as my own – with its overtones of arrogance and self-entitlement, cynicism and disenchantment, but also insecurity, vulnerability, and ultimately hope. There is no doubt that David Lurie is one of the "villains" (if such terms are in any way still applicable), but one must first suffer, laugh, desire, and blunder with Lurie before one can *alter* one's *self*. As far as we, the readers, are concerned David Lurie is the only character we can really *care about*; also because, unlike Spivak it seems, we do not know Coetzee's hidden intentions and maybe we should never know them. I would even

[276] Ibid., p. 12.
[277] See chapter two, "Against Allegory," ibid., pp. 32-64.
[278] "Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee, and Certain Scenes of Teaching," *Diacritics*, vol. 32, no. 3 / 4, Autumn – Winter, 2002, pp. 17-31. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1566443, see especially pp. 22-23.

dare say that David Lurie must have been the character Coetzee himself cared most about (also given the obvious biographical resemblance between the two). And I take Coetzee's following words as a hint: "The book took over two years to write. I couldn't have lived with DL [David Lurie] for those two years if he had been an entirely unpleasant character."[279] Coetzee *lived* with David Lurie – for far longer and far more intensely too, one would assume, than he lived with Lucy, or with any other character for that matter. But if we reduce David Lurie, as Spivak does, to a mere "rhetorical signal" deployed by Coetzee in his elaborate strategy to draw attention to something else (which sounds indeed like the apex of suspicion), are we not running the risk of depriving writing – and reading by extension – of precisely its "lived" quality or its "sense of life to which, in the long run, all art harks back…."[280]? I am not saying Spivak's reading is wrong: I just do not want to go down that road as I find it more interesting and inspiring to think that Coetzee writes more about himself (and thus about myself) and less about alterity. Notwithstanding Coetzee's refined dexterity in handling rhetorical devices (including counterfocalization no doubt), I would therefore agree with David Attwell that "Coetzee's writing is a huge existential enterprise, grounded in fictionalized autobiography."[281]

An existential enterprise whose ripples spread out to reach other people by engendering a sense of "listening to and belonging with (*Zuhören*) someone who knows how to tell a story."[282] This last quote is taken from Gadamer and is actually meant to describe the nature of hermeneutical understanding but, as I hope I have shown, it can just as well convey the meaning of Coetzee's "living reading."

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279 This is Coetzee's reply to one John Mark Eberhardt, the books editor of *The Kansas City Star*. The exchange is published in full in J. C. Kannemeyer, *J. M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing*, translated by Michiel Heyns (Melbourne, London: Scribe, 2012), p. 520.

280 Nathalie Sarraute, "The Age of Suspicion," *The Age of Suspicion: Essays on the Novel*, translated by Maria Jolas (New York: George Braziller, 1991), p. -.

281 David Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face-to-Face with Time* (New York: Viking, 2015), p. 2.

282 Hans-Georg Gadamer in the foreword to Jean Grondin's *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, translated by Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale UP, 1994), p. xi.

b) The weakening imagination

We use our imagination not to escape the world but to join it.
(Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*)[283]

I wish to conclude this chapter by briefly alluding to the role of imagination in rapport with alterity in the context of literary thinking. It would not be an exaggeration to suggest at this point – albeit merely as a working hypothesis – that, for Coetzee, perhaps the most important task of fictional writing is to assist imagination in its relationship to history. More specifically, what writing/reading fiction in a context such as that of South Africa's might reveal is the nature of the imaginative involvement elicited by forms of textual representation. To what extent can imagination cope with the burden of history without being flattened under the weight of resentment or relegated to mere fantasy? Is understanding/reading alterity possible without succumbing to hermeneutical violence? It is in fact in the context of such questioning that textuality and history come together as a result of a weakening of imagination.

In the introduction to *White Writing*, a collection of essays in South African literary criticism,[284] Coetzee says that one of his main concerns in the book is to address the ways "through which South Africa has been thought by Europe" (p. 10). His basic assumption is that at the heart of the colonial encounter between Europe and Africa is a failure of imagination that manifests itself either by reducing Africa to European tropes or by an expression of incomprehension and awe before the alien territory. In either case, Coetzee stresses the decisive role of imagination in the encounter with alterity: imagination can work either violently, by assimilating alterity into pre-structured hermeneutical patterns, or passively, by spiraling into a nostalgic rut characterized by an indefinite deferral of alterity with no possibility of any retrieval of meaning. The first kind of imagination – the violent one – annihilates the otherness of South Africa by unproblematically translating it into the language of the colonist, a language not fit for the alien context which is meant to describe. The second kind of imagination – the passive one – remains in thrall of the impossibility to find an ideal, primordial language

[283] Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 90.
[284] J. M. Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1988).

capable of establishing a genuine, pure connection with otherness. Coetzee's alternative to these two drives of the imaginary, which also bears quite obvious ethical implications, is a "listening imagination" (p. 9) that can find meaning neither by imposing onto otherness an already established conceptual structuring nor by reducing otherness to an ahistorical essence.[285] The same is true for the hermeneutical encounter with the text.

The first step in envisaging a mode of imagination that would respond responsibly to alterity is a relaxation of what Coetzee calls the "reasoning imagination." To clarify the point let us look at a seldom cited piece from 1993 where Coetzee describes the process of writing as follows:

> In my account, it is not the theme that counts but thematizing. What themes emerge in the process are heuristic, provisional, and in that sense insignificant. The *reasoning imagination* thinks in themes because those are the only means it has; but the means are not the end.
>
> It barely needs to be said that a writing is possible in which the *reasoning imagination* is deceived from beginning to end (or deceives itself), in which the themes it discovers are not the themes the reader will find, or indeed the themes the writer may find on a later rereading. This may be a part of the cunning of the work, as it works its way past the defenses of the hand writing it.[286]

A distinction is made between the identification of themes and the way themes emerge in writing (i.e., thematizing). We are told that themes are thought out through the reasoning imagination, which is merely a secondary, almost insignificant process. Coetzee does not explain the nature of the primary, significant process through which themes actually emerge. We are led to believe, however, that thematizing is somehow related to a kind of imagination other than the reasoning imagination. An imagination, it is suggested, that escapes or resists authorial control.

Once the authoritative impulse of the reasoning imagination diminishes in the wake of the crises of modernity (the decentering of subjectivity, the demise of grand narratives,

[285] Martin Woessner has already pointed in this direction in a recent piece: "Beyond Realism: Coetzee's Post-Secular Imagination," *Beyond the Ancient Quarrel: Literature, Philosophy, and J. M. Coetzee*, edited by Patrick Hayes and Jan Wilm (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017), pp. 143-59.

[286] J. M. Coetzee, "Thematizing," *The Return of Thematic Criticism*, edited by Werner Sollors (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1993), p. 289 (my emphasis).

the waning of first principles, etc.) the encounter with alterity becomes increasingly problematic. The question then to be raised is: How can a listening, humbler kind of imagination still redeem its productive/emancipatory function beyond a logic of overcoming and while mediating between tradition and innovation, integration and discontinuity, humanism and anti-humanism, the masking and the disclosing of meaning, and so on?

As with the question-begging character of literary thinking we are again in the realm of paradox, or what Richard Kearney calls the "post-modern paradox of imagination." Not surprisingly, Kearney also finds inspiration in Vattimo's "fragile thought," as he calls it, to locate postmodern art (which would include Coetzee's work to a certain extent at least) within a crisis of overcoming. Disillusioned with the modernist subversive attempts to break with tradition and innovate at all costs, postmodern art questions precisely the value of the new and the faith in the future. It problematizes temporality and revalorizes (an-denken, re-membering) tradition and the past by unleashing the ludic, affirmative side of imagination. Aesthetic liberty is thus taken as a model for or a source of dialogue with thinking (*dichten-denken*).[287]

However, we have to tread carefully here as Vattimo's antifoundationalist impetus comes with a major caveat, a caveat that is particularly relevant in Coetzee's case. Aesthetic experience cannot merely revel in playfulness as it must always hark back to a life-project constantly underpinned by ethical constraints and epistemic limitations. Needless to say, in Coetzee the burden of an oppressive history is felt on every page; even when it seems to slip away through the gaps of textuality. So instead of focusing solely on the playful and adventurous character of art freed from the yoke of truth and progress, the question that must be raised is: How can the imaginary avoid colluding with the hermeneutical violence proper to phallogocentrism *without* succumbing to the sterile play of self-mirroring signs? (Even Derrida admits that undecidability invites decision, as its very condition of possibility, rather than paralysis.[288])

[287] See Richard Kearney's discussion of Vattimo in *Poetics of Imagining: Modern to Post-Modern* (New York: Fordham UP, 1998), pp. 190-95. See also Gianni Vattimo, "Myth and the Destiny of Secularization," *Social Research*, vol. 52, no. 2, Summer 1985, pp. 247-62. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40970374.

[288] Jacques Derrida, "Hospitality, Justice, and Responsibility: A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida," *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, edited by Richard Kearney and Mark

While Kearney is right to acknowledge the "positive" outcome of the aesthetic experience and particularly that of storytelling,[289] his effort seems to be mainly aimed at reconciling the integrative (conservative) and the disruptive (rebellious) drives of the imaginary; a prospect both Coetzee and Vattimo seem less optimistic about.[290] Kearney's account is helpful in that it provides the background for understanding the two opposing tendencies of imagination, but it is not clear what form the imaginary might take under the pressure of this tension. I suggest at this point that Coetzee's double-bind imperative to "imagine the unimaginable"[291] might, if rightly understood, offer an interesting lead since 1) it maintains the irresolvable tension between the same and the other *without* 2) being weighed down by the metaphysical debris of Levinasian asceticism.[292]

We should therefore read Coetzee's injunction not as a debilitating concern with the unimaginable but as an ever-renewed commitment to the practice of imagination. As a matter of fact, imagination fails – and hence breeds hermeneutical violence – precisely insofar as it strives obsessively for the unimaginable understood as something outside or independent of human comprehension.[293] Viewed this way – unburdened, that is, of a capitalized Unimaginable – the task of imagination in Coetzee chimes rather with Vattimo's bitter-sweet realization that we must keep on dreaming even while aware of dreaming.[294] Still, the notion of the "unimaginable" needs further clarification in order

Dooley (London, New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 65-83.

289 "The poetic commitment to *story-telling* may well prove indispensable to the ethical commitment to *history-making*." *Poetics of Imagining: Modern to Post-Modern* (New York: Fordham UP, 1998), p. 236 (emphasis in the original).

290 The shortcomings of such attempts at reconciliation have also been emblematically confirmed, albeit in a different context, by the "failed" encounter between Gadamer and Derrida. See Diane P. Michelfielder and Richard E. Palmer, editors, *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989).

291 J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, edited by David Attwell (Cambridge MA/London: Harvard UP, 1992), p. 68

292 Cf David Wood, *The Step Back: Ethics and Politics after Deconstruction* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 2005), see especially the chapter on Levinas, pp. 52-68.

293 Cf Richard Rorty's discussion of the romantic imagination in "Pragmatism and Romanticism," *Philosophical Papers, IV: Philosophy as Cultural Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), especially pp. 108-09. Rorty warns against an idealistic conception of imagination. Cf also Martin Woessner's reference to Rorty in relation to Coetzee in "Beyond Realism: Coetzee's Post-Secular Imagination," *Beyond the Ancient Quarrel: Literature, Philosophy, and J. M. Coetzee*, edited by Patrick Hayes and Jan Wilm (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017), p 147.

294 Gianni Vattimo, "Myth and the Destiny of Secularization," *Social Research*, vol. 52, no. 2, Summer 1985, pp. 247-62. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40970374, p. 360.

to dispel the metaphysical overtones and integrate it into the workings of a weakening imagination. Let me, at this point, cite Coetzee in full from an interview with David Attwell:

> I don't believe that any form of lasting community can exist where people do not share the same sense of what is just and what is not just. To put it another way, community has its basis in an awareness and acceptance of a common justice. You [Attwell] use the word *faith*. Let me be more cautious and stay with *awareness*: awareness of an idea of justice, somewhere, that transcends laws and lawmaking. Such an awareness is not absent from our lives. But where I see it, I see it mainly as flickering or dimmed – the kind of awareness you would have if you were a prisoner in a cave, say, watching the shadows of ideas flickering on the walls. To be a herald you would have to have slipped you chains for a while and wandered about in the real world. I am not a herald of community or anything else, as you correctly recognize. I am someone who has intimations of freedom (as every chained prisoner has) and constructs representations – which are shadows themselves – of people slipping their chains and turning their faces to the light. I do not imagine freedom, freedom *an sich*; I do not represent it. Freedom is another name for the unimaginable, says Kant, and he is right.[295]

This paragraph is crucial not only for understanding the character of the "weakening imagination" but also in that it illustrates the more general claims concerning the notion of literary thinking. The task of imagination and, by extension, of thinking is *not* to represent the Unimaginable in itself (*an sich*). That would only be possible if one could go outside Plato's cave and "wander[] about in the real world." In other words, the Unimaginable – a concept that Coetzee associates with absolutes such as Justice or Freedom, but we could also add Truth, the Real, the Other, God, and so on – is only available to the heralds of community (which could also include, as one could surmise, the figure of the *führer*). As it quite clearly transpires from the above citation, Coetzee does not aspire to be a herald of community since imagination is not strong enough to establish contact with the absolute. This, however, does not mean either that imagination is confined to the social practices of a given historical community – as that would amount to merely conform to an already established state of affairs.[296] That is

[295] J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, edited by David Attwell (Cambridge MA/London: Harvard UP, 1992), pp. 340-41 (emphases in the original).

[296] Cf Adrzej Zawadzki's discussion of Vattimo's ethics of interpretation in the context a problematic negotiation between "continution and innovation." *Literature and Weak Thought*, *Cross-Roads: Polish Studies in Culture, Literary Theory, and History*, vol. 2, translated by Stanley S. Bill, edited by

why Coetzee believes, for example, that the idea of justice "transcends laws and lawmaking." The point to be stressed here is that any awareness of transcendence comes in the form of "flickering or dimmed" – or *weak*, I would venture – "intimations of freedom."

In her insightful monograph on Coetzee,[297] Carrol Clarkson reads these intimations of freedom as constituting the "transcendent imperative" that sustains the "*pathos* of Coetzee's fiction" throughout. While she duly acknowledges the "position of historical situatedness" (inside Plato's cave, as it were) from which Coetzee's characters speak, her interpretation betrays a fascination with the true light of freedom blazing in the real world outside the cave – the Unimaginable, that is. While I do find Clarkson's reading justified to a certain extent, I would rather drop notions such as "transcendent imperative" or "pathos" and dwell inside the cave for little longer. In the end, the intimations of freedom Coetzee talks about are only discernible, if we are lucky, by looking at the flickering shadows on the walls. The cave, with its dim light, seems to be the only world we have got. And that is why, as Iris Murdoch puts it, we should use imagination in order to join this world, rather than to escape it (see the the quote at the outset). This, I suggest, is the meaning of the weakening imagination that informs Coetzee's writing.

Ryszard Nycz and Teresa Walas (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2013), pp. 100-02.

297 *J. M. Coetzee: Countervoices* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), see especially pp. 189-90.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have sought to engage in a reflection on the nature of thinking by taking Coetzee's commitment to literature as the guiding conceptual thread. I have suggested that storytelling, far from being a form of evasion or a way of engendering cathartic experiences, allows Coetzee to respond responsibly to an unbearable historical situation without having to rely on strong justifications or foundational principles. As I have shown, it is precisely the freedom and disclosing possibilities that fictional writing offers that enable Coetzee to enter a productive dialogue with an authoritative philosophical tradition without exercising authority in its turn. My argument has been that such a positioning is characterized essentially by an abandonment of a logic of overcoming, that must constantly turn back on its tracks and confront itself with the contingency of its own assumptions. A paradoxical movement akin to the structure of the hermeneutical circle is thus generated and is played out time and again in Coetzee's fiction. These aspects place Coetzee in a position of weakness that is subversive insofar as it undermines any secure ground from which to speak.

My main contention throughout has been that Coetzee's self-conscious positioning within the Western philosophical and literary tradition is essentially an attempt to come to terms with the ontological dilemma haunting the white South African intellectual who is "no longer European, not yet African."[298] Moreover, the Janus-faced tension thus created is not resolvable in any way since it bears the mark of a too violent past and present. For Coetzee writing fiction turns out to be the only medium enabling him to dwell in this contradiction and, at the same time, work through the crises of representation, identity, meaning, *telos*, etc. as revealed by the various discourses of postmodernity. Coetzee does in fact exploit the deconstructive and defamiliarizing potential of the novelistic discourse in order to disrupt familiar hermeneutical patterns and call attention to what is left unsaid in the practice of writing and reading. However, to interpret his literary achievement as a tribute to silence and introspection would run the risk of overlooking its productive, "living" aspect. As Coetzee himself confesses, his

[298] J. M. Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1988), p. 11.

is not a “literature of silence”: “I am not there yet. I am still interested in how the voice moves the body, moves in the body.”[299]

Coetzee’s writing, as I have argued, must therefore be more than a self-serving allegory of its own fallible constructedness to be deployed as a strategy to preemptively diffuse indiscreet criticism. While undoubtedly problematized, elements such as contextualization, voice, and embodiedness are always present in Coetzee’s fiction and contribute to situate his characters in history. The elusive, self-undermining, anti-representationalist, and anti-correspondist effect achieved in the play of textuality is therefore not meant, at least in Coetzee’s case, to evade or negate history, but to understand it *differently*. That is, a link between text and history must somehow be established if any retrieval of meaning, however fragile, is to be realized.

Three interrelated queries ensue: How is truth “worked out” through storytelling once the question-begging character of thinking is acknowledged?; What is the nature of literature’s authority – or lack thereof – after the writer/subject has been de-centered?; Is it possible to break the paralyzing enchantment with the forever ungraspable Other through weaker, more earthbound modes of enchantment? These queries have been raised, respectively, in the three main chapters of this study.

In light of these quandaries, Coetzee would be more than justified to remain silent or to wallow in an attitude of defeatism and resignation. But that seems to be the luxury of the privileged, of those who can still think in essences. Coetzee’s “South-Africanness” requires forms of enchantment that can contribute, however weakly, to disclose modes of carrying on despite guilt, self-questioning, and spiraling doubt. It is in this spirit that I would read the following passage: “All of us, both great and small face the problem of how to bring our confession to an end; not all of us have the power to accept pessimistically (Freud) or with equanimity (Derrida, it seems), the prospect of endlessness.”[300] Here lies, I have tried to suggest, the “positive” or “constructive” drive in Coetzee’s literary engagement. Thus the imperative to “imagine the unimaginable”[301]

[299] J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, edited by David Attwell (London, Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1992), p. 23.
[300] Ibid., p. 249.
[301] Ibid., 68.

is not the expression of an endless search for the ineffable but of a hope that "there is more to this life than we have ever imagined"[302] – a weak hope, nevertheless, which is perhaps best captured in Vattimo's beautiful phrasing: "we have to keep on dreaming, while being conscious of the fact that all is a dream."[303] Only a radically historical consciousness can retain that speck of naiveté to keep the imagining and the dreaming going on.

Prompted by the brief encounter between Coetzee and Vattimo,[304] this study is principally an endeavor to look at Coetzee's engagement with literature through its possible points of interference with Vattimo's weak thought. This is what foregrounds the meaning of what has been called *literary thinking*. However, given the underexplored influence of a "weak poetics" in literary studies, further work needs do be done on the specific problems each of Coetzee's novels raises in order to validate or invalidate this approach.

Finally, to be true to Coetzee, I must close on a contradictory and rather anticlimatic note. One major and perhaps unsurmountable limitation of this study – and of all similar studies for that matter – is that it ultimately and knowingly reduces the manifold potential of a body of writing and the complexity of a human life to one single master reading. A reading that, as Coetzee himself warns in his encounter with Vattimo, if properly supported, can take up the violent form of "a directive or even a dictate." In this case, the master reading is mainly informed by Vattimo's hermeneutics. One could therefore contend that perhaps a better way to respond to a novel would be by writing another novel. This, however, is not seen, as yet, as a "valid" form of criticism. "But what is criticism," Coetzee wonders, "what can it even be, but either a betrayal (the usual case) or an overpowering (the rarer case) of its object?"[305] At this point, one does not even know which to opt for: the betrayal or the overpowering?

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[302] Dorothy Allison, "Believing in Literature," *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class and Literature* (London: Pandora, 1995), p. 181.

[303] Gianni Vattimo, "Myth and the Destiny of Secularization," *Social Research*, vol. 52, no. 2, Summer 1985, pp. 247-62. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40970374, p. 360.

[304] See Preface

[305] J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, edited by David Atwell (London, Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1992), p. 61.

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