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“A dynamic of blaming and counterblaming”:

J.M. Coetzee’s Analysis of Self-deception in South African Resistance Literature

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The early 1980s in South Africa was a period still marked by apartheid politics, which made clear restrictions on art as well as on many other aspects of life. In such a heated context, artists and writers were often important figures in the resistance against state power and were expected by readers and critics to take clear political stances against the state and its inhumane politics.

The logic of literary politics—influenced by literary existentialism—followed the schema according to which the author “opposes apartheid through exposing it” (Bethlehem 367).¹ A

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part of such a logic involved seeing the author as residing on the side of truth, whereas the state was inherently seen as corrupted. J. M. Coetzee’s notion of a writer’s situation in society, on the contrary, complicates this existentialist notion of a writer’s duty to act against the repressive state, a notion shared by many of his contemporary South African authors during the era of apartheid politics. Coetzee’s essays on censorship call into question the presupposition of a relationship between a truthful author and a lying state, and characterize a contagious logic informing the relationship between the two. In his essays, Coetzee disputes the straightforward politics informing committed art in the

¹ South African literary politics after the 1960s was indebted to existentialism. Paul Rich writes: “Already avant-garde Afrikaans literary circles via the Sestigers had, in the early 1960s, begun the exploration towards a version of literary existentialism, stimulated by such writers as Samuel Beckett, Jean Paul Sartre and Eugene Ionesco. The effect of this, so Andre Brink claimed, was to escalate the decolonising process in South African literature despite the European origins of these writers” (Rich, “Tradition and Revolt” 55). See also Richard Peck’s “Condemned to Choose, But What? Existentialism in Selected Works by Fugard, Brink, and Gordimer.”

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context of apartheid politics and moves toward the notion of autonomous art as a potential way of criticizing the state in a more sustained manner. The aim of this article is to introduce briefly some of the more prominent aspects of these complex questions regarding the interplay of art and politics in the context of the South African literary discourse in the early 1980s.² I explore South African resistance literature and, more particularly, André Brink’s ideas and his commitment to political struggle vis-à-vis Jean-Paul Sartre’s notion of politically committed art. I read Coetzee’s challenge to resistance literature as a response with striking similarities to Theodor Adorno’s criticism of committed art, which Adorno levelled at Sartre in his two-part essay “On Commitment.” As both Coetzee and Adorno demonstrate, committed art remains close to the power it criticizes, and does not break free from it. Coetzee maintains that it is the constant task of the writer to resist the binaristic logic of the state by avoiding the lure of self-deception and maintaining an awareness that he, too, is implicated in state violence.

Existentialism, which arose in France under Nazi occupation, has been an appealing philosophy for writers and intellectuals

² In various analyses of state politics, the questions of lying and politics are often seen in close proximity to one another. Hannah Arendt, in “Truth and Politics,” establishes a firm relationship between the realm of politics and the act of lying. She writes: “No one has ever doubted that truth and politics are on rather bad terms with each other, and no one, as far as I know, has ever counted truthfulness among the political virtues” (*Between Past and Future* 227). In *Crises of the Republic*, she further claims that secrecy “and deception, the deliberate falsehood and the outright lie used as legitimate means to achieve political ends, have been with us since the beginning of recorded history” (4). In his essay on Hannah Arendt, “History of the Lie: Prolegomena,” Jacques Derrida maintains that political history as well as any history would not be possible without at least the possibility of the lie, as he writes that “there would be no history in general, and no political history in particular, without at least the possibility of lying, that is, of freedom and of action” (“History of the Lie” 155). Thus, in the words of Joseph Kronick, “truth remains bound to its spectral relationship with the lie” (1002). In this essay I also want to examine how these two terms, truth-speaking and lying, often remain in close proximity to one another rather than forming mutually exclusive polarities.

under similarly oppressive circumstances. In 1992, Richard Peck argued that “existentialism maintains an extraordinary grip over white South African dissident writers” (67).³ He further maintained that “[t]he resonance of this philosophy with the author’s own ideas generally derives from a sense of historical correspondence” (68). Existentialism’s emphasis on action provides the author with a sense of agency in a tyrannical state. For instance, it was the French political situation, and particularly the Algerian war (1954-62), that made a permanent impression on young Brink’s mind, and in an interview with Bahgat Elnadi and Adel Rifaat, he credits existentialist author Albert Camus as the writer who triggered a change in his own political views: “I was in Paris at the time of the Algerian war and all the problems it caused in France, the time when Camus was writing about the *pieds noirs*, the French settlers in Algeria” (5). For Brink, French occupation of Algeria had political correlations with the white settlement in South Africa. In similar fashion, Peck maintains that existentialist philosophy has appealed to white South African dissident authors because of the country’s “state of almost perpetual crisis ... [v]irtually all of Brink’s and [Nadine] Gordimer’s recent novels are set within this crisis” (69-70).

The existentialist author is bound to act. For engaged authors—who take their responsibility seriously and wish to initiate change in the world—action takes the form of writing. Sartre writes in *What is Literature?* (1949) that “[t]he ‘engaged’ writer knows that words are action. He knows that to reveal is to change and that one can reveal only by planning to change” (23). Sartre further claims that “the function of the writer is to act in such a way that nobody can be ignorant of the world and that nobody may say that he is innocent of what it’s all about” (24). In the context of

³ The writers whose works he has selected to explore in his article are André Brink, Athol Fugard, and Nadine Gordimer.

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apartheid politics in South Africa various literary critics took a similar stance on the function of literature. Leon de Kock, for instance, emphasizes the writers’ desire “to reveal the lie behind the moral sanctimony of separate development” (230).⁴ This concern is shared by Sarah Christie, Geoffrey Hutchings, and Don Maclennan, who maintain that the power of South African literature “comes from knowledge, and from deep concern for social and political change. The crime, for a writer of this group is to be in any way escapist, not committed to the greater human cause.... Consequently most of this writing is by intention critical and protesting, for its main function is to present the truth and the truth is seldom pleasant” (99).

Brink is one of the South African authors whose ideas are very clearly related to existentialism, and who was very persistent in his fight against the repressive state system.⁵ In his introduction to the collection of essays titled *Writing in a State of Siege* (1983), he distinguishes his own position as a writer in the following manner: “There lies a peculiar satisfaction in countering the tactics of secrecy with exposure: the dark fears nothing quite so much as light” (35). Although Brink denies being affected by Sartre’s work, it is apparent that his thinking is influenced by Sartre’s philosophy of art.⁶ This becomes clear in his introduction, in which Brink discusses the reasons he wants to remain in

⁴ As Bethlehem points out, separate development is a well-known “state euphemism for apartheid” (368).

⁵ According to Peck, “[t]he existentialism that pervades the fictional work of ... André Brink, is most obvious in *The Wall of the Plague* (1984)” (67).

⁶ In an interview conducted by Bahgat Elnadi and Adel Rifaat, Brink answers their question, “Were you influenced by Sartre?” in the following manner: “Not much. I read Sartre before I read Camus. Intellectually, I admired Sartre very much. But Camus bowled me over, emotionally and morally. Sartre affected me intellectually, but that was all” (5). See also Isidore Diala’s article “André Brink and Malraux.”

South Africa by using such Sartrean terms as “being in situation.” Brink writes:

In the fullest sense of the word [this] is an experience of being *in situation*. Which is something radically different from ‘being within the system’! In fact, only by being not only in situation but, if it is at all possible, *sur place*, can one make sure that the system is exposed, countered and eventually shattered. (35)

It is Brink’s political obligation to reveal and expose the apartheid system and use his writing as action in the world. Brink acknowledges that as beings in situation we are challenged to transcend our historical circumstances. This is why we are bound to be free. We are free to choose. Brink further states that

the system is [to be] exposed ... in the name of that truth all writers go in search of, that freedom which can only be born from the rebellion against unfreedom, and that justice of which as a barefoot boy I caught a glimpse that can never fade—provided one commit oneself unconditionally to the need to state it, and restate it, and state it again, and again, and forever. (35)

For the committed author the concept of freedom originates from choice. Brink’s writing bears much in common with other existentialist writing, which, according to Peck, emphasizes the necessity to act: “one is free to choose, and indeed condemned to such freedom; therefore one defines oneself by action, and good faith would seem to demand forms of action that are capable of enlarging human life and freedom” (73). For the writer, freedom and the choice it involves entail the action of committed writing, a critical act aimed at enabling other subjects to reflect critically on and actively challenge their own unfreedom.

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In Theodor Adorno’s critical discussion of political commitment in art, Adorno challenges representational strategies that attempt to directly reflect social conditions without complicating the relation between forms of art and reality. Adorno’s critique is useful in relation to the discussion of resistance literature in the South African context. Brink’s notion of the role of the artist who goes against unfreedom in his writing in order to reveal social ills becomes complicated if we follow Adorno’s criticism of Sartre’s concept of committed art.⁷ For Adorno, committed art is not free and it does not arise from the freedom of choice; rather, such art is bound to remain consigned to the logic of the society it wishes to critique. Adorno writes that “[t]he notion of a ‘message’ in art, even when politically radical, already contains an accommodation to the world” (“On Commitment II” 65). Furthermore, he states that “works of art that react against empirical reality obey the forces of that reality” (“On Commitment II” 62). Such forms of art make compromises, as they fail to break free from the empirical reality in which they originate (“On Commitment II” 62). For Adorno, art is not to mime empirical reality, but to follow its own rules of creation.⁸

⁷ Sartre’s understanding of committed art has since received a lot of criticism for compromising its artistic forms, but it was not really challenged before Adorno’s two-part essay “On Commitment.” In support of Sartre’s position on engaged art, Robert Pickering writes in his article “*Témoignage* and *Engagement* in Sartre’s War-Time Writings” that “literary values alone were never conceived to be the fundamental grounding of Resistance writing, attuned as it is to a complex intermeshing of political and ideological preoccupations, and to their relationships with cultural dissemination and advancement” (309).

⁸ Without explicitly referring to Adorno’s reading of Sartre, both Benita Parry and Louise Bethlehem raise similar concerns in their analysis of the South African resistance literature. Louise Bethlehem remains critical of the given relationship between art and “reality” in South African literary discourse. She states that “[w]riters and readers collectively assume that literature and life in South Africa maintain a mimetic or one-to-one relationship, that writing provides a supposedly unmediated access to the real” (366). Bethlehem clarifies this standpoint by stating that “[d]iscussions of literary function and value in South African

Like Adorno, Coetzee claims committed art remains in too close a proximity to the reality it wishes to criticize. In other words, its reaction to the world is dictated by its accommodation of that world. When analyzing literary depictions of torture in fiction, in his article “Into the Dark Chamber,” Coetzee develops this thought:

For the writer the deeper problem is *not* to allow himself to be impaled on the dilemma proposed by the state, namely, either to ignore its obscenities or else to produce representations of them. The true challenge is: how not to play the game by the rules of the state, how to establish one’s own authority. (*Doubling* 364, italics in the original)

In other words, if the author reacts to the state’s obscenities, like torture, by trying to reveal them in his or her fiction, it is self-deceptive to think that this writer is “free.” Rather, in the end, his or her reactions are dictated by the same state violence. Coetzee has, throughout his literary career,

literature in English ... are refracted through an elaborate rhetoric of urgency that strains to effect a secular closure between the word and the world precisely to safeguard the ethical claims of South African literary culture” (368). Therefore, in order to remain ethical, literary style cannot complicate the relationship between the sign and its referent—the word and the world. Such an approach assumes that ethical work is only possible through the modes of mimetic writing.

This approach further implies that non-mimetic writing is somewhat apolitical. It follows that any author swaying from mimetic writing and from clearly stated political standpoints—i.e. not overtly enough positioning him/herself against the regime in power—is accused of apolitical, escapist and often reductionist writing. Such readings of literature are supported by Mthobu Mutoatse, for instance, who argues that “any writing which ignores the urgency of political events will be irrelevant” (qtd. in Seroke, 305. See also Bethlehem 367).

In its emphasis on mimetic realism, as Benita Parry has noted, such an approach “acts to exercise a constraint on literary production” (13). Parry continues to state that “oppositional discourses quickening liberation energies can reside in spaces where there is no obvious correspondence between image and social message, and in articulations which do not register a literal relationship of word to social referent” (13).

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struggled with this trying task of establishing one’s own authority in a society rife with state violence. He identifies this persistent problem in his own writing as well as in Brink’s. Coetzee’s essays further emphasize the need to avoid the lure of self-deception in one’s writing, and the need to examine the ways in which state power does substantial damage to any author’s freedom.

Both Sartre and Adorno were troubled by state violence in the aftermath of the Second World War, but Adorno strongly disagrees with Sartre’s idea of committed art, which would teach its audience about the horrors of the world and at the same time imperil its own aesthetic form.⁹ According to Adorno, art cannot function as a mere vocalization of political values, since it has its own formal rules to follow.¹⁰ Adorno also expects art to be political, but he proposes that it can be political only by taking its distance from reality and by avoiding any direct reflection of political realities. In “On Commitment II,” Adorno claims:

I have no wish to soften the saying that to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric; it expresses in negative form the impulse which inspires committed literature. The question asked by a character in Sartre’s play *Morts Sans Sepulture*, “Is there any meaning in life when men exist who beat people until the bones break in their bodies?” is also the question whether any art now

⁹Adorno criticizes Sartre’s idea of committed art: “In order to develop his [Sartre’s] drama and novel beyond sheer declaration—whose recurrent model is the scream of the tortured—Sartre has to seek recourse in a flat objectivity, subtracted from any dialectic of form and expression, that is simply a communication of his own philosophy. The content of his art becomes philosophy” (“On Commitment I” 8).

¹⁰This, nevertheless, does not mean that art is not “social.” In the opening pages of *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno claims that art should be both autonomous and *fait social*; it does this by resisting polemicizing and, through its form, making its relationship with society legible. Adorno writes: “The unsolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form. This, not the insertion of objective elements, defines the relation of art to society” (6).

has a right to exist; whether intellectual regression is not inherent in the concept of committed literature because of the regression of society. (60-61)¹¹

The last sentence is particularly important here. According to Adorno, art can only live up to its role in society by refusing to relinquish its own formal rules. Committed literature and intellectual regression are characteristics of a society that has not reached its fullest potential; committed literature does not help the victims but rather leads society into a more regressed state.

Coetzee's and Adorno's understandings of the relation between art and politics, even if arising from different politico-historical contexts, have much in common. Sam Durrant, who also reads Coetzee's work in relation to Adorno's discussion of literature and art, maintains that Adorno's 1962 essay "On Commitment" "sheds a crucial light on Coetzee's insistence on the autonomy of art" ("Bearing Witness" 433). Yet Coetzee—who refuses to follow the path of committed literature and who was during the 1980s often

¹¹Adorno has stated various times that "Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (*Prisms* 34). Thus, art after the Holocaust could not be the same; it had to be reconfigured. The term "lyric poetry" can be interpreted here as a relatively wide concept including literary representations that seek to represent mimetically the Holocaust by sympathizing with the victims, and thereby domesticating the horror of the event and creating a consumable pathos.

In his essay "The Modernist Event," Hayden White also writes about representations of the Holocaust in the following manner: "With respect to the question of how most responsibly to represent the Holocaust, the most extreme position is ... [that of] those who hold that this event is of such a kind as to escape the grasp of *any* language even to *describe* it and of *any* medium—verbal, visual, oral, or gestural—to *represent* it, much less of any merely historical account adequately to *explain* it" (30, italics in the original). Therefore, a disaster like the Holocaust goes beyond any form of representation; it can neither be explained nor comprehended. White broadens his discussion beyond the specific context of the Holocaust to suggest that "modernist techniques of representation provide the possibility of de-fetishizing both events and the fantasy accounts of them which deny the threat they pose, in the very process of pretending to represent them realistically" (32).

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strongly criticized for doing so—at the same time maintains that remaining an independent thinker in such circumstances is profoundly difficult.¹² Rather than firmly establishing truths in such a violent context as the South African apartheid regime, Coetzee has continually stated that its environment confuses and overwhelms him. He writes:

Let me add, *entirely* parenthetically, that I as a person, as a personality, am overwhelmed, that my thinking is thrown into confusion and helplessness, by the fact of suffering in the world, and not only human suffering. These fictional constructions of mine are paltry, ludicrous defenses against that being-overwhelmed, and, to me, transparently so. (*Doubling* 248, italics in the original)¹³

¹²Coetzee’s literary style, which avoids mimetic realism, the main representational strategy associated with “resistance literature” of the 1980s, has received much criticism in the context of South African literary politics, a politics which sought to expose the truths of a corrupted society. Coetzee’s anti-mimetic writing was strongly criticized for its perceived ahistoricism, particularly by Abdul R. JanMohamed in his article “The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature” and Paul Rich in his article “Apartheid and the Decline of the Civilization Idea.” Since then, some critics, including David Attwell, “have endeavored to rehistoricize Coetzee’s fiction by emphasizing its discursive relevance to the time and place in which the novels were produced” (Durrant, “Bearing Witness” 431). Re-historicizing Coetzee’s work nevertheless runs a risk of failing to do justice to his ambiguous style. Attwell has also acknowledged this and states that the attempt to take Coetzee’s books “back into their context” means also reading them “against the grain” (“Editor’s Introduction” 8). This attempt to re-historicize Coetzee’s work also indicates a partial acceptance of criticism that sees his work as ahistorical. My reading of Coetzee’s fiction is more aligned with Durrant’s analysis, as he maintains that “Coetzee’s commitment to the autonomy of his art is precisely that which ensures the political force of his novels, that his novels are only able to engage with the history of apartheid precisely by keeping their distance” (“Bearing Witness” 432).

¹³ In an interview with David Attwell, Coetzee states: “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” (*Doubling* 341). Coetzee, unlike Brink, does not see writers as free subjects able to choose. Rather than seeing an apartheid society as

Whereas Brink sees South African society providing him with a strong “experience of being *in situation*” (35, italics in the original) and challenging him to transcend his historical circumstances, the same society confuses Coetzee, whose writing is not aimed at the exposure of state violence in the same sense. Instead, Coetzee’s interest is to examine how this violence has affected him, and in turn, every citizen living in apartheid society. Coetzee’s argument remains that authors cannot remain outsiders, calmly diagnosing the evils of society, because their thinking is contaminated by abuses of state power in a context marked by the “pervasive intrusiveness of totalitarian violence” in which no one—including writers—can claim a position that remains untouched by such violence (Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee* 97). Coetzee has come back to this issue at various points in his career. For instance, in his Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech, he maintains that this violent social structure has distorted any “normal” human relations:

The deformed and stunted relations between human beings that were created under colonialism and exacerbated under what is loosely called apartheid have their psychic representation in a deformed and stunted inner life. All expressions of that inner life, no matter how intense, no matter how pierced with exultation or despair, suffer from the same stuntedness and deformity. I make this observation with due deliberation, and in the fullest awareness that it applies to myself and my own writing as much as to anyone else. (*Doubling* 98)

In the context of South African apartheid politics, Coetzee suggests, it is very difficult to establish the authority of one’s own position as a writer. This becomes all the more clear

challenging him to act, he finds his role in such a society a disabling position.

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when he writes about censorship, an extreme form of a restricting politics exercised by the state.¹⁴

The antagonism between dissident authors and state politics becomes particularly heated in the context of discussions regarding censorship. In response, Brink, who is committed to exposing state violence, maintains that “unless [the authorities] are prepared to change, they must stand warned that we shall go all the way, always at least one step ahead, in making sure that their lies are exposed, that reality is not distorted, that truth will prevail” (194). Brink sees no ambiguity in the writer’s role: the writer resides on the side of truth, ready to expose the lies told by state authorities. Nevertheless, Coetzee’s understanding of verity remains different.

This discussion of censorship resembles the earlier discussion of the dissident author trying to reveal state obscenities in his or her politically committed literature. Even if the author thinks that in the name of freedom he or she goes against the state by exposing the violence in his or her art, Coetzee maintains that the writer’s artistic reactions are eventually dictated by the same state violence. Similarly, when discussing state censorship, the rules are once again created by the state, and the author should be wary of this logic.

Coetzee identifies a fraught relationship between the “repressive state” and the writer fighting against it. This binaristic relation between the state and the writer is created by the logic of censorship, which Coetzee characterizes as a contagious discourse. He explains: “The further we explore the phenomenon of censorship, the more pivotal we find *attribution* to be, specifically the attribution of blame, and the dynamic that blaming initiates, a dynamic of blaming and

¹⁴He has written a collection of essays on the topic titled *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship* (1996), which also includes his essay on Brink titled “The Politics of Dissident: André Brink.”

counterblaming" (*Doubling* 328). Coetzee maintains that "it is hard not to be sucked into this dynamic [of blaming], impossible not to be touched by it: those who claim to observe it judiciously or scientifically may be the most deceived" (*Doubling* 328). If the state is seen as a corrupted entity against which the truthful author is fighting, then the author suffers from self-deception if she or he is not aware of this contagious "dynamic of blaming and counterblaming" he or she is also necessarily taking part in (*Doubling* 328). The author risks losing his or her own authority in this situation. It is an infectious logic from which there seems to be no escape, unless the author takes his or her distance and establishes the rules of his or her own artistic representation.

If the state becomes essentially antagonistic, an entity that is necessarily corrupted, this anti-state position entails risking a continuation of the contagious discourse: i.e. when the state blames me, I will blame it back. In his essay titled "The Politics of Dissident: André Brink," Coetzee writes of Brink's clear-cut analysis of the truthful writer facing the corrupted state in the following way: "The writer tries to tell his truth and the state tries to stifle him; or the state offers seductions to which the writer either succumbs or replies with a truth-affirming No" (*Giving Offense* 205). Nevertheless, according to Coetzee, these accusations regarding the antagonist, i.e. the state, situate in advance its potential

response outside rational discourse. To the extent that they close off the entry of the antagonist into dialogue, they predict and indeed invite retaliatory violence, which in turn acts as a confirmation of their diagnostic truth. Much the same can be said about accusations of lying when lying is treated not as a trick or scheme or strategy of disputation but as the manifestation of an evil essence, the essence of power itself. (*Giving Offense* 212)

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This position entails the end of dialogue, and the continuation of retaliatory violence. The infectious logic of censorship remains unchallenged. This logic lures in everyone—Coetzee included. He is painfully aware of a contagious discourse or a paranoid logic of censorship when he notes that he, like anyone else, cannot escape this logic: “As I place it [censorship] under suspicion of hiding its true nature, of being a paranoid act, my criticism itself cannot escape from the paranoid dynamic of judging, blaming, expulsion” (*Doubling* 332). Thus Coetzee makes clear the notion that deception and self-deception remain haunting issues in discussions of apartheid censorship; discerning the truth remains a difficult task, and acknowledging the lures of self-deception takes a constant effort.¹⁵

Within this context it becomes easier to understand why Coetzee has chosen to write in his much criticized, ambiguous literary style during the heated era of apartheid politics. Durrant has stated that “[t]he dialectical movement of Adorno’s thinking captures the agonistic position that Coetzee is forced to adopt. To create art seems blasphemous in the face of excessive suffering but, equally well, art may be the only means of remembering this suffering, of giving ‘suffering its own voice’” (*Postcolonial Narrative* 29). The South African literary scene during the apartheid period was faced with similar issues to the ones confronting Sartre and Adorno during the aftermath of the Second World War—namely, what is the value of literary production in the face of brutal state violence? Many authors, encouraged by literary critics, followed Sartre’s idea of committed art. Yet even if resistance literature was the paradigmatic mode of evaluating literary

¹⁵ Coetzee’s problematization of the act of truth-telling remains in important relation to the particular political context in which he is writing. To remain truthful in such a situation means being open to self-doubt; the attainment of truth is characterized as an inherently incomplete process that remains caught in the spiral movement of doubt.

value, some authors, like Coetzee, embraced a vision more closely aligned with Adorno's notion of autonomous art, which seeks to complicate the relationship between art and society by addressing the problem of establishing one's authority as a writer within the context of persistent state violence. From this perspective, authors who think they can wash their hands of the dilemma are deceived. Autonomous art—towards which Coetzee has taken his own aesthetic project—is not apolitical but rather sees the political struggle between the writer and the state from a more nuanced position. ☉

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