Archival and Affective Displacements: The Ethics of Self-reflexivity, Shame, and Sacrifice in J.M. Coetzee's Life-Writing

Farrant, M.

DOI
10.1080/10436928.2021.1941718

Publication date
2021

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Literature, Interpretation, Theory

LIT: LITERATURE INTERPRETATION THEORY
2021, VOL. 32, NO. 3, 173–191
https://doi.org/10.1080/10436928.2021.1941718

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Archival and Affective Displacements: The Ethics of Self-reflexivity, Shame, and Sacrifice in J.M. Coetzee's Life-Writing

Marc Farrant

> I have been through the letters and diaries. What Coetzee writes there cannot be trusted, not as a factual record—not because he was a liar but because he was a fictioneer. In his letters he is making up a fiction for his correspondents; in his diaries he is doing much the same for his own eyes, or perhaps for posterity. —J.M. Coetzee, *Summertime*, 225.

Introduction

From the vantage point of the archive, J.M. Coetzee's literary oeuvre appears vexed by the question of the self in writing, or of writing as a repository of the self and its ineluctable baggage. Across three fictionalized memoirs, Coetzee's literary self-archiving is constructed through an epistemological dynamic of presenting and concealing that enables a revealing and masking of this self. More fundamentally, however, Coetzee also constructs an ontological dynamic of producing and erasing the self that is often overlooked. As Carrol Clarkson astutely argues in her review of J.C. Kannemeyer's 2012 biography of Coetzee, to speak only of the presenting and concealing of "the 'inner life' of a person, as if it were something hidden from view, accessible to oneself only and not to others, is to run the risk of assuming some stable and inviolable 'essence' of a self that has no public mode of expression" (265). Indeed, Coetzee's notion of "*autre*-biography" captures this sense of the self's constitutive lack of self-sufficiency (*Doubling* 394), including in affective terms (I explore the impurity and contingency of Coetzee's sense of affect below). This essay argues that both the epistemological-archival and ontological-affective displacements of Coetzee's life-writing, specifically those of the third memoir *Summertime* (2009), epitomize his wider use of literary writing to reckon ethically with life as something inherently finite and limited, both in a biological and biographical sense.

Although the first two memoirs, *Boyhood* (1997) and *Youth* (2002), can to a large extent be factually verified with the extant record of Coetzee's biography, *Summertime* poses larger questions about literature as a mode of engaging with personal history. These questions address to what extent literature constitutes a form of truth or truth-seeking. As Clarkson subtly hints, that involves more

Marc Farrant is a lecturer in English Literature at the University of Amsterdam. He has written for numerous publications, including *Samuel Beckett Today/ Aujourd'hui, Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction, Textual Practice, Journal of Modern Literature*, and others.

than merely bifurcating fact from fiction, or simply shuttling back and forth from reality to text. The burden of truth Coetzee places on the task of life-writing, of self-archiving, is fraught not with life as a matter of record or even of representation, but life as a matter of *living*. In the two sections that follow this introduction, I explore how life informs and interferes with the truth status of Coetzee's literary practice by focusing on how *Summertime* fundamentally troubles the idea of knowledge in a digital age. It is not simply that life therefore precludes an archival knowledge, but instead emerges as intrinsic to ways of knowing that literature offers in contradistinction to the digital transformation of our era. As the critic Jan Wilm puts it, the transformations of our era can be described as "a more general drift of the humanities (and culture as a whole) towards positivism, desiring answers, resolutions, explanations" (216). This emphasis on positivism and verifiability is similarly noted by Tom Eyers who laments "the new digital positivisms" that he sees as typified by Franco Moretti's distant reading (48). As Eyers writes, it may be worth considering instead "how the self-enclosure of a text, its formal indifference or even resistance to its context, might be the very source of its power" (44). Through a framework of self-reflexivity, *Summertime* provides such a resistance to propositional knowledge. Yet the archival displacements of Coetzee's text invite a productive response in affective terms that help us refine the difference between truth to fact and truth to life, between the archived life and the lived life. I go on to explore this affective response in terms of the notion of shame and draw upon Raymond Williams to articulate a sense of affect beyond narrative identification and ethical recovery.

In the first section, I explore how the question of reading literature against positivism is integral to Coetzee's very earliest writings. This opens onto a discussion of Coetzee's archival displacements as they reach an apotheosis in the documentary conceit of *Summertime*. In the second section, I explore the link between self-reflexivity and ethics that informs Coetzee's wider life-writing project. I situate the self-reflexivity of Coetzee's metafictional autobiographical practice in relation to the self-sacrificial gesture that informs a number of works, from Michael K's quietist existence in *Life and Times of Michael K* to David Lurie's self-adopted disgrace in *Disgrace*. By appealing to the ambiguity of sacrifice in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, I conclude the section by posing a problem that is seldom commented on in the critical commentaries on Coetzee yet seems intractable for a thorough discussion of *Summertime*: at what point does self-denigration become self-promotion, or self-sacrifice resemble a zealous martyrdom?[1] In the coda, I build upon Hannah Arendt's account of factual truth–of the certainty of factuality despite the contingency of facts–to resolve this tension by turning to the relations among ethics, truth, and time in Coetzee's writings. Ultimately, although Coetzee's archival displacements steer us away from a focus on immanent and verifiable forms of knowing, the affective displacements evidenced by his

life-writing also refuse a transcendental or ethical flight away from the material contexts of both biographical and biological life.

A Phallus Straining Across a Suburb: *Summertime*, Self-Reflexivity, and Embodiment

Coetzee's third fictionalized memoir, *Summertime*, presents a fictionalized self that is constructed through a rich weaving of fictive documents, notes, and interviews (the latter conducted by a biographer named Mr. Vincent). Unlike the real Coetzee, the "John" depicted during the time represented in the narrative (roughly from 1970 to 1975) is single and living with his widower father. The five interview transcripts that comprise the bulk of the work are framed by two sections of notebook entries. These entries indicate an original schema for a third volume in the style of *Boyhood* and *Youth* (which deploy a third-person narrative voice in the present tense). However, the interviews with former colleagues, friends, and lovers, are conducted *postmortem*. This haunting central conceit establishes a problematic freedom. On the one hand, given that the dead cannot respond, Mr. Vincent's interviewees are free to speak as they wish. For instance, Martin–a former colleague–recalls the dead Coetzee's belief in the "creative force of unconscious processes": "You must have noted how rarely he [John Coetzee] discussed the sources of his own creativity. . .in part it. . . suggests a reluctance to probe the sources of his inspiration, as if being too self-aware might cripple him" (213). This view is reinforced earlier in the volume, when Margot–John's favorite cousin–tells a story of an episode stuck in a car together. They pass the time exchanging stories. John begins, "'Given the existence of a personal God,' he says, 'with a white beard quaquaquaqua outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia loves us deeply quaquaquaqua with some exceptions'" (112). This strange irruption of nonsense in their dialogue confounds Margot. John is quoting, or rather misquoting, Lucky's speech in Act One of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Giving the apparent unwitting or unconscious nature of John's speech (he falls asleep shortly after), Margot's tale appears to confirm Martin's assessment. On the other hand, this freedom to recall and speak of the dead (which is even more readily observed in the denigrations of John as a lover by his girlfriends) is contrasted with another freedom. This other freedom is that of the other John who stands, without extension, outside the time of the text. This freedom of the author-god J.M. Coetzee, who has somehow posthumously survived the narrative John's death (since his name is inscribed on the dust jacket of *Summertime*), is the freedom to invent stories about oneself that open onto a vertiginous epistemology: that of the fictioneer. After all, insofar as John is attributed with an apparent lack of self-awareness or self-reflexivity–with a receptivity to unconscious or other processes of inspiration–this second freedom emerges as a performative self-

contradiction. Given that these stories are really Coetzee's, this contradiction emerges as an awareness of one's apparent lack of self-awareness.

The deep structural irony of *Summertime* exacerbates the unconventional self-reflexive and self-deprecatory mode of *Boyhood* and *Youth*. Coetzee's life-writing constantly invites us to ponder, as Dirk Klopper writes, the "generic boundaries" of autobiography (23), the authority of the speaker, the apparent teleology of progress from the "then" of the narrative to the "now" of the time of writing. Most of all, Coetzee's life-writing constantly invites us to consider how truth is generated, what narrative and language have to do with truth, and who ultimately decides between truth and falsity. The theological framework of Lucky's speech is resonant with this wider project. Not only does it recall the Christian and idealist context that informs Coetzee's discussion of confession in the pivotal 1985 essay "Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky" (reprinted in the 1992 *Doubling the Point*), but, I argue, it opens onto life (the life of the self and life itself) as pressingly and ambiguously finite. The final notebook section of *Summertime* amplifies this concern by concluding the implicit narrative trajectory. From being "a child" living at his parent's (14), John is forced into adulthood when his father receives a sudden cancer diagnosis. A binary choice emerges: either abandon his literary ambitions and become a full-time carer or "alternatively, if he will not be a nurse, he must announce to his father: *I cannot face the prospect of ministering to you day and night. I am going to abandon you. Goodbye*. One or the other: there is no third way" (266).

Caught between reality and fiction, between life and death, Coetzee's confessional writings offer precisely such a third way. This third way we might term a literary-thinking. Coetzee explores this mode of thinking in a recent short essay entitled "On Literary Thinking" (2016). Focusing on the rise of digital technologies, Coetzee castigates the reductive sense of thinking associated with the proliferation of "binary logic" ("Literary Thinking" 1151). Contrary to the closed circuit of "YES-NO decisions" that characterize rational thought in a digital age (1152), Coetzee argues it is literature that is assigned with the task–as he writes explicitly in *Doubling the Point*–of uncovering a "higher" sense of truth (17). In the later literary thinking essay Coetzee adds, "if God will not keep our children from the single vision of YES or NO then it is up to the poets to do so" (1152). This disavowal of the binary processes that govern our age is inextricably linked to another biographical encounter with Beckett in Coetzee's 1969 doctoral thesis. From the doctoral thesis onwards, Coetzee continues to flesh out a dynamic thinking that is first identified in the comic anti-rationalism of Beckett's *Watt* (1953) against the "general positivism" of computational approaches to literature (*The English Fiction* 17). In *Youth,* we are told similarly of John's concern that the Atlas computer he is using in the production of poetry might "burn either-or paths in the brain of its users and thus lock them irreversibly into its binary logic"

(160). Against the bad faith propagated by an excessive rationalism, whose claims to certainty, objectivity and truth are more often than not mere recapitulations of their own axiomatic premises, Coetzee's later writings appeal to a state of grace as a "condition in which the truth can be told clearly" (*Doubling* 392). Such a state, however, is not attained in relation to a big transcendental Other. The third way of Coetzee's literary thinking, instead entangles, the difficulty of pinning down the meaning or origin (the *Arche*) of a literary work–the guiding ambition of the doctoral thesis–with a sense of life as displaced between the finite moments that organize a narrative record and the infinite mystery that holds them together.

Inscribed between these two poles, *Summertime* allows us to bear witness to how Coetzee simultaneously utilizes and undermines the conventions of autobiography. In Beckett's text, Lucky's speech ends in ellipsis: "tennis. . . the stones. . .so calm. . .Cunard. . .unfinished" (*Waiting for Godot* 43). It is this sense of the truth of life being unknowable because it is unfinished (even if the life itself, as *Summertime* hyperbolically suggests, is categorically spent), rather than beyond the realm of reason or facts, that Coetzee posits throughout the life-writing trilogy. In other words, as with *Boyhood* and *Youth*, no final word can be found. Written in the third-person present tense, both texts call into question, as Derek Attridge argues, the neatness of identification between the "narrative voice" and the "narrated consciousness" that is conventionally a given of the genre (143). This generic neatness is then usually dramatized by the past tense, which emplots the narrated events into an order of triumphant progress toward the situation of the reflecting self. As Paul Sheehan writes of the genre, "There is, then, an apriority of achievement that steers the autobiographical work towards its denouement–the point at which the self-reflecting subject comes into its own as a self-writing subject, capable of narrating its own development" (453). *Boyhood* and *Youth*, however, deny both a neat sense of progression and the stability of an unrestricted viewpoint through which the truth of the narrative can finally be spoken.

Similarly, by drawing attention to its own archival and textual materiality, such as the transcribed format of the interviews and the repeated intrusion in these sections of the remark "[Silence.]" (32), *Summertime* works against strict biographical verifiability to achieve certain effects. As Wilm writes, by inscribing the archive into his work, Coetzee makes "the archive part of the fiction a priori" (227). This, therefore, disables the validity of conventional archival approaches to the material (empirical, positivist biographical), suggesting an alternative approach that lies at the border of the text's own being as a text, and it is this ontological status of the text–the life *of* writing–that is pertinent to a discussion of what is at stake for us as readers in terms of the work's affective and ethical effects.[2]

In *Summertime,* Mr. Vincent gestures toward these stakes by oscillating between two positions. He tells Martin, "[I]n biography one has to strike

a balance between narrative and opinion. I have no shortage of opinion. . .but one needs more than that to bring a life-story to life" (216). To this end, with Margot, he recasts her prior testimony in terms of a narrative that she believes distorts her original meaning. He pleads in response, "That's not entirely fair. I have not rewritten it, I have simply recast it as narrative. Changing the form should have no effect on the content" (91). On the one hand, then, Coetzee's biographer appeals to narrative form as a way of bringing to life the story of a life, whereas on the other hand, narrative is seen as a neutral medium, independent of the content, to the facts of the case. By making this conflict to the diegetic frame of its own narrative, *Summertime* stages the original terms of the debate surrounding autobiography in *Doubling the Point*. In the final interview, Coetzee declares, "all autobiography is storytelling, all writing is autobiography" (391). Earlier in the volume, Coetzee establishes two poles of this debate by disavowing the simplistic principle of "truth to fact" (the truth-procedure of conventional archive discourse) and posits instead a "higher" sense of truth (17), which is seen as symptomatic of an exterior agency that acts upon the writer.[3] This agency is difficult to pin down, although it would appear to fall under the notion of grace as outlined in the confession essay. In the confession essay, grace enables the confessant to escape the perpetual double thought of the skeptic for whom truth is merely a self-serving fiction and language simply arbitrary. Faced with the potential anarchy of endless self-reinvention, Coetzee advances a "transcendental imperative" of writing (340): "Why should I be interested in the truth about myself when the truth may not be in my interest?. . .I continue to give a Platonic answer: because we are born with the idea of the truth" (395). In the 2015 *The Good Story*, Coetzee reiterates this idealist position against the functional truths of psychotherapy. For a fiction writer, this insistence on the "ethical dimension of truth versus fiction" seems superficially perhaps quite bizarre (*The Good Story* 77).[4] Far from being a theological operation, however, Coetzee's transcendental imperative can be seen instead as embedded in the temporal and embodied present of writing, reading,failed and living. Coetzee achieves an archival and affective displacement of the truth not by circumventing the earthly foundations of life (both biological and biographical, the present here and now of both life and language as material extensions of self) but by making those foundations ultimately incalculable or *unmasterable*.[5]

This unmasterability can be brought into greater focus by exploring the self-deprecating litany of failure and failed relationships represented across the trilogy. *Summertime* is the most shameful of the three in this regard. Despite the quite literal sense of the autobiographical self of the story being entirely effaced from the work, the characters through which we are made privy to John's creative and personal gestation in the 1970s are uniformly candid in their recollections. Julia insists that John was "not built for love" (48). She adds, "In his lovemaking I now think there was an autistic quality" (52). Another

interviewee, Adriana, tells us that he was "without fire, without grace" (172). In an allusion to Heinrich von Kleist's *Über das Marionettentheater*, she later adds, "This man was disembodied" (198); "I think you should call your book: *The Wooden Man*" (200).[6] This self-denigrating rhetoric and the general tone of romantic disillusionment behind it is foreshadowed in Coetzee's youthful writings. In an aphoristic yet similarly playful aside in the archived juvenilia, undated but amongst a series of poems from the late 1950s and early 1960s, Coetzee writes, "and what is my love but a phallus straining across a suburb" (Harry Ransom Center, MS Coetzee Papers, Box 112, Folder 3; hereafter HRC). In *Summertime*, however, this shame-driven self-effacing impulse is combined with terms that situate the autobiographical John in relation to key themes from Coetzee's other fictions. For example, the irony of this self-effacing logic is exacerbated as we are told by Sophie of John's personal philosophy of grace: "He saw Africa through a romantic haze. He thought of Africans as embodied, in a way that had been lost long ago in Europe. . . . He had a whole philosophy of the body, of music and dance" (231). For discerning Coetzee readers, this appears to both dissociate the author from the anti-idealism of his forebear, Beckett, and also align him with his character, Elizabeth Costello, a celebrated Australian novelist and authorial avatar who appears across numerous works (most notably the 2003 novel *Elizabeth Costello*). However, rather than conflate the views of Coetzee's characters with the works themselves, we must attend to the literary thinking that stages and packages these views. Accordingly, Sophie's characterization of John's philosophy in *Summertime* is framed by the same double-bind that constitutes Martin's insight into John's apparent lack of self-awareness. This double-bind, effected at the diegetic level of story-telling, renders John's purported romantic belief in embodiment deeply ironic. Not only is John, the character, literally disembodied (as dead), the cacophony of voices claiming to speak on his behalf render any sense of romantic self-sufficiency as entirely hollowed out.

This incongruous relation between form and content not only produces the vertiginous epistemology of the fictioneer but, I argue, relates irony to the affective, rather than purely cognitive, dimension of reading. This sense of irony is apparent in Coetzee's archival notes to a 1998 course he taught on autobiography at the University of Chicago. Discussing James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Coetzee writes, "there is a distance between the 'mature' presence behind the book and this speaking self, and that distance manifests itself as what we call irony. An ability to read that irony competently becomes the main qualification for the reader of the *Portrait*" (HRC MS Coetzee Papers, Box 114, Folder 11). In Coetzee's *Summertime* this distance between self and other–a relation played upon by Coetzee's notion of *autre*-biography–substantiates an irony that appeals to the reader in terms of embedded life. After all, if all writing is autobiographical, then no matter how fantastical the fiction, there must always be a sense of situatedness in the here

and now that makes life possible in both a narrative and biological sense. Instead of truth to fact, therefore, Coetzee's memorial fictions strive to create a sense of *truth to life* that is fundamentally tied to the displacements put to work through the work of literature.[7] As Stephen Mulhall writes on the contingency of literary ways of knowing, "If human embodiment exceeds the grasp and the (un)certainty of all human sense-making systems, it must exceed that of literature; how, then, can literature properly represent this excess, if not by enacting it–by exceeding its own limits?" (*Wounded Animal* 202). It is through this writing of the limit–not a displaced writing but a writing *of* displacement (and irony is of course nothing other than a displacement of meaning)–that Coetzee opens onto affective approaches that are hinted at in the writings on shame and confession, explored below. This limit writing, or *finite* writing, is hence intrinsically linked to the finitude of embodied life.

The Ethics of Shame and Sacrifice

It is through their depiction of shame that Coetzee's trilogy of fictionalized memoirs reveal their "essential truth" to be neither a matter of historical nor factual record (*Doubling* 252). Through the operation of shame Coetzee undermines *both* the idea that the self is merely a narrative construction but also the contrasting idea that there exists a pre-linguistic bodily core outside of narrative. This is because shame emerges not through narrative understood in terms of representation but, as Andrew Gibson delineates, in terms of "inauguration" (87). In other words, these works disclose the embodied nature of meaning-making prior to any specific meaning. For instance, by withholding the moments of penitence and absolution, as retrospective self-reflection or regret, Coetzee's situated present-tense narrative voice in the memoirs fails to claim possession of the specific truth of the narrated consciousness yet nonetheless grounds the possibility of truth through its very temporal-spatial embeddedness as narrative. The concept of shame thus explicates more generally how Coetzee's works are oriented toward a higher truth, beyond mere truth to fact, without appealing to a transcendental guarantor outside of language and time. As I argue in reference to Raymond William's concept of structures of feeling, shame typifies Coetzee's handling of affect not as a way for us to escape the narrative text (to some plenitude of the body or an ethics of pure otherness) but rather to transform our relation to it.

In Coetzee's inaugural lecture at the University of Cape Town, "Truth in Autobiography," shame is an essential component in the "economy of confession" that plays out in Rousseau's *Confessions*: "everything shameful is valuable: every secret or shameful appetite is confessable currency" (3). In the slightly later confession essay, Coetzee expands on the concept of shame by discussing Saint Augustine's childish theft of some pears from a neighbor's

garden. It is not the transgression itself that is important in Augustine's account, but rather the fact that he and his fellow sinners were "seeking nothing from the shameful deed but the shame itself" (qtd. in *Doubling* 251). Augustine's shame is "abysmal" (*Doubling* 251), Coetzee goes on to argue, since this acknowledgment itself becomes shameful. Thus, shame comes to demarcate the unspeakable core or origin of the self and of confession. A confession that is worthy of the name involves confessing that which is most shameful about oneself. It is this shameful core of the self, that which is most difficult to access, that lends the confession authority. Discussing Tolstoy's *The Kreutzer Sonata*, Coetzee argues that "whatever authority a confession bears in a secular context derives from the status of the confessant as a hero of the labyrinth willing to confront the worst within himself" (*Doubling* 263). The experience of shame, unlike repentance, evades re-inscription in the circle of self-deception because, as with Augustine's example, it precedes the self-deceiving chain that it engenders. As such, shame becomes a physical-affective response that ultimately resists formal articulation.[8] We might thus think of shame in the same way that grace comes to demarcate David Lurie's inarticulable physical response to his situation in the second half of *Disgrace*.[9] In both instances, this physical-affective nexus is also tied to a sense of material finitude. By appealing neither to the self-evasion that is the transcendental solution to confession (namely God), nor to self-deception of the abysmal logic of secular representation, Coetzee's account of shame illuminates how his own life-writings neither escape history entirely nor remain enslaved to the record of facts and events that make up a life.

In *Boyhood,* a series of shameful incidents are recounted, beginning with the opening chapter, which ends with an account of John's betrayal of his mother by belittling her attempts at cycling: "That evening he joins in with his father's jeering. He is well aware of what a betrayal this is. Now his mother is all alone" (3). Regardless of the present tense, the structure of self-awareness is here, as elsewhere, presented not merely as a product of knowing retrospection on behalf of the confessant-autobiographer. As with Augustine, the shame of the betrayal is immediate and felt in the act and is then doubled and virtually re-doubled by the shame of not acting upon the initial impression. Later we are told how John laments his mother's intense love for him: "He wishes she did not love him so much. She loves him absolutely, therefore he must love her absolutely: that is the logic she compels upon him" (47). This logic is further extended near the end: "Whose fault is it? He blames her, he is cross with her, but he is ashamed of his ingratitude too. *Love*: this is what love really is, this cage in which he rushes back and forth, back and forth, like a poor bewildered baboon. . .His heart is old, it is dark and hard, a heart of stone. That is his contemptible secret" (122–3). The shame of ingratitude is, of course, also the shame of being ashamed of his mother's love.

These intense episodes, if read as confession rather than fiction, become, as Attridge argues, markers of their "power as memory, as lasting imprint[s] on the same psyche that is producing the words we read" (151). Yet the fictional framework paradoxically heightens the ethical ambiguity of the narrative by disturbing our impression of the event's impact on the writing psyche. A visceral episode, where John mutilates his brother's hand, stages this process yet further. During a trip to a farm that supplies fruit to their father's company, Standard Canners, John and his brother come upon a mealie-grinding machine. John persuades his brother to put his hand down the funnel while he turns the handle:

> For an instant, before he stopped, he could actually feel the fine bones of his brother's fingers yield as the cogs crushed them. His brother stood with his hand trapped in the machine, ashen with pain, a puzzled, inquiring look on his face. Their hosts rushed them to hospital, where a doctor amputated the middle finger of his brother's left hand . . . He has never apologized to his brother, nor has he even been reproached with what he did. Nevertheless, the memory lies like a weight upon him, the memory of the soft resistance of flesh and bone, and then the grinding. (119)

This gruesome account, told as a memory, heightens the sense of self-truth that is dramatized throughout by refusing to yield an explanation or justification. That this passage is staged as a memory, in the past tense, further provokes our expectation of a penitent and contrite reflection. The subversion of generic convention is then further undone by the reflective moment which re-inscribes the horror by making the physical and sensory experience the sole memory of the event. By withholding an explanation for the heinous act, the truth of the episode emerges as that which cannot be possessed and is therefore not subject to either knowledge or deceit. Such a presentation of the event avoids the double-thought inherent to confession, in which the desire to confess is always contaminated by the shameful desire to exculpate or excuse. The sheer fact of the suffering body, in this instance, ends the cycle of doubt and deceit, but, by doing so, it also effaces the possibility of self-responsibility and so places the onus of judgment on the reader.

In *Youth*, the failure of self-responsibility manifests even more intensely as a central theme, especially in relation to John's romantic engagements. John's dismissive and unkind treatment to Marianne, the friend of his cousin, after taking her virginity in a bloody sexual encounter, is presented as profoundly ambiguous to the mind of the troubled youth: "There remains the question of what to make of the episode, how to fit it into the story of his life that he tells himself" (130). Despite the unremitting portrayal of John's emotional and empathetic failures, there is a revelry evident in this process of shame and self-degradation (a revelry that recalls the playful tone of the juvenilia). Such a revelry marks the dark humor and irony of the three memoirs and their logic of self-sacrifice. In this process of writing the worst in oneself there is

a guilty pleasure akin to what Coetzee discovers in Rousseau and Augustine. The greater the wretchedness the greater the glory of the confession. The guilty pleasure of self-laceration thus marks the other side of the same coin as overt vanity; both are potentially shameful and trap the self in the endless exorcism of writing and confession.

This insight is pivotal to another autobiography-cum-confession, Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* (1908). Indeed, this same logic of self-sacrifice is integral to Nietzsche's sense of personal freedom as it is framed in terms of physical and affective suffering. Nietzsche writes of illness, "for one who is typically healthy being sick can even be an energetic *stimulant* to life, to more life" (40). In an echo of John as a constrained or unfree Wooden man, Nietzsche continues, "In that a human being who has turned out well does our senses good: that he is carved out of wood at once hard, delicate and sweet-smelling. . . . [W]hat does not kill him makes him stronger" (40–41). The cult of heroism that has dogged Nietzsche's reception in the twentieth century is indicative of the potential pitfalls of this logic of self-sacrifice. Far from sacrificing oneself in the name of opening onto the possibility of ethical intersubjectivity, Coetzee's tactic of self-denigration can instead be linked to a vain-glorious martyrdom.

The slipperiness of the gesture of self-sacrifice has profound consequences for a reading of the ethics of Coetzee's works, both within and beyond the life-writing trilogy. As the critic Dominick LaCapra argues of the sacrificial gestures in *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello*, far from guaranteeing an opening to the other, these gestures involve a totalization of the position of the other in the name of the self. Contrary to Attridge's ethical reading of Coetzee, LaCapra asserts that instead of provoking an ethical comportment toward others, the purported singularity of Coetzee's writings cannot be extricated from a religious doubling that marks the ethical as "supra-ethical" (86). For LaCapra, this reading makes Coetzee's openness to otherness akin to "traumatic event" that is often characterized by commentators in similar terms (85), that is, as resistant to direct representation and "as a modality of sublime experience if not of a state of grace" (85). Writing similarly on the problem of ethical singularity in her essay "Truth and Politics" (1967), the philosopher Hannah Arendt notes, "The disastrous consequences for any community that began in all earnest to follow ethical precepts derived from man in the singular–be they Socratic or Platonic or Christian–have been frequently pointed out" (559). This sense of singularity (although not of man) underlies Elizabeth Costello's doctrine of the "sympathetic imagination" (*Elizabeth Costello* 80); an ethics and esthetics concerned with imaginatively inhabiting non-human subject positions. Costello's doctrine is not only embodied within but also often conflated with Coetzee's works themselves.

By focusing on the concept of shame, however, another story emerges. The fictionalized memoirs present the possibility of envisaging the ethico-political

effects of Coetzee's writing not in terms of singularity or transcendental duty but instead in terms of a truth that is irrepressible *because* finite and contingent: because it is subject to the democratic force that Arendt terms "opinion" (549), to the vagaries of a process of othering, of constant change, rather than to the certainty of an otherness beyond change. Indeed, the difficulty of sympathetically inhabiting another being is ironically problematized by *Summertime* itself (ironic given that Coetzee, speaking through his characters, is in fact not talking about another but himself), as Martin tells Mr. Vincent, "Who can say what goes on in people's inner lives?" (216).

This alternative sense of truth as neither knowable nor singular and beyond comprehension might leave the specific ethics of Coetzee's writings open to contestation, but for Arendt, what underscores the importance of truth in politics (and as that which safeguards democracy) is not merely that we heed factual truths but we heed the truth of factuality itself, "this stubborn thereness, whose inherent contingency defies all attempts at conclusive explanation" (569). Turning again to Nietzsche we can explicate how this "stubborn thereness" informs Coetzee's life-writing. While apparently asserting the singularity of the self, Nietzsche subverts the martyr-logic of the hero through an extreme immodesty. Chapter titles such as "Why I Write Such Good Books" work to create a greater resistance on behalf of the reader who is less inclined to empathize with the autobiographical subject. Nietzsche's purpose is to instill the will to power in his own readers as independently minded critical thinkers (as he writes in the Foreword, "One repays a teacher badly if one remains only a pupil" [36]). Coetzee's works similarly build a resistance (both psychic and somatic) into the reading experience, and by doing so, the perilous freedom of interpretation is passed on to us. The "stubborn thereness" that marks the truth of Coetzee's *autre*-biographical economy of self and other is thus inherently temporal, just as an archival displacement distorts and defers the sovereignty of factual truth, an affective displacement marks how the truth of the self depends constitutively on another, thereby indefinitely postponing any ultimate exoneration or exculpation. We are left ineluctably embedded in the present. Shame demarcates this co-implication of self and other by staging the other as a part of oneself; the other within oneself that one finds abject.

That self and other are bound together does not thus equate to ethics itself but is merely the condition of possibility for ethics. After all, a presumed relation between self and other is also the condition of possibility for violence or sacrifice. Rather, the co-implication of self and other instead marks how the ethical must be continually negotiated and is therefore embedded in the finite present of temporal life. The works stage this process by making such a finitude ineluctable to our competency as readers; to our ability to sense how literary works, to recall Raymond Williams, inculcate "structures of feeling" that precede codified action (128). The affective pertinency of William's concept to Coetzee's works is that such structures are not merely

private or pre-linguistic (as Deleuzean affect theorists, such as Brian Massumi, argue) but social in the sense of being irreducible to the anarchy of endless private play or self-invention yet neither formalized as objects of proper or propositional knowledge. As Mitchum Huehls argues, "the crucial feature of structures of feeling, then, is not the presence of feelings, but the presence of the present and our compromised perspective on it" (420). Contrary to the ethical singularity issued from the body in opposition to reason, the affective matrix of Coetzee's works–as brought to focus through the life-writing–come closer to life by leaving the very question of what it means to be alive open, fundamentally ambiguous. As Coetzee writes to his students in his 1998 course syllabus, "An autobiography, by definition, does not have an end" (HRC MS Coetzee Papers, Box 114, Folder 11).

Coetzee's writings of displacement both rely upon and subvert the conventional pact between author and reader that underpins the genre of autobiography. As Linda Anderson writes, the "autobiographical pact" implies that the author "is the person he says he is and that the author and the protagonist are the same" (3). To both rely upon and challenge this pact simultaneously is to suggest that fiction and reality are more entangled than a positivist way of knowing would allow. As Wilm elucidates, conventional archival approaches, such as genetic criticism, proceed according to a binary model of surface and depth, whereby the published oeuvre is taken to be the "mere surface" to the more "authoritative depth" of the archive (219). This approach risks installing a model of authorial intention, as Nicola Evans warns, since "genetic criticism can also be construed as resurrecting the authority of the author through its focus on the author's intentions and strategies as these are revealed in the working notes" (220). Given that Coetzee's life-writing ironically preempts such an approach, an alternative non-binary use of the archive is implicitly suggested. As Wilm argues, to move beyond positivist "hierarchization" means to bear witness to the archive as both "rubbish and humus" (222), as both prior ground and new source, and as therefore neither inferior nor superior to the published work. By extension, the published work is not simply a mere surface but rather parallel to the *work* of the archive, which Wilm terms an "*autre*-oeuvre" (225). Such a simultaneous strategy is indeed suggested by the blurring of genres that marks Coetzee's fictionalized memoirs. Yet Coetzee's archival displacements speak to the literary thinking of the wider oeuvre insofar as they signal how the otherness of temporal and affective life is not an alternative truth but rather marks the contingency of any attempt to neatly separate truth and fiction, which is to say, any attempt to settle the question of life.

Coda: The Time of Life

Far from being opposed to factuality or materiality, then, Coetzee's literary thinking functions by staging the power of language to illicit emotions or speak the truth, yet without shutting down the possibilities for further readings, without shutting down the irrepressible truth of the "inherent contingency" that lies behind all truth-claims. Indeed, the importance of shame to the confessional mode of autobiography is thematized explicitly in relation to language in general, notably in the biblical context of the Fall. In Coetzee's original outline of Augustine's confession, shame indicates an awareness of self and, as such, a mediation of the self to itself. This mediation prevents total self-knowledge; the speaking self and the narrated self are separated by language, which is both one's own but also collective, hence that of another. This circuitous logic–associated specifically with secular confession but constitutive of language and self-expression in general–is related precisely to the *human* mode of being as self-conscious and fallen, as inherently finite and thereby divided.

This triangulation of shame, self-consciousness, and language is thematized in the memoirs. John enjoys the Adamic-like language on the Voëlfontein farm, which constitutes a "slapdash mixture of English and Afrikaans that is their common tongue when they get together" (*Boyhood* 81). With his cousin Agnes, whom John plays with on the farm, we are told of an intense ease and pleasure in their conversation: "As he spoke he forgot what language he was speaking: thoughts simply turned to words within him, transparent words" (94). This is shortly before the narrative voice is pierced by the first-person exclamation: "*I belong on the farm*" (95). This overwhelming bond with the farm is also what permits, ever so briefly, an instant of wholeness that escapes the logic of shame and is staged by the momentary fusion of voices. *Summertime* also makes explicit the link between the problem of self-consciousness and self-expression. In an archival note dated 18 March 2005 Coetzee writes, "He was born into English, it was 'his,' though without a thought. Then gradually in adulthood he lost that happy unawareness. More and more the language becomes a foreign body which he has to enter. He comes, in his mind, a person without a language, a disembodied spirit" (HRC, MS Coetzee Papers, Box 46, Folder 1). In the published work, John tells Margot how he has remained sorry for a killing of the locust on the farm when they were children and how he has sought forgiveness: "*Kaggen*, I say, forgive me," to which she replies, confused, "*Kaggen*?"; "*Kaggen*. The name of mantis, the mantis god. But the locust will understand. In the afterworld there are no language problems. It's like Eden all over again" (96).

Of course, readers of Coetzee's most recent Jesus fictions will know that language problems very much continue to exist in the afterworld. Directly following *Summertime*, these works deploy a similar *postmortem* narrative

situation and through the young David's education (who may or may not be the titular Jesus figure) thematize a notion of grace that is poised between, on the one hand, an idealist immediacy of communication (which happens, like Kleist's marionette, through dance) and, on the other, the bathos of mere exchange, of the circulation of signs and symbols forever detached from that to which they refer. Ultimately, John's insight that Margot fails to understand and which is not made explicit in *Summertime*, is that absolute self-sufficiency (Edenic life), in fact, equates to death (the non-life of the afterlife which constitutes the uncanny narrative world of the Jesus fictions). After all, the point at which the self is not divided by time and subject to mediation or change is, of course, the same as death.

This division of the self from itself is also what opens the self to the other, indeed, what necessitates the self's co-implication with others. With regard to the "transcendental imperative" of writing, Coetzee's concern with the question of "the ethical dimension of truth versus fiction" thus situates the confessional or life-writing nexus at the heart of the oeuvre itself. Instead of a Platonic or Christian ideal, Coetzee's imperative emerges not as a moment outside of time but rather as an *infinitizing* of time in the form of what Coetzee terms the "bad infinity" of confession (*Doubling* 290) . The problem of ending the life-story, which is also the problem of judging and deciding upon the truth of that life-story, is forever displaced.

The infinite finitude of life-writing thus ultimately mirrors the infinite finitude of life itself. This is staged at the end of *Boyhood*, where the truth of the self and the truth of the confessional genre materialize simultaneously:

> Sometimes the gloom lifts. The sky. . .opens a slit, and for an interval he can see the world as it really is. He seems himself in his white shirt with rolled-up sleeves and the grey short trousers that he is on the point of outgrowing: not a child. . .yet still as stupid and self-enclosed as a child. childish; dumb; ignorant; retarded. In a moment like this has can see his father and mother too, from above, without anger: not as two grey and formless weights seating themselves on his shoulders, plotting his misery day and night, but as a man and a woman living dull and trouble-filled lives of their own. They sky opens, he sees the world as it is, then the sky closes and his is himself again, living the only story he will admit, the story of himself. (160-161)

The truth of the self emerges only at the point where other selves are also deemed to be autobiographically capable. That is, John's epiphanic but fleeting vision of himself and the world "as it really is" depends upon the irruption into his self-narrative of others, his parents. John's true vision of himself not only depends on others, it is constituted by the capacity for others to be similarly autobiographically capable beings. A similar insight occurs in a notebook entry from 17th May 1995. Coetzee writes, "Looking at his father asleep, he marvels at this man, who all his life has been no more than a dummy to be resisted and hated, should have a life all of his own. For a moment he is open to this life, [and] [t]he task (and the challenge) of being a writer, of writing these lives" (HRC, MS Coetzee

Papers, Box 35 Folder 2). In other words, for the life of the self to attain a level of truth it must be constitutively divided, open to others and therefore to change.

As Martin Hägglund writes of another contemporary series of fictionalized memoirs, Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle*, "[s]uch finitude does not devalue [a] life, but is an essential part of why it can matter and take on significance, against the backdrop of its possible dissolution" ("Knausgaard's Secular Confession"). The "secular faith" that Hägglund reads in Knausgaard's privileged sense of embodied time denies the totalitarian desire for purity that is echoed in the title of the multi-volume work. Such a desire doubles the religious pursuit of immortality yet is seen to work against precisely that which it seeks to save; by statically fixing life itself, dominating space in the form of the body, this purity negates or *sacrifices* the very condition for caring about life in the first place. As Hägglund elucidates, "without the recognition of finitude the question of responsibility and care would not even take hold of us" ("Knausgaard's Secular Confession"). Such a sacrifice is thus the gateway to the greater sacrificial logic of any totalitarian program. In contrast, it is this sense of infinite responsibility, not to a transcendental other or obligation but in the face of the stubborn thereness that makes contingency the only sure-fire certainty in this life, that structures the ethical dimension of truth that Coetzee prioritizes in his writings, both critical and creative. This responsibility, which in the face of the incalculable possibilities of finite life must always wrestle with becoming an irresponsibility, constitutes a position that is also a non-position, a position that ceaselessly, as Coetzee writes, "glances back skeptically at its premises" (*Doubling* 394). This literary thinking of the fictioneer constitutes what the narrator of *Youth* calls "a knowledge to humble to know it is knowledge" (139). Such a thinking thus involves bearing witness to literature as an archive of the embodied self, as a corpus that is more than a static pillar of truth to fact but a dynamic embodiment of the truth to life that animates Coetzee's works.

Notes

1. Previous commentary has arguably taken its lead from Derek Attridge's ethical approach as set out in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (2004), which I address in this essay. However, recent scholars have tended to downplay the significance of the autobiographical works, and despite the renewed interest in life-writing and confession (derived in part from the release of J.C. Kannemeyer's 2012 biography of Coetzee), recent studies such as Patrick Hayes' *J. M. Coetzee and the Novel: Writing and Politics after Beckett* (2010) and Jarad Zimbler's *J. M. Coetzee and the Politics of Style* (2014) have ignored Coetzee's life writing in favor of the novels.
2. I take the expression "life of writing" from David Attwell's 2015 *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing.*
3. The aversion to truth to fact is echoed in JC's opinions in *Diary of a Bad Year*. Writing of Ezra Pound's journeying in the South of France in pursuit of troubadour poetry, JC defines the problem thus: "We know what the troubadours must have seen [generic birds and flowers], but we do not know what they saw" (141). In other words, the raw factual data does not add up to the truth of the literary work.

4. In *Diary of a Bad Year*, the authorial avatar, JC, reiterates a similar concern with a loss of truth: "In the present 'culture,' few care to distinguish–indeed, few are capable of distinguishing–between sincerity and the performance of sincerity" (109).
5. The notion of mastery is a key one in Coetzee's writing and his thinking of what it means to be a writer. The fictionalized Dostoevsky in *The Master of Petersburg* is described as a "*Master of life*" thanks to his professional ability to conjure figures in writing (141). Such an ability comes at a cost, however, the cost of the living presence of the very thing one wishes to conjure (for Dostoevsky, this is his dead stepson, Pavel). Hence mastery of life becomes equivalent to a mastery of death. Mastery is similarly disparaged in an e-mail to Kurtz about self-transcendence and confession where Coetzee writes, "What I don't know how to describe is the relation between whatever entity it is that does the work of self-construction and the self/selves it constructs. My guess is that any model that posits a master-self of quite another order from the servant selves it constructs is likely to be false" ("Nevertheless, My Sympathies Are With The Karamazovs" 58).
6. Julia in an earlier section similarly notes how his hypertrophied mental capacities resulted in a loss of "his animal self": "He was *Homo sapiens*, or even *Homo sapiens sapiens*" (*Summertime* 58).
7. A similar notion of truth to life is broached in *Summertime* by Julia in her narrative account to Mr. Vincent: "What I am telling you may not be true to the letter, but it is true to the spirit, be assured of that" (32).
8. As Attridge argues, "Shame. . .is as much a physical response–a coloring on the cheeks, an increase in body temperature, a tightening of the stomach muscles–as an emotional one" (147). This resistance to formal articulation and conceptual representation, which ultimately underscores rather than overcomes the situated materiality of the subject, is echoed in Timothy Bewes' account of shame in *The Event of Postcolonial Shame*: "Whereas responsibility or guilt would presuppose an ontology of the subject, shame is an experience of the subject's dissolution, of the fundamental complicity that, in the modern world, constitutes living" (28).
9. Lurie's supposed redemption in *Disgrace* is often linked to his inarticulable stubbornness in the face of the futility of his act of care for the dead dogs at Bev Shaw's clinic. Yet a careful reading of the novel, attuned to Coetzee's logic of shame, suggests this attitude is nothing but an ironic extension of his earlier refusal to account for himself to the disciplinary committee. After the meeting, his ex-wife tells him, "It isn't heroic to be unbending" (66). Accordingly, the novel's ethical trajectory is inextricable from the ironic form of its own final words, Lurie's negative affirmation: "Yes, I am giving him up" (220).

Acknowledgments

My thanks to J. M. Coetzee and the Harry Ransom Center, the University of Texas at Austin, for permission to cite from the J. M. Coetzee Papers.

ORCID

Marc Farrant http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6482-826X

Works Cited

Anderson, Linda. *Autobiography*. Routledge, 2001.

Arendt, Hannah. "Truth and Politics." *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, edited by Peter Baehr, Penguin, 2003, pp. 545–74.

Attridge, Derek. *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*. U of Chicago P, 2004.

Attwell, David. *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face to Face with Time*. Oxford UP, 2015.

Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot. The Complete Dramatic Works*. Faber & Faber, 2006, pp. 7–88.

Bewes, Timothy. *The Event of Postcolonial Shame*. Princeton UP, 2010.

Clarkson, Carrol. "J. M. Coetzee: 'N Geskryfde Lewe./J.M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing." *Life Writing*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2014, pp. 263–70. doi:10.1080/14484528.2014.878067.

Coetzee, J.M. *The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett: An Essay in Stylistic Analysis*. 1969. U of Texas at Austin, Doctoral Thesis.

———. "Truth in Autobiography." Inaugural Lecture, University of Capetown 3 October 1984. *New Series*, Vol. 94, U of Cape Town Printing Department, 1985, pp. 1–6.

———. *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*. Harvard UP, 1992.

———. *Boyhood*. Vintage, 1998.

———. *Disgrace*. Vintage, 2000 [1999].

———. *Youth*. Vintage, 2002.

———. *Elizabeth Costello*. Vintage, 2004.

———. *The Master of Petersburg*. Vintage, 2004 [1994].

———. *Diary of a Bad Year*. Harvill Secker, 2007.

———. *Summertime*. Harvill Secker, 2009.

———. "Notes, 2002-2006." *J.M. Coetzee Papers*. Box 46, Folder 1, Harry Ransom Center.

———. "Poetry and Other Writings, 1957-1961." *J.M. Coetzee Papers*. Box 112, Folder 3, Harry Ransom Center.

———. "Seminars Taught Abroad, 1984-2002." *J.M. Coetzee Papers*. Box 114, Folder 11, Harry Ransom Center.

Coetzee, J.M., and Arabella Kurtz. "Nevertheless, My Sympathies Are With The Karamazovs: An Email Correspondence, May – December 2008." *Salmagundi*, vol. 166/167, 2010, pp. 39–72.

———. *The Good Story: Exchanges on Truth, Fiction and Psychotherapy*. Harvill Secker, 2015.

Evans, Nicola. "Inside the Writer's Room, the Artist's Studio and *Flaubert's Parrot*." *Literary Careers in the Modern Era*, edited by Guy Davidson and Nicola Evans, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp. 167–83.

Eyers, Tom. *Speculative Formalism: Literature, Theory, and the Critical Present*. Northwestern UP, 2017.

Gibson, Andrew. *Towards a Postmodern Theory of Narrative*. Edinburgh UP, 1996.

Hägglund, Martin. "Knausgaard's Secular Confession." *Boundary 2*, vol. 23, August. 2017, https://www.boundary2.org/2017/08/martin-hagglund-knausgaards-secular-confession-1a/?fbclid=IwAR0GAhV6JdP-7lZ-RhFqSWXP16CnyL86-22mMcwc6pxdiF1loh4HziB65NA .

Hayes, Patrick. *J.M. Coetzee and the Novel: Writing and Politics after Beckett*. Oxford UP, 2010.

Huehls, Mitchum. "Structures of Feeling: Or, How to Do Things (Or Not) with Books." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 51, no. 2, 2010, pp. 419–28. doi:10.1353/cli.2010.0012.

Kannemeyer, J.C. *J.M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing*. Translated by Michiel Heyns, Scribe Publications, 2012.

Kleist, Heinrich von. *Selected Writings*. Edited & Translated by David Constantine, Hackett Publishing Company Inc, 1997.

Klopper, Dirk. "Critical Fictions in J.M. Coetzee's *Boyhood* and *Youth*." *Scrutiny2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2006, pp. 22–31. doi:10.1080/18125441.2006.9684199.

Knausgaard, Karl Ove. *My Struggle*. Translated by Don Bartlett & Martin Aitken, Vols. 1-6, Penguin Random House, 2018.

LaCapra, Dominick. *History, Literature, Critical Theory*. Cornell UP, 2013.

Massumi, Brian. *Parables of the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Duke UP, 2002.

Mulhall, Stephen. *The Wounded Animal: J.M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy*. Princeton UP, 2009.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*. Translated by R.J. Hollingdale, Penguin, 1983.

Sheehan, Paul. "Coetzee & Co: Failure, Lies and Autobiography." *Textual Practice*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2016, pp. 451–68. doi:10.1080/0950236X.2016.1158934.

Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford UP, 1977.

Wilm, Jan. "The J.M. Coetzee Archive and the Archive of J.M. Coetzee." *Beyond the Ancient Quarrel: Literature, Philosophy, and J.M. Coetzee*, edited by Patrick Hayes and Jan Wilm, Oxford UP, 2017, pp. 215–31.

Zimbler, Jarad. *J.M. Coetzee and the Politics of Style*. Cambridge UP, 2014.