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J. M. Coetzee and the Archive

Fiction, Theory, and Autobiography

Edited by

Marc Farrant, Kai Easton and Hermann Wittenberg

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‘The aura of truth’: Coetzee’s archive, realism and the problem of literary authority

Marc Farrant

We possess *art* lest we *perish of the truth*.

Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (1968: 435)

1. Introduction

The problem of literary authority, posed in my title, arises as a question of origin: from where and whence does authority spring? The archive intercedes at this juncture; an imposing concept that relates authority to origin through its morphology. The Greek *arché*, meaning origin or source, denotes in the notion of the archive the origin or fount of an author’s authority. In German the notion *Ursprung* captures both this notion of the origin as source and as a primal leap, a springing forth. The music of Johann Sebastian Bach often features in J. M. Coetzee’s works as the epitome of such an authority, both in itself and as an exemplar of the process of artistic inspiration or springing-forth (‘Bach’ in German means stream or spring).¹ For Elizabeth Curren, in *Age of Iron*, the music of Bach generates a form of ‘Pure spirit’ (2010: 24); it is a conduit to a divine realm. The music’s capacity for transcendence is mirrored by its arriving *ex nihilo*, as if from nowhere. For Coetzee’s orthonym J. C., in *Diary of a Bad Year*, the music of Bach is a surprise gift, a moment of grace: ‘It comes as a gift, unearned, unmerited, for free’ (2007: 221). For J. C., authority is not simply a question of the effects of the works but from where and how those effects spring forth. As both cause and effect, Bach’s authority is related to a blurring or indecipherability between these modes that is demarcated in Coetzee’s works by the concept, or gift, of grace. Grace, as a self-reflexive concept, troubles the sense of an artwork’s authority as arising from a linear causality, including, as we shall see, Coetzee’s own works. Grace marks an authority, namely the truth-telling capacity of the work, but only insofar as this authority cannot be excavated from a single point or origin.² As Coetzee writes of Bach in ‘What is a Classic?’: ‘In Bach nothing is obscure, no single step is so miraculous as to surpass imitation. Yet when the chain of sounds is realised in time, the building

process ceases at a certain moment to be the mere linking of units. ... Bach thinks in music. Music thinks itself in Bach' (2002b: 10).

What happens, then, when the authority attributed to the body of work signed 'J. M. Coetzee' – an authority now enshrined at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas – is founded upon a disavowal of the possibility of authority; of unitary or singular foundations or sources of authority, literary and otherwise? What happens to the authority of those critical discourses – historical, empirical, genetic or biographical – that attribute this authority to the body of work – the archive – signed J. M. Coetzee? In this chapter I investigate the interactions between the author and the works so as to conceptualize the way in which Coetzee's writing both leads us towards the archive, to a site of origin (textual and material), and draws us away, leaving open the space of interpretation and the possibility of a *critical* reading.

In Section 2 below, I explore how Coetzee's earliest writings on Beckett, including the 1969 doctoral thesis 'The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett: An Essay in Stylistic Analysis', establish a thought of literature as irreducible to static or summative or, indeed, authoritative modalities of truth. Importantly, this understanding of literature will pose it as irreducible to either an empirical or rational approach to knowledge. This thought of literature will, over the decades, yield a *literary thinking* (a term Coetzee deploys in a 2016 essay) whose truth seems to correspond to the religious notion of grace, to an order of truth beyond verifiability or falsifiability. Indeed, Coetzee can thus be seen to inherit Beckett's late modernist interest in religion and belief as demarcating a form of knowing that exceeds truth to fact.

In Section 3 I explore how Coetzee's dynamic account of the literary work, far from dissolving writerly authority to the point of oblivion, in fact necessitates the presence of a writerly figure. Such a figure or agency becomes the focus of the self-reflexive and metafictional elements of the later fictions. The gestating affective-temporal logic of creativity that emerges in Coetzee's thesis is thematized in the second of the fictionalized memoirs, *Youth*, and specifically in relation to the author's coming into being as an author, as a writer of fictions. Through a brief discussion of the writings of Walter Benjamin, I explore how the young John's struggle with creating a realistic portrait in his writing, a struggle to attain what is termed 'the aura of truth' (2002a: 138), encapsulates how the difficulty of reducing the work of literature to either an empirical or rational system nonetheless attests to a modality of truth that refuses romantic or religious mystification and remains historically and ethically embedded.

In Section 4 I explore how the self-reflexivity of Coetzee's works compounds a critique of realism in the name of what might be considered a truer reality. The notion and trope of realism occurs across the record of Coetzee's teaching career, and the numerous materials housed in Coetzee's archive bear witness to the pivotal role of realism with regard to the way Coetzee conceives of the relation between literature and philosophy. I then turn to Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus* to illustrate how a fundamental tension between the notions of reality and truth dissimulates a literary thinking that ties the authority of grace to the irony of a *critically* motivated cynicism. Finally, I return to how the archive, both as source and framework, helps to elucidate the fundamental truths of Coetzee's writing.

2. From writer to work

In the decades that follow Coetzee's doctoral thesis there emerges in his commentary on writing a logic of simultaneous activity and passivity. For Coetzee, writing is both a task, an activity that one undertakes, and a duty or vocation that calls the author into being. For instance, in *Doubling the Point* this duality is examined explicitly in relation to life writing: for Coetzee writing involves a 'push into the future ... and a resistance' which is in part psychic and in part 'an automatism built into language' (1992: 18). In the short essay 'Thematizing' the process of writing emerges through 'a certain back-and-forth motion' (1993: 289); a giving of oneself over to the process of writing before, then interrogating where the writing has taken you (a retrospective activity termed 'thematizing'). As Carrol Clarkson argues, this non-linear dynamic is described repeatedly: 'Throughout his critical reflections, Coetzee is consistent in his assertions about not quite knowing what it is that he wanted to say in advance – meaning emerges in retrospect, once he has been through the experience of writing' (2009: 44). In this section I explore how Coetzee's experience of writing follows from an account of reading that is first outlined in his investigation into various truth-procedures through which literary meaning is established in his doctoral thesis. More specifically, I explore how this logic of simultaneous activity and passivity follows from an investigation into Beckett's *Watt* as irreducible to summative or extractive truth-claims.

The literary-critical truth-procedure under scrutiny in Coetzee's thesis is that of stylostatistics, a statistical branch of stylistic analysis that Coetzee perceives to be beset by a fallacious underlying premise: that one can account for the qualitative aspects of a literary text using quantitative methods. The underlying positivism of this structuralist approach assumes a quantifiable difference or deviation between everyday language and literary language (which constitutes its 'style'). It presupposes a static, objective and immutable context or domain of the literary per se. For Coetzee, this presupposition fails to account for a further difference between figurative and literal language and is hence bedevilled by an unacknowledged 'metaphor of linearity' which, as Coetzee elucidates, conceives 'of language as a one-dimensional stream extending in time' (1969: 160). This is linked to a conception of the mind (of the reader or writer, for instance) 'as a computer with an input system which reads linear strips of coded information' (160).³ Coetzee's thesis critiques this axiomatic model of consciousness by masterfully demonstrating how Beckett's novel *Watt* pre-empts his own quantitative stylistic methodology. This is achieved by drawing a parallel between the warped rationality of the infinity of logical permutations that constitute the consciousness of Beckett's eponymous protagonist, Watt, and the fundamentally tautologous nature of any systematic or quantitative account of literature. As Coetzee argues, discussing an episode in the novel where Watt ponders the meaning of Erskine continually running up and down the stairs all day in Mr Knott's house: 'Watt's original question, Why does Erskine run up and down stairs?, grows six branches [and] terminates in the solipsism that is one of Watt's answers to the infinities of logic: fish that need to rise and fall exist because my naming of them calls them into existence' (81). The 'logical comedy' of the episode, and the novel, rests on a 'bland disregard' for the criterion

of simplicity. Accordingly, Watt's consciousness becomes a model of the linear code-reading computer 'mind' of stylostatistics, since by seeking to answer an empirical question through logical analysis, Watt ignores the very experience – the intrusion of external and sensory stimuli – upon which the question is predicated.

Coetzee's appeal to Watt's tautologous reasoning, as an analogy for stylostatistics, and the self-affirming process that seeks to define style as a categorically isolable use of language, is devastating. Yet the thesis also invites us to ask whether the missing empirical link (which Coetzee refers to as the 'historical Samuel Beckett' (1969: 3)), once added to the analysis, is enough to determine the origin of a work's style or distinctive literariness. Indeed, Coetzee insists throughout that extra-textual contexts are insufficient when seeking to account for the logical comedy of the novel, specifically the literary effect described by Coetzee as a 'rhythm of doubt' (1969: 95). Reinstalling the empirical or causal element might solve Watt's faulty reasoning, but such a method in literary-critical terms (taking account of the author) does not translate into an adequate account of literary meaning (precisely because, in this instance, the literary is bound up to the *failure* of Watt's thinking).

How, one might ask, does this discussion intersect with the question of the archive and the disciplinary authority granted to empirical research? The recent 'archival turn' in Beckett Studies serves as a good comparative example to explore this putative authority.⁴ As S. E. Wilmer outlines, this archival turn 'focuses on the social and historical circumstances of Beckett's life and work and emphasises genetic criticism' (2012: 586). The unearthing of what Sam Gontarski terms the 'grey canon' (2006: 143) – a vast number of hitherto unexplored archival and manuscript materials – has led to substantial increase in available data for scholars. The subsequent rise of geneticist approaches, and activities of preservation, cataloguing and 'text mining', map neatly onto an older empiricist drive to historical and biographical verification.

In a laudable yet atypical spirit of methodological self-reflection, Matthew Feldman has sought to formalize this renewed historical approach to Beckett's works by drawing on Karl Popper's theory of 'falsifiability' (2010: 164). This deductive approach to evidence aims to engender a critical self-awareness by 'seek[ing] arguments able to be disproved rather than simply finding verification in accordance with one's preferred readings, or outlook, or politics' (2010: 165). The question is, as Feldman asks, does a falsifiable approach 'to the task of generating empirical knowledge of a given subject have any place in the study of literature?' (2010: 165). In Gavid Dowd's response to Feldman he makes clear that the falsifiable-deductive approach condemns theoretical readings to mere 'fanciful prosthetic extension[s] of the critic's hermeneutic imagination' (2008: 379) precisely because they exceed an archival understanding of what constitutes textual evidence. As Dowd summarizes, 'the temporal mode underpinning Feldman's position is such that only direction [is] *backwards* to Beckett's notes [and] sources' (384). This conflation of archival truth and literary meaning betrays a more promising merging of horizons whereby, as Dowd argues, literary obscurity isn't simply dispelled by an 'illuminating criticism' (385) but rather contaminates and complicates the latter.

Ultimately, Coetzee's thesis suggests that neither the axiomatic nor the empirical can guarantee a falsifiable account of literary style or meaning, and that *Watt* makes

a mockery of any attempt to transmute its 'message' into the propositional terms of a linear thesis of cause and effect (whether or not the cause is imputed to be language or the author or some other primal scene). In the conclusion these observations are expanded: literary meaning in general, Coetzee argues, is constituted through an 'internal economy' (1969: 151) of shifting and divisible contexts. As he argues: 'our experience of a work is more than the sum of a number of experiences of small contexts' (161). Such contexts circumscribe meaning, but as they include the temporally and spatially embedded dynamics of reading and writing, as well as that of language itself, they are themselves inexhaustible (or better, insofar as no single context suffices, they are inherently divisible). A linear model of scientific causality, as satirized in *Watt* and critiqued by Coetzee, thus fallaciously claims to transpose the unambiguous truths of mathematics into the ambiguous realm of language and literary meaning.

An empirical account of the literary work claims precisely the opposite: to transpose the ambiguous realm of literary meaning (as inherently hermeneutic) into the supposedly unambiguous and objective realm of historical or biographical context. Yet whereas the rational account – via the analysis of rhetorical or stylistic 'data' – excludes the author, the 'historical Beckett', an empirical account by virtue of the same structural linearity runs the risk of excluding that which remains *after* the *archic* process of historical interrogation (as the search for singular origins and explanations). As Coetzee argues of Kafka:

What is left of Franz Kafka after the alienation of Josef K has been explained in terms of Kafka's marginality? What is life of Michael K after he has been explained in terms of my marginality in Africa? Is it not what is left *after* that interrogation that should interest us, not what the interrogation reveals? Is it not what Kafka does *not* speak, refuses to speak, under that interrogation, that will continue to fuel our desire for him (I hope forever)?

(1992: 199–200)

In other words, Coetzee indicates that what interests us as readers – and I would add, as readers of literature specifically – is what cannot be summatively presented or positively identified. The rational-scientific approach to stylistic analysis purports to account for this *after*, that aspect of the work which precisely signals literariness by deviating from other forms (narrative history, for example), but it fails to do so by virtue of aping the deductive approach of its opposite methodology; of aping the *backwards* 'excavatory reason' (Dowd 2008: 384) of empirical analysis. Like the empirical-archival method, Coetzee's rational-scientific approach in the thesis is found to rely upon a linear mode of causality that condemns meaning to a static point in time. Both do so by excluding the position of the reader as the site of both hermeneutic and affective mediation, a position Coetzee, following Barthes, takes to be generative of the work itself and therefore comes as much before as after. Below I show how this same paradoxical logic is at work in Coetzee's account of the writer, and how we might use Coetzee's economic rather than linear model of literature to rethink an approach to the archive via a productive contamination of before *and* after.

3. From work to writer

The denial of a singular authority or (historical) origin appears to license relativism, yet in both the thesis and in later commentaries Coetzee nonetheless insists on upholding an idea of the materiality of the work. In this section I explore how for Coetzee the material character of literary works resists the reduction of language to its putative status as a bearer of disembodied or abstract ideas. The authority of the literary work is, therefore, derived on its own terms and is inextricable from its material embeddedness. Nonetheless such an embeddedness is not to be confused with a sovereign conception of materiality, as per the empirical-archival method of searching backwards for the historical author as *definitive* foundation or source. What emerges instead is a conception of the authority of the literary author as defined by a lack of authority (a lack which, we might add, can only be accounted for in a modality of literary criticism that no longer asserts definitive claims). This lack is established by the self-reflexivity of Coetzee's fictions (explored further in the next section) insofar as they implicate the author-as-origin within the works themselves. Although this is obvious in Coetzee's use of avatars and in the fictionalized memoirs, this idea pervades the fictions more generally. As a result, the works involve a certain complicity between the functions of author and reader.⁵

Coetzee addresses the authority of the author in the doctoral thesis through the seemingly arcane issue of psycho-linguistic correlation. As the thesis puts it: 'In what sense can we speak of language imitating or mirroring thought?' (1969: 36). If one assumes a direct correlation then what can be analyzed on the textual surface (lexical features and syntactical structures) can be directly attributed to a single origin or source: the writer's mind. Coetzee is thoroughly dismissive of such a hermeneutic operation. Unless the 'focus ... is biographical', Coetzee argues, the suggestion that there can be a direct correlation between thought and syntax is simply tautologous: 'The habits of a writer's mind can only be a metaphor for habits (or patterns) of the text' (159). He then adds: 'The question is of course thrown open again if instead of the writer we speak of a fictionalized intelligence in the text' (159). This notion of a fictionalized intelligence not only disavows the utility but also the very *possibility* of a biographical approach. Earlier, in a discussion of Leo Spitzer's 1928 study of Marcel Proust, Coetzee argues that even if one's focus of study is the biographical author, the attempt to unearth 'the movements of his soul' – regardless of whether or not one then attributes the meaning of the work to these movements – is rendered flawed by the fact that, as Coetzee argues, 'our only approach to the preverbal mental activity [i.e. the soul] that results in language is through that language itself' (87). In other words, even if Proust were alive his account of his 'movements' would be yet another linguistic fabrication or fiction.

It is, of course, not very far to go from here – the assertion that our access to a pre-linguistic consciousness is inhibited because it is only through language that such an access is made possible – to the assertion that such an account of pre-linguistic consciousness is itself entirely fallacious and must also comprise of linguistic structures. This leap would take us from a discussion of *Watt* to the interminable monologue of Beckett's *The Unnamable*; from the structuralist methodologies that constitute

Coetzee's focus in the thesis to the post-structuralist readings of Beckett's work that followed in subsequent decades. It is not in the interests of this chapter to make this leap, to throw the baby out with the bath water and to deny the existence of an authorial subject who exists outside the text, but rather to demonstrate how such a subject is irrelevant to an assessment of a literary work qua literary work. To do so does not entail disregarding the notion of authorship tout court, however, nor does it mean disregarding the notion of the material archive. Following the contours of Coetzee's idea of a 'fictionalized intelligence' within a text, I rather seek to privilege a notion of the authorial subject as within, rather than outside, a literary work.

In the 2015 collaborative volume *The Good Story*, Coetzee, discussing W. G. Sebald's novel *Austerlitz*, writes: 'My guess is that psychoanalysis cannot (in the view of the writer) offer aid because psychoanalysis is ahistorical (I must add that I have no knowledge of what Sebald the man thought of psychoanalysis)' (2015: 188). It is with this distinction between an actual biographical person who happens to write fiction, and the idea of an author figure whose contours a reader must infer from the work itself, that we can begin to bridge the gap from the question of authorial authority to that of literary authority. This distinction is of course fundamental to the three fictionalized memoirs – or autre-biographies – *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime*. The memoirs each fictionalize their autobiographical subject using third-person narration. This estranges the narrating consciousness from the narrated consciousness. Through the genre of life-writing, Coetzee dramatizes the fundamental estrangement of the self through writing that is typical of his critical commentaries. These works complicate our access to a sense of the material or living man behind the writing by highlighting how our access cannot be separated from the medium, from the writing of the man. This is hyperbolized in *Summertime*, especially, where the autobiographical subject is already dead, literally immaterial, and our only access lies through archival notes and interview transcripts whose substitute materiality both grants and obscures our vision. The memoirs thus make the disruption and disaggregation of the truth-procedures of historical or biographical verifiability – disparaged in *Doubling the Point* as mere 'truth to fact' (1992: 17) – integral to the truth-content of their own status as literary works.

In *Youth* what constitutes the authority of the literary work is explicitly thematized. *Youth* covers the period of Coetzee's time in London as a computer programmer just prior to embarking on his graduate study of Beckett's English fictions. *Youth* portrays the aesthetic and sentimental education of its author. Towards the end, John is palpably discontented with the rational or binary logic of his profession: 'Death to reason, death to talk!' (2002a: 164). Choosing instead to embark on the perilous enterprise of literary fiction, John worries he might not possess the capacity to render what he terms 'the aura of truth' (2002a: 138). For this, the methods of verisimilitude will not suffice: 'The creak of the grease-pot, the trilling of the cicadas – those he is confident he can bring off' (138). Here Coetzee's scepticism towards positivist science is seen as congruent with a growing disdain for realism. Instead, the truth of the literary work – the truth of the work as literature – is constituted enigmatically as an aura.

For Walter Benjamin, the aura accounts for the specificity and authority of the art work itself; for an immaterial essence lost through the process of technological reproduction. Reproduction jeopardizes what Benjamin terms the 'historical

testimony' (1999: 215) of the work of art that constitutes its authenticity.⁶ However, by retrospectively framing the account of auratic authority through Benjamin's discussion of the *Ursprung* or origin in his doctoral thesis, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, it is possible to deduce a distinctly anti-romantic conception of the truth of the aura and thus, I argue, of Coetzee's sense of the aura of truth. For Benjamin, the origin or *Ursprung* does not signify a unique or unequivocal instance of genesis but rather a process of historical becoming in which the singular and repeatable are 'conditioned by one another in all essentials' (1998: 46). That is, 'the authentic – the hallmark of origin in phenomena – is the object of discovery, a discovery which is connected in a unique way with the process of recognition' (46). This triangulation of authenticity, originality and authority situates the artwork in a dynamic process (which Benjamin terms history) analogous to Coetzee's account of the economic relation of the activity and passivity of the writer/reader. The truth-content of a work is thus as much related to our reading of it as any innate property or feature. If 'grace' marks Coetzee's literary thinking of this dynamic, which imperils the rationalist premise of linear causality that underpins biographical or historicist criticism, then Benjamin's account of the *Ursprung* also helps to dispel a Romantic myth of genius, of unsullied or divine originality, that we might infer from a religious register that occurs throughout Coetzee's later works (notably the recent quasi-allegorical *The Childhood of Jesus*, discussed below).

In *Youth* this dual renunciation – of both historicist 'truth to fact' and divine originality – is conducted through the memoir's staging of John's aesthetic education. Accordingly, the displacement of the autobiographical subject – through the use of a third-person narrative voice – is redoubled in the context of John's failure to reach the transcendental heights of his literary forbears; a failure that is dissimulated through a romantic striving (*Sehnsucht*) for idealized love: 'Does an artist's life entail sleeping with anyone and everyone, in the name of life?' (2002a: 30). Thus *Youth* stages Nietzsche's comment – 'we possess *art* lest we *perish of the truth*' (1968: 435) – in two senses: not only does art stand in opposition to techno-scientific positivism, but the alternative truth of art cannot be simply sublimated or idealized under the Romantic category of the beautiful. As Nietzsche adds: 'Truth is ugly' (435).

4. A truer realism

Coetzee's staging of the figure of the author is integral to how the literary works question their own authority. This is addressed directly in *Diary of a Bad Year* when J. C. quotes Kierkegaard on authority: '*Learn to speak without authority*, says Kierkegaard. By copying Kierkegaard's words here, I make Kierkegaard into an authority. Authority cannot be taught, cannot be learned. The paradox is a true one' (2007: 151). In this section I explore this paradox, which speaks to how Coetzee's metafictional interrogation of authority both displaces the author (as origin) and yet also concedes the ineluctability of a work's authoredness. This interrogation is linked to a project of demarcating a *truer realism*; a realism beyond mere verisimilitude. By hinting towards

a truer sense of the real as that which emerges paradoxically through a critique or realism, Coetzee follows in Beckett's late modernist footsteps. Indeed, it is through a discussion of Beckett in *Doubling the Point* where realism is placed under suspicion as 'illusionism' (1992: 27). Although Coetzee turns away from Beckett's strategy of anti-illusionism (a strategy of self-citation or repetitive auto-destruction that he reads in the later prose), there remains a powerful – even abyssal – strand of self-reflection and self-reflexivity in Coetzee's own writings. In this section I seek to establish the link between Coetzee's insistence on self-reflexivity, as that which would appear to undermine arriving at certain truth, and the notion of grace as a kind of truth that attests to the abyssal nature of the literary itself.

The Cretan liar paradox, which Mark Currie situates at the heart of any definition of metafiction, articulates how 'there is something logically chaotic or aporetic about a discourse that refers to itself' (2010: 171). Something of this logical chaos works its way into Coetzee's thinking in *Doubling the Point* when he discusses he influences in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Stating that a self-awareness about one's influence is problematic for a storyteller (who needs to work free of 'introversions and doubts'), Coetzee then adds: 'You catch me, of course, in self-contradiction. If I don't want to look into myself, claiming that isn't good for my novel-writing what am I doing conducting this interview, and what sort of autobiographer am I? ... I am clearly descending into a Cretan Liar position from which there will be no escape' (1992: 105). It is precisely this position, however, that the reader of Coetzee's fictions is obliged to adopt. For instance, as when the fictional writer Elizabeth Costello declares in an academic lecture: 'writers teach us more than they are aware of' ([2003] 2004: 97). Just as the character Costello is herself in a state of performative contradiction, making a discursive claim about the non-discursive capacities of poetry to teach us an ethical humility towards animals, the reader cannot help but feel similarly suspicious of the authorial Coetzee standing behind these words. If this is an authorial aside, aimed at poking fun of Costello's compromised position, how are we to also read it as a clear example of another author or authority lying behind Costello given that the statement itself indicates a lack of mastery?

This abyssal logic manifests abundantly in Coetzee's third fictionalized memoir, *Summertime*. Written as a series of interviews conducted by a biographer, Mr Vincent, after the death of John Coetzee, Martin – a former colleague of John's – recalls how Coetzee consistently exhibited 'a reluctance to probe the sources of his inspiration, as if being too self-aware might cripple him' (2009: 213). The paradox Coetzee establishes asks us this: how do we as readers reconcile the problem of self-awareness when self-awareness here appears ironically as an awareness of one's apparent lack of self-awareness? John's purported romantic belief in the 'creative force of unconscious processes' (213) can thus be read neither literally nor wholly ironically, since the position of the ironist or critic is folded back within the textual machinations.

In Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus*, this abyssal logic is evoked at the level of the logical chaos that marks the narrative whole. By conjuring a quasi-allegorical world without a clear allegorical referent (no Jesus figure ever arrives), these novels locate the reader in a perpetual crisis of meaning. This is exacerbated by the religious register deployed throughout and by how the novel makes discussions about meaning into part

of its own content, notably the distinction between what is real and what is true with regard to the young Jesus-like character, David. Simón, David's self-elected guardian, tells another character: 'You say we are not his real mother and his real father. What exactly do you mean by real? Surely there is such a thing as overvaluing the biological' (207). This sense of there being something more real than *the* real is also marked by the unspecified geographic and historical narrative world. However, as Derek Attridge argues, if *The Childhood of Jesus* indeed represents 'Coetzee's first truly post-South Africa novel' (2018: 268), then the disengagement from reality once again invites the kind of political critique that Coetzee's works have long since weathered.

Indeed, such charges have been levelled repeatedly against Coetzee, and the topic of realism in relation to politics is often at the forefront of Coetzee's discussions of other South African writers, notably Nadine Gordimer and her indebtedness to the Marxist critic Georg Lukács. Coetzee's aversion to art's secondary status as subordinate to a political agenda thus helps explain the strong aversion to realism that is evidenced across the archival notebooks. During the writing of *Life & Times of Michael K*, Coetzee notes in an entry: 'What I need is a liberation from verisimilitude!' (HRC, CP, 33.5: 2-3-81). Similarly, in the archived notebooks for *Foe* Coetzee expands on a 'great sense of liberation when you lose yourself from realism and let language take over (the best of my own writing comes from that – parts of ITH, smaller parts of WFB, MK)' (HRC, CP, 33.6: 18-3-84). It is through Coetzee's voluminous teaching materials, however, that a more philosophical approach to realism as illusionism can be traced, and notably in the context of a key intertextual reference in the Jesus fictions, namely Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote*.

In 1982 Coetzee gave a talk to the Philosophical Society at the University of Cape Town entitled 'Realism in the Novel'. The lecture focuses on *Don Quixote* and the theme of disillusionment. Coetzee starts from the premise that 'the state of affairs with which we have to live is therefore that the term realist has been hijacked by and for a particular kind of novel, the novel of the empirical' (HRC, CP, 114.12: n.d.). Contrary to this empiricist impulse, Coetzee outlines how Cervantes's depiction of romantic disillusionment situates a self-reflexive awareness at the heart of the realist novel from its very inception. This insight is extended into his teaching engagements abroad, and in 1984 Coetzee taught 'Realism in the Novel' at Buffalo and in 1986 'Studies in Realism' at Johns Hopkins. Coetzee writes in his course description that, alongside texts often designated realist, students 'will also read ... four works which include in themselves reflections on the problematics of realism' (HRC, CP, 115.1: 1986), including *Don Quixote*.

Ten years later, Coetzee returned to teaching realism at Chicago in 1996 with a revamped course (with Flaubert and Turgenev at its centre) but again *Don Quixote* was an important text. Building upon the arguments set forth in the 1982 lecture, especially its philosophical context and the 'fundamentally political question' of 'why is it better to live in terms of the possible than in terms of the impossible?' (HRC, CP, 114.12: 1982), Coetzee is once again keen to sidestep the obvious proto-postmodernist appeal to textuality and relativism. In his seminar notes Coetzee's discussion of the 'satiric genealogy behind empiricist presentation' (HRC, CP, 114.11: 1996) leads to the insight that Cervantes marks a shift in the tradition of the mimetic arts. Realist detail is used to both mock the protagonist (the example of such mocking realism

is provided in the earlier lecture in relation to the movements of the Don's bowels, which echoes the metaphysics of poo in *The Childhood of Jesus*) but also emerges for the first time as a value in itself. Derived from the triumph of Renaissance physics and psychology, the literary work enters an age of profound disenchantment: 'one of the master themes of realism is disenchantment or disillusionment or demystification. Since the essence of fiction has to be fantasy, it is a theme which is in a sense counter to the movement of fiction itself' (HRC, CP, 114.11: 1996). In the 1982 lecture this is said to give rise to realist mode of fiction 'that looks back on itself with some kind of consciousness of its own motives' (HRC, CP, 114.12: 1982). In the earlier lecture Coetzee appears as a defender of fantasy. However, the later 1996 course reveals the nuance in Coetzee's position. Rather than take up the 'highly textual world' of the novel as a precursor to 'postmodern fiction' (HRC, CP, 114.11: 1996), the latter teaching materials helps reveal how, rather than disregarding the empirical in the name of a radical subjectivism, Coetzee is instead concerned with refusing to equate empirical reality with the totality of reality itself.

Both the teaching materials of the 1980s and 1990s exemplify Coetzee's trademark conjunction of sparse logic and lyrical fantasy. The self-reflexivity attributed to Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, as that which guards against realism as a mode of merely debunking forms of naïve idealism, formally anticipates the self-reflexivity of *The Childhood of Jesus*. Similarly, the highly textual world of novel (the young David learns to read using *An Illustrated Children's Don Quixote*) establishes a kind of truth that is neither simply fantastical nor forgoes material reality in adherence to a ludic postmodern 'doctrine of the arbitrariness of the signifier' (2013: 78).

In *The Childhood of Jesus* it is David who embodies the position of the radical subjectivist or idealist tilting at windmills. David refuses to adhere to the social consensus that orders reality and asserts instead his own private language. Much as Coetzee describes the Don's sidekick Sancho, the characters in *The Childhood of Jesus* are all driven to David like parasites to a host and, indeed, become enthralled by the boy's illusionism (which is precisely what signals him as potentially Christ-like). Simón, in particular, tries to encourage David to see the book as a work of fiction and not as a real record of what happened:

'David,' he says, '*Don Quixote* is an unusual book. To the lady in the library who lent it to us it looks like a simple book for children, but in truth it isn't simple at all. It presents the world to us through two pairs of eyes, Don Quixote's eyes and Sancho's eyes. To Don Quixote, it is a giant he is fighting. To Sancho, it is a windmill. Most of us – not you, perhaps, but most of us nevertheless – will agree with Sancho that it is a windmill. That includes the artist who drew a picture of a windmill. But it also includes the man who wrote the book.'

'Who wrote the book?'

'A man named Benengeli.' (154)

By invoking the name Benengeli, the name the narrator of Cervantes's original text gives to the Arabian historiographer Cid Hamet Ben Engeli (from whom he has acquired the manuscript of the tale he is transcribing), *The Childhood of Jesus* situates the problem

of authorship directly into its own complex intertextual, abyssal and self-reflexive framework. Although Simón is ostensibly attuned to the irony of the narration, which enables us to see the world ‘through two pairs of eyes’, the attribution of authorship to ‘Benengeli’ signals that he is taking the narrator at face value (just as David takes the Don’s perspective at face value). As Stephen Mulhall argues, the Platonic resonances behind the allusions to Cervantes (the opposition between appearances and reality) illustrate how Coetzee’s use of the intertextual framework reveals how ‘one can identify some given claim or register of a text as ironic only if one is willing to regard some other claim or register as literal’ (2017: 29). That by choosing either windmills or giants ‘requires investing in a reality with which fantasy can be contrasted’ (29). The abyssal textual logic of *The Childhood of Jesus*, however, which refuses to verify or repudiate the divinity of its young protagonist, establishes a literary thinking that can be read neither wholly literally nor ironically or, better, where irony or the possibility of fiction is itself aligned with a certain truth.

Indeed, David’s appeal to the other characters, and Simón’s vehement defence of the child, involves a certain faith in the fantastical that exceeds a logic of debunking. By further appealing to a theological framework and religious register that recalls an earlier reckoning with the notion of grace, *The Childhood of Jesus* asks us to question whether it is in fact useful to ask of a fantasy whether or not it is *literally* true. Instead the fantastical emerges as significant, or even true, beyond its relation to literal or empirical reality. Perhaps fantasy is important not because of what it is, or what it claims, but because of what it *does*, and how it might spur or motivate action, ethical or otherwise.

Conclusion

By means of a conclusion it is worth returning to the questions of Coetzee’s thesis, the notion of the archive and the context of contemporary critical approaches to literature. In this light, and with regard to the themes of realism and self-reflexivity that emerge across the oeuvre, Coetzee’s Jesus fictions become exemplary. The recent turn away from notions of critique and the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ (Felski 2008: 1) is thus anticipated by Coetzee’s works, both critical and creative. The Jesus novels pre-empt and distort any attempt to expose their hidden depth, to separate what Coetzee terms the vehicle from the message.⁷ However, in the second novel, *The Schooldays of Jesus*, the murder of Ana Magdalena (David’s adored teacher) can be seen to epitomize the corollary that a disavowal of depth is not tantamount to a naïve belief in the surface. In an age of disillusionment, Coetzee’s writings indicate that faith in the fantastical should not be a blind faith; there can be no pure fantasy, no transcendental escape from a finite world that would not entail the risk of sacrifice.⁸ The final work in the trilogy, *The Death of Jesus*, similarly epitomizes the impossibility of pure fantasy or transcendental escape. The question that this work leaves unresolved concerns reconciling the seeming profundity of David’s life (and death) in a world marked by the absence of profundity. This question echoes the question of literature or literary form that runs throughout Coetzee’s writing career: how are we to be responsive to the auratic truth of literature without reducing the work to a simple point of origin or *arché*, of ‘truth to fact’, nor reducing the aura to

a romantic or religious mystification. How does one account for both the material and immaterial essence, the surface and depth, of a literary work simultaneously?

Such a question, which lies latent within Coetzee's earliest writings, seems vital to how we approach the archive both as material entity, a fixed origin, and as a dynamic (and ever-expanding) field of embedded meaning. The answer perhaps lies in developing a mode of reading which corresponds to Coetzee's own literary thinking. Such a literary thinking is derived from the observation that Coetzee's self-reflexivity, the introspective and questioning nature of the writing, does not simply divorce the works from their material or historical origins but rather implicates these origins in the works themselves. By tracing the consequences of the false equation between the quantitative and qualitative methodologies first outlined in Coetzee's thesis, we have seen how the anti-systematic nature of literary meaning results in a dynamic conception of the literary work between reading and writing, passivity and activity. Indeed, if for Coetzee writing is always a case of reading, of forgoing ultimate mastery, it follows that reading is always a form of writing, an engaged activity attentive not only to the stated or literal content of a work but also to its performances. We might term such a reading a *critical* reading; a mode of engagement responsive to a literary thinking. Coetzee describes such a thinking as 'a matter of awakening of the countervoices in oneself' (1992: 65); of stepping down from the governing position, of opening onto a critical position in the sense defined by Michel Foucault when he writes: '[Critique] is the art of not being governed' (1997: 29). Such a literary practice is thus aligned to the notion of truth not despite but *because* of its unavailability. At the end of his 1987 Jerusalem Prize speech (reprinted in *Doubling the Point*), the ethico-political urgency of refusing what Nietzsche terms the 'perspective which makes what is closest at hand and most vulgar appear as if it were ... reality itself' (1974: 133) is signalled by Coetzee in pithy terms: 'We have art, said Nietzsche, so that we may not die of the truth. In South Africa there is now too much truth for art to hold, truth by the bucketful, truth that overwhelms and swamps every act of the imagination' (1992: 99). It is this sense of the overwhelming that spurs Coetzee's imaginative acts to this day and marks the imperative of a truer realism.

Notes

- 1 The name is transliterated in the recent *The Schooldays of Jesus* to Juan Sebastian Arroyo, who is the head of the Academy of Dance in the fictional Estrella.
- 2 As Coetzee writes, grace – as opposed to cynicism – constitutes the 'condition in which truth can be told clearly, without blindness' (1992: 392).
- 3 Coetzee's early work in the field of the nascent Digital Humanities pre-empts the pitfalls of what Tom Eyers has termed the 'prodigious growth of neo-positivist methodologies' (2017: 34) in the contemporary field – that is, a tendency to elide the formal and epistemological peculiarities of the literary text in favour of an empiricist certainty. The model of scientific rationality underpinning this digital revolution in the humanities is, Eyers argues, 'ahistorical and Anglo-centric' (37).
- 4 Indeed, an early scholar of this archival turn is arguably Coetzee himself. In the 1972 essay (which derives from the thesis), 'The Manuscript Revisions of Beckett's Watt',

- Coetzee complements his quantitative approach with a genetic investigation of the 'compositional biography of Watt' (1992: 39). The experience of the chaos of Beckett's manuscripts might in part explain the meticulous dating Coetzee later undertakes in his own archive.
- 5 Alexandra Effe observes the potentially liberating result of this complicity at the end of her study on Coetzee and metalepsis: 'Metaleptic self-reflexivity [a blurring of the narrative levels that separate narrator, author and reader], in Coetzee's works, constitutes an ethics of writing. ... This theoretical dimension of metalepsis also constitutes its ethical dimension of renouncing authority and of emancipating the reader as an active participant in the creation of storyworlds and in the deliberation of ethical questions' (2017: 159).
 - 6 It is interesting to note that, in an essay on Benjamin collected in *Inner Workings*, Coetzee is disparaging of the idea of aura as it seems to betray Benjamin's materialism. On Benjamin's philosophy of language Coetzee further writes: 'How a symbolist conception of language could ever be reconciled with Benjamin's later historical materialism is not clear' (2008: 52). However, it is by turning to a theological or mystical register that I argue one finds an analogous process in both Benjamin and Coetzee. This process transforms, rather than transcends, the finite or material as ground for knowledge or truth. This argument partly concerns Coetzee's relation to the postsecular (see Woessner 2017) and exceeds the confines of this chapter.
 - 7 As Coetzee writes in 'The Novel Today': 'There is no addition in stories. They are not made of one thing plus another thing, message plus vehicle, substructure plus superstructure. On the keyboard on which they are written, the plus key does not work. There is always a difference; and the difference is not a part, the part left behind after the subtraction. The minus key does not work either: the difference is everything' (1988: 296).
 - 8 I discuss the crucial relation between sacrifice and finitude in a *Journal of Modern Literature* article (see Farrant 2019).

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