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# A Poetics of Embeddedness: J. M. Coetzee's Dissertation on Beckett

Marc Farrant

The danger is in the neatness of identifications.  
—Samuel Beckett, “Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce”

J. M. Coetzee's writing on Samuel Beckett is prefigured by the Beckett's own writings on James Joyce. Indeed, like Coetzee's, Beckett's first published work was not creative but critical, an essay entitled “Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce” (1929). Appearing alongside an array of other commentaries on Joyce's *Work in Progress* (the text that would become *Finnegans Wake* [1939]), Beckett's essay opens with the premise that “the danger is in the neatness of identifications” (“DBVJ” 19). The particular identification under suspicion here is that between Philosophy and Philology. Although capitalized, the disciplinary denotation of these categories is less significant than the contrast established between thought (philosophy as a love of knowledge) and language (*logos*)—especially, as we shall see, considered in light of Coetzee's dissertation. Of course, the question of Beckett's direct influence on Coetzee has received much attention in Coetzee studies. In what follows I'll trace not that influence but, rather, the relationship between Coetzee's early critical writing on Beckett and the fiction he then went on to produce.<sup>1</sup>

Coetzee's early writing on Beckett is vexed by the same danger of identification that Beckett writes about with regard to Joyce. As Beckett observes, Joyce's modernist manipulation of form and content troubles any easy relation between the work's philosophical substance and its verbal surface: “Here form is content, content is form. You complain

that this stuff is not written in English. It is not written at all. It is not to be read—or rather it is not only to be read. . . . His writing is not *about* something; *it is that something itself*” (27). In turn, in his writing about Beckett, especially in his dissertation, Coetzee is troubled by the question of the relation between language and thought; namely the extent to which thought or content is determined by language itself.<sup>2</sup> First wrestling with this question in his critical writings, Coetzee then transfers it to his creative endeavors, both as a thematic concern and a formal one, so that key elements of that later work can be read in relation to patterns of thinking that emerge in the dissertation. Indeed, his concern with language and writing itself there is later regularly thematized, whether in Coetzee’s authorial avatars (such as JC in *Diary of a Bad Year* [2007]) or in the attempts of characters to narrate the truth of their lives (Elizabeth Curren’s letter writing in *Age of Iron* [1990]). And his sustained ethico-political interrogation of the possibility of representation in the first place, especially in a context where the process of representation is so easily appropriated, is bound up with formal questions provoked by the discrepancy between brute reality and the discursive tools available to frame and register that reality.

In section one I outline how, in Coetzee’s engagement with Beckett and the concept of style in his dissertation, and in his repudiating structuralism in favor of a more dynamic, temporally oriented account of the literary work, there emerges in nascent form his later sense both of the literary work’s irreducibility *to* history and of the irreducibility *of* history itself. Although Coetzee later describes his dissertation as a “wrong turning . . . both in my career and in the history of stylistics” (DP 22), our examining his suspicion about the “general positivism” (“EFSB” 17) of the method of quantitative stylistics he adopted in that wrong turning and the nonlinear model of literature to which he subsequently turned attunes us to how the later fictions perform their own deep suspicion toward origins and foundations.<sup>3</sup> Following Coetzee’s own critical lead, and attending to his indebtedness to Beckett’s late modernism, I argue that this critical performance of the later fictions is inextricable from their autotelic status.

In section two I explore the legacy of Coetzee’s engagement with structuralism in his later works, where a challenge to the authority of the author figure appears as inherently related to a pervasive linguistic skepticism, especially to a widespread thematization of linguistic

determinism. In this, Coetzee frames his creative endeavors as an extension of Beckett's late modernism, as typified by *Watt* (1953).<sup>4</sup> I argue that a weak version of verbal determinism is fundamental both to Coetzee's literary-political engagement with history and to his wider configuration of the relation between language and life, as in the recent Jesus trilogy. There, a quasi-allegorical setting and religious framework help Coetzee gesture not toward a transcendence of the material conditions of finite life but, rather, toward its ultimately unmasterable or unquantifiable terrain—what I call Coetzee's poetics of embeddedness. Its premise is that we are ineluctably determined by, or embedded within contexts (material and linguistic) that, by definition, cannot yield to a propositional or rational knowledge. This concern with the limitations of rational thought amounts to Coetzee's denunciation of the digital technologies on which his dissertation relied, a position epitomized in his recent critical writings and the Jesus fictions.

That Coetzee ultimately disavows the positivist premise of his doctoral work does not mean that it can't help us see how Beckett informs Coetzee's attempt in his fictions to think through language.<sup>5</sup> Carrol Clarkson (2009: 4) notes how the dissertation inaugurates "Coetzee's preoccupation with narrative as a form of rule-bound play," and although Coetzee himself is wary about drawing parallels between his critical works and his creative ones, in *Doubling the Point* (1992) he does refer to his scholarly work as a kind of "play, relief, diversion" (DP 142).<sup>6</sup> But just as the scholarly work functions as a kind of play, we might consider the creative work as a form of critical inquiry—especially when we consider how Coetzee's inquiry into questions of style and literary form proceeds alongside a literary engagement with the violent history of the twentieth century and of those (human and nonhuman animals both) silenced by its machinations. Ultimately, the ethical rigor of Coetzee's formal experimentation derives precisely from his rigorous disavowal of what Beckett terms the neatness of identifications.

## Writing sans Style

In 1969, Coetzee was awarded a PhD by the University of Texas for his dissertation, "The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett: An Essay in Stylistic Analysis." Writing about Joyce, Beckett himself had first stressed the harmonious unification of form and content, but Coetzee starts with

Beckett's later repudiation of Joyce. In the well-known 1937 German letter to Axel Kaun, Beckett (2009: 515) sets what he calls a "*Literatur des Unworts* [literature of the unword]" in opposition to Joyce's celebratory "apotheosis of the word" (519). As others have noted, the novel *Watt* marks Beckett's first attempt to establish an aesthetic of the unword, and, for Coetzee, it is thus exemplary of the German letter's peculiar account of style—or rather of the desire to write *without* style.<sup>7</sup> Considering the switch Beckett made, after *Watt*, to writing in French, Coetzee wonders, "Perhaps he assumed French because he knew it would remain an instrument, taking on precisely as much life as he gave it. (Notice the strange twist we have given the word 'style.' To write without style is to write with full control of expression)" ("EFSB" 4). Across 164 pages, and through tabulations, statistical analyses, computations and diagrams—tracking the logic of *Watt*'s rhythmic thinking through stylistic measures such as sentence length, noun usage, and rare vocabulary—Coetzee goes on to explore this strange twist. In the process, Coetzee isolates in *Watt*, a contradiction between the "anarchic life" (4) of the work itself, on the one hand, and, on the other, the agency of the author trying to contain it—and in this we can see Beckett's text opening onto a field of philosophical questions in a way that portends the philosophical inflection of Coetzee's own later fictions. As Coetzee puts it, the issues raised by the stylistic eccentricities of *Watt* "bring a theoretical question of great generality: in what sense can we speak of language imitating or mirroring thought?" (36).

Coetzee didn't know prior to his arrival in Texas in 1965 that the university housed the manuscript materials of *Watt*. (These are still located at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center in Austin, now alongside Coetzee's own archive.)<sup>8</sup> His discovery of them led to weeks spent analyzing the six notebooks, and as he later recalls, "It was heartening to see from what unpromising beginnings a book could grow: to see the false starts, the scratched out banalities, the evidences of less than furious possession by the Muse" (*DP* 25). When Coetzee first encountered the published novel, in London (where from 1962 to 1965 he worked as a computer programmer), his reaction, framed in *Youth* (2002) in the third person, was intense: "*Watt* is also funny, so funny that he rolls about laughing. When he comes to the end he starts again at the beginning" (155). In the collection of essays and interviews elsewhere, he recalls how the dissertation "originated in that sensuous response, and was a grasping after ways in which to talk about it: to talk about delight"

(*DP* 20). Because, as he writes in the dissertation itself, “the language of the work has been pushed into the foreground and the action into the background” (“EFSB” 30), Coetzee was drawn to approach *Watt* by way of stylostistics, a quantitative branch of linguistic study,<sup>9</sup> and an economical account of Beckett's style is repeated a few years later, in Coetzee's “Samuel Beckett and the Temptations of Style” (1973). There, Coetzee sees Beckett's “art of zero” as involving “two opposing impulses that permit a fiction of net zero: the impulse toward conjunction, the impulse toward silence” (“SBTS” 43).<sup>10</sup> Although in Beckett's later works this “art of zero” renders the literary work a “self-enclosed game” (*DP* 393), a form of stylized autodestruction, in *Watt* it yields the spiraling regressions and infinite permutations that instead constitute a “rhythm of doubt” (“EFSB” 95), one not yet sublated into the aesthetic credo that would mark Beckett's postwar writings.<sup>11</sup>

In the opening pages of the dissertation Coetzee establishes two antithetical positions: Beckett's and that of Bernard Bloch, a key figure in the development of American structuralist linguistics pioneered by Leonard Bloomfield.<sup>12</sup> According to Coetzee, Bloch defines style as the statistical distribution of syntactic and lexical variables across a work or body of work. As Coetzee writes, style is thus predicated on “the idea of a text as a collection of sets of linguistic features (phonemes, morphemes, words, etc.) which can be treated like members of statistical populations” (“EFSB” 2), so that “a word” can be reduced “to a dimensionless and immaterial point” (3) for the purposes of analytical study.<sup>13</sup> Most important for Coetzee, however, is that Bloch's account of style “expresses in a succinct and extreme form the idea of style as deviation from a norm” (154). For Beckett, conversely, style is a matter of a particular form matching a particular content, and so, Coetzee writes, style arises as a problem when “a certain kind of form, associated with the English language, is no longer adequate to express a certain kind of content” (3).<sup>14</sup> The consequent “crisis in the relation of form and content” illuminates the “terrible arbitrary materiality of the word surface” (Beckett 2009: 518) and thus renders moot the goal of arriving at the Flaubertian *mot juste*.<sup>15</sup> At the start of the dissertation, Coetzee establishes this condition through an account of Beckett's postwar switch to French, reading it as an attempt to write “*sans style*” (“EFSB” 2)—a paradoxical attempt to regain control of one's expression and delimit the anarchic life of language.<sup>16</sup>

As the dissertation goes on to explore how *Watt* is constrained by the connotative freight of its own medium, it is subject to an inherent tension. On the one hand, Coetzee seeks to contend the notion that one can access a work's stylistic elements only through metaphor, a notion associated with New Criticism and explicitly with the work of critics such as Hugh Kenner and Ruby Cohn, writing, as Coetzee sees it, from a "tradition of literary criticism . . . in which insight into the nature of a style is a partly intuitive act" ("EFSB" 10).<sup>17</sup> On the other, with "anarchic life" Coetzee himself falls back on metaphoric description. He observes that "writers on *Watt* have resorted to a number of curious metaphors to describe its style: the compulsive evacuation of reason, the graph of a half-absent mind, counting, the turning out of the coins of logic from a die" (178), and that the underlying similarity drawing together such disparate figurations seems to intimate "some incessant, half sleeping, computational quality to *Watt* accessible only to metaphor" (78). In other words, what makes "*Watt* *Watt*-like" (77) may finally be unquantifiable.

Characterizing *Watt* as somehow both computational and unquantifiable points to why the dissertation ultimately disavowed its investment in positivist methodologies: language operates not as a natural medium but as a fundamental determinant of thought. Indeed, this is precisely what is at stake in *Watt* itself; as he attempts to work out the flux of objects and bodies at his new abode, Mr. Knott's house, the eponymous main character, a resolute idealist cannot accept the possibility that the word might be reconciled with the world. For Coetzee, it is therefore "characteristic of *Watt* that he believes that an empirical question can be solved by logical analysis" (81). He observes that

No empirical data are introduced into his chains of speculation. The multiplication of these chains depends on a manoeuvre in four stages: statement of a question, proposal of a hypothesis, breakdown of the hypothesis into components, and analysis of the implications of the hypothesis and its components. . . . The only qualification *Watt* demands of a hypothesis is that it answer the question: his criterion is one of logic rather than of simplicity.

Coetzee is here specifically addressing an episode near the middle of the novel, one where *Watt* ponders the meaning of Erskine's running up and down the stairs all day: "Or perhaps Erskine, finding the first floor

trying, is obliged to run upstairs every now and then for a breath of the second floor . . . just as in certain waters certain fish, in order to support the middle depths, are forced to rise and fall, now to the surface of the waves and now to the ocean bed. But do such fish exist? Yes, such fish exist, now" (*W* 102). Coetzee's extended analysis of the passage concludes, "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" ("EFSB" 81). The impending infinite series is brought to an abrupt end because, as Coetzee writes, "The only qualification Watt demands of an hypothesis is one of logic rather than simplicity." It is this disregard of simplicity that is the foundation of the "logical comedy" of Beckett's novel.

If in this way Watt's mind operates as a self-enclosed logical system of computer circuitry, then exposure to a sensory world beyond this system ushers in experiential data that evade inscription. Coetzee recounts the consequences of this clash between data and system: "The attempt to apply logic to the absurd dispensation governing Knott's establishment, to discover the causes behind effects, leads to infinite causal regression. The attempt to understand the nature of the simplest sensory perceptions leads to infinite sequences of nested hypotheses. The attempt to describe the simplest phenomenon leads to a description of the whole universe" (35). The intrusion of external stimuli triggers the computational process, yet, structured not by accumulated experience but purely by an abstracted and axiomatic logic, the logic of Watt's nominalist consciousness (he cannot distinguish abstract objects from real phenomena) cannot make qualitative value distinctions, beyond those already embedded in its logical categories.<sup>18</sup>

This dilemma is exemplified in the famous pot episode: "Watt was greatly troubled by this tiny little thing, more troubled perhaps than he had ever been by anything . . . by this imperceptible, no, hardly imperceptible, since he perceived it, by this indefinable thing that prevented him from saying, with conviction, and to his relief, of the object that was so like a pot, that it was a pot" (*W* 68). Observing that in *Watt*, "The world of things and the world of language are systems closed to each other," in an unpublished 1966 graduate essay, Coetzee writes, "It is presumably this dichotomy that lands Watt in the asylum" (1966). In "Surreal Metaphors and Random Processes" (1979), in response to the



possibility of a computer poetry based on a grammatically programmed master routine, Coetzee argues, “The crucial difference between this master routine and a human being is that the master routine has no interface with the world” (24). And just as the absence of any “interface,” of an empirical or causal ground structures Watt’s empty thinking, it similarly afflicts the divinelike David in Coetzee’s *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013). Unchecked by the “necessity of natural law” (Brits 2017: 137), the young David can understand neither the principle of sequence nor, for that reason, the abstract processes of addition and subtraction. Instead, for David, numbers are real: “A number can fall out of the sky like Don Quixote when he fell down the crack” (Coetzee 2013: 178). Ultimately, for Coetzee, Watt’s tautological reasoning exemplifies the dilemma inherent in the attempt to transpose numerical values into natural-language statements—even as stylostatistics depends on this very process, in its attempt to transpose the neutral categorical definitions of mathematics into statements of literary meaning.<sup>19</sup>

In satirizing philosophical reasoning—so that “intricate syntactic structures develop a purely plastic content” (“EFSB” 147)—*Watt* thus also seems to preempt, by staging, the very procedures of Coetzee’s own analysis itself. Structured by the “rhythm of doubt” (95)—by the rhythm of Watt’s thinking, endlessly piling “answer against question, objection against answer, qualification against objection”—*Watt* makes manifest a fundamental difficulty in neatly delineating form from content or norm from deviation.<sup>20</sup> And this difficulty is compounded as *Watt* fails, finally, to reduce style to a zero point. Instead, this oscillation comes to constitute a textual economy by which each successive reduction functions also as a restoration, reviving an anarchic life force in an “explosion of logic, epistemology and ontology” (35). For Coetzee, then, although “*Watt* aspires to the condition of music,” the novel “does not attain that condition because, as its confused genesis and formal fragmentation indicate, it is unfinished” (163). As a result, Coetzee thinks, “We must regard Beckett’s failure to carry *Watt* through to the ideal of total self-cancellation as a failure of nerve,” though this is “a failure which he made good when, in *L’Innommable*, he eventually and far more harshly constructed a complete work out of doubt alone” (164). Where in *The Unnamable* (1953), subject (the doubting self) and object (doubt itself) are unified, *Watt*, like the earlier *Murphy* (1938), fails to achieve such formal reflexivity, one where “consciousness of self can

only be consciousness of consciousness. Fiction is the only subject of fiction" (*DP* 1992: 38). Instead, in *Watt*, "We are not sure of the *telos*, the formal principle expressed as aim of function, but we know, so to speak, the shape of the *telos*. . . . Decline and inversion are reflected in *Watt*'s language, as reported by the narrator Sam. Decline and inversion constitute what I call the shape of the *telos*" ("EFSB" 35–36). Conversely, in the later works form subsumes content, as the generative principle coincides seamlessly with its material substance, the "tics we see on the verbal surface" (78). Ultimately, however, as only a "partial" (32) allegory, *Watt* forecloses on any such consummation, troubling any positivist approach to the relation between form and content and thus eluding the inductive stylistic methodologies through which Coetzee approaches the text.

If in this *Watt* the character remains trapped in tautological reasoning, mistakenly conflating word with world, then *Watt* the novel mockingly stages the impossibility of language ever reaching beyond itself to a living or embodied world. Language thus appears both as inextricable from reality and somehow nonetheless wholly heterogenous to it. For Coetzee, the situation is reflected in what the narrator Sam notes as *Watt*'s increasingly indecipherable discourse:

The following is an example of *Watt*'s manner, at this period: *Days of most, night of part, Knott with now. Now till up, little seen so oh, little heard so oh. Night till morning from. Heard I this, saw I this then what. . . .* From this it will perhaps be suspected: that the inversion affected, not the order of the sentences, but of the words only; . . . that there was perhaps more than a reversal of discourse; that the thought was perhaps inverted. ("EFSB" 140–41)

If the complicity of language and thought might seem to situate *Watt* as an idealist, tilting at windmills, at the same time the novel's irreducible skepticism ties its meaning to the indecipherable verbal paroxysms of *Watt*'s speech.<sup>21</sup>

As he reads *Watt* this way we can see Coetzee conceiving of style as inextricable from meaning, even as they remain somehow incommensurate. He sees language not as determining thought but as "associative" ("EFSB" 157), so that while thought is bound to those possibilities afforded by the field of language, that field is itself boundless.

(This paradoxical logic is integral to Beckett's palindromic aesthetics, by which every negative or "no" constitutes a further going "on" and vice versa. In *Worstward Ho* [1983] the narrator speaks of this condition as the "boundless bounded" [WH 83]). In Coetzee's later fictions, this understanding of style will give rise to a poetics of embeddedness: the necessity of being situated in or bound by context (linguistic, biological, historical) means that living things cannot be wholly determined by any single or ultimate context.

An important aspect of Coetzee's poetics of embeddedness concerns conceptions of time. The dissertation offers an implicit staging of the structuralist opposition between synchrony and diachrony. Indeed, it is the fundamentally synchronic, or static, character of structuralist approaches themselves that aligns Coetzee's initial dissatisfaction with close reading, or new critical approaches, and the eventual dissatisfaction with his own scientific methodology. Distinguishing his framework from what he sees as the "symbolist ideal" ("EFSB" 15) behind a postromantic or liberal-humanist aesthetic of "organic" unity," the dissertation early on establishes its own starting point: "Content is the aggregate of elements, form the relations among them." We can follow this position throughout. The introduction sets out the task of demonstrating that a statistically based stylistics cannot "integrate the study of style in overall literary study" (7); the conclusion appeals to the literary work as structured by an "internal economy" (151), so that its "verbal dimension" cannot be isolated from its "plot, structure, and the style of its context," as "an approach to the understanding of one of them leads to greater understanding of the others," and "no one aspect can be fully understood unless one considers its relation to the others." In thus elaborating on the impossibility of separating form and content, Coetzee also suggests, as Jarad Zimblar (2014) argues, the impossibility of convergence in terms of an organic whole. Indeed, Coetzee's economical thinking here emerges precisely through a repudiation of this "organic" ("EFSB" 10) metaphor.<sup>22</sup>

This is especially evident in the conclusion. Where "the convenience of a metaphor of organic unity or of a single system is that it allows the critic to start where it most suits him and to expand thence to cover the whole work" (152), for Coetzee, literature resists definitive meanings not by transcending given forms of sense but, rather, by proliferating a sense of embeddedness—"an interpenetrating system of systems" (151)—corresponding neither to the finite, quantifiable unit of measure nor to

a romantic sense of the immeasurability of the artistic work. Equally, while content is not a mere function of form, as the structural linguists argue, neither are form and content separable. Insightfully, Zimble (2014: 9) argues that for Coetzee the concept of style can be defined as “form understood relationally,” but Coetzee's complex account of literary relationality is fundamentally temporal rather than spatial. This is the key to Coetzee's later poetics of embeddedness. Indeed, Coetzee's understanding in the dissertation of the temporal economy of the literary work is itself embedded in his wider discussion of the fundamentally disjunctive nature of literary meaning. The logic of causality inherent in any conception of a literary work as an organic whole—history preceding writer, writer preceding the work, and the work preceding the reader—is disturbed by a literary temporality that blurs the distinction between writer and reader and replaces history as a ground of given (if shifting) norms, with history conceived as a site of contestation.

Coetzee's 1969 account of this process is concurrent with the poststructuralist critique of history and origins elaborated in Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Roland Barthes. His understanding (1977: 145) of the sense of the literary work, for example, closely resembles Barthes's critique of authorship: “The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a *before* and an *after*.” Coetzee's understanding of form as a negotiation between norm and deviation presupposes no such line, no organic foundation on which this negotiation might be conducted. In other words, norm and deviation are preconditions of each other, and thus for Coetzee the problem of deviation involves a logic of style inherently contradictory: literary language and literary works emerge as immanent to structures of everyday language and reality even as they also transcend them.<sup>23</sup>

Coetzee's rendering of finite embodiment is underscored by a later essay on Beckett's short prose work, *Lessness* (1969), entitled “Samuel Beckett's *Lessness*: An Exercise in Decomposition” (1973). For Coetzee (1973a: 198), insofar as *Lessness* constitutes a distillation of an automatic style of negation, the fact that the text can be approached with a structuralist/statistical approach attests to a fundamental “killing of time” akin to what the dissertation identifies as “the crippling weakness of stylostistics . . . its domination by this metaphor of linearity” (“EFSB” 161–62), that is by “a conception of language

as a one-dimensional stream extending in time” (160) in which “the experience, and particularly the stylistic experience, of a work of literature is a linear experience composed of a series of smaller experiences succeeding each other in time” (161). Inherent in such a conception is an understanding of “the mind as a computer with an input system which reads linear strips of coded information.”<sup>24</sup> In Coetzee’s account of reading, however, “we are continually reformulating formal hypotheses to account for what we are reading and what we have read,” and so “no description of the act of reading on a linear analogy can account for this incessant recursion.” For him, because style is necessarily bound up with context and “our experience of a work is more than the sum of a number of experiences of small contexts” (161), the teleological and linear succession of linguistic units can not account for stylistic whole. As we read, each successive small context is inscribed with “the memory of all the contexts that have preceded it,” an embeddedness structurally informed by the critique of the idea of style as deviation from a norm—an idea underwritten by a logic of normativity that literary works necessarily question.<sup>25</sup>

The logic of Coetzee’s critique of the positivist premise of his dissertation can also be traced in the later “Surreal Metaphors and Random Processes” (1979). “Since language is always changing,” he writes there, “a synchronic grammar is an artificial construct” (1979: 28). Focusing on how the contexts of both “production and reception” (27) of literary texts are necessarily also “changing” points to how Coetzee’s critique of structuralist methodologies, in the 1970s follows on Derrida’s, in “Force and Signification,” where he critiques the spatial terms of the structuralist approach as overlooking questions of time and history: “Th[e] history of the of the work is not only its *past*, the eve or the sleep in which it precedes itself in an author’s intentions, but is also the impossibility of its ever being *present*, of its ever being summarized by some absolute simultaneity or instantaneousness” (Derrida [1969] 1978: 15). In his dissertation, Coetzee develops a similar insight, one that grounds his later approach to the literary as focused on the relation of literature to embedded reality.<sup>26</sup> In later writings this critical approach, of course, takes form as creative practice.

In summary, the account of style in the dissertation reveals earlier critical work to be a precursor to Coetzee’s later novels as, enlisting Beckett’s fraught relation between word and world, they fundamentally

challenge the various discourses of domination and mastery they interrogate. Here, literary works cannot be reduced to history (they resist a one-to-one correspondence between word and world) even as they remain embedded in finite contexts of meaning (Coetzee strenuously avoids transcendence, despite the religious framework of the Jesus fictions). As I argue in the next section, as they represent literary authorship and authority, they reveal history itself as irreducible, Coetzee's poetics of embeddedness suggesting that what cannot be represented cannot be escaped. In his later writings, then, Coetzee (1993: 7) defines style not in terms of linguistic science or literary criticism but, rather, as

an approach to the world and to experience, political experience included. Ideas are certainly important . . . but the fact is, the ideas that operate in novels and poems, once they are unpicked from their context and laid out on the laboratory table, usually turn out to be uncomplicated, even banal. Whereas a style, an attitude to the world, as it soaks in, becomes part of the self, ultimately indistinguishable from the self.

Offering an "approach to the world and to experience," Beckett's writing thus underlies Coetzee's own understanding of style as neither an aesthetic instrument wielded for its own sake, nor as a means to serve some historical or other content, but as a mode of thinking.<sup>27</sup>

## The Words of Others

In Coetzee's dissertation and his other critical writings, he anticipates the critiques both of structuralist thinking and of ahistorical versions of poststructuralist textuality. For the former, consider Coetzee's continued skepticism about of digital technologies and what is often framed as binary thinking, an opposition to rationalism that often seems to manifest as a humanist defense of culture. In "On Literary Thinking," for example, he writes that, "If God will not keep our children from the single vision of YES or NO," the binary logic structuring rational thought in a digital age, "then it is up to the poets to do so" (Coetzee 2016a: 1152). If this is a kind of humanism, however, it is far from a simple one, as the recent Jesus fictions attest. In this section I will first

consider how Beckett's late modernism anticipates Coetzee's poetics of embeddedness, notably in relation to his staging of authorship. While I do consider how Coetzee's attention to the way language determines thought counters the idea of historical essentialism, at the same time his account of the relation between form and content points to the condition of being determined does not mean being subject to a limitation that is rational and quantifiable. Coetzee's antirationalism, that is, constitutes not a return to humanism but, rather, a refusal of the neatness of identifications.<sup>28</sup>

One pivotal legacy of Coetzee's dissertation is what amounts to a poststructuralist insistence that literary work cannot be reduced to history.<sup>29</sup> "I am not concerned in this essay with the views of the historical Samuel Beckett" ("EFSB" 3), the dissertation clarifies early on, taking issue with the author-led approach as exemplified by Leo Spitzer's 1928 essay on Proust, "Zum Stil Marcel Prousts." In light of Spitzer's taking stylistic phenomena as manifestations of "psychological etymon" (quoted in "EFSB" 86) within the writer, he typifies for Coetzee the "uncritical belief in the imitative potential of syntax" to mirror thought. For Coetzee, it is not possible to draw psychological conclusions based on, for example, Proust's use of parenthesis since "Proust is dead. Even if he were alive it would be unlikely that he would be prepared to tell us what 'the movements of his soul' were when he composed his fiction. Even if he were prepared we would have no means of verifying it, which would be merely another fiction" (87). The dynamic account of style in the dissertation thus challenges both the idea that a singular authority stands behind a work and the idea of the surface/depth approach more generally.<sup>30</sup> In this, Coetzee disavows the idea that underlying or ideal structures of meaning determine linear syntactical correspondences on the surface of the page—and thus the presupposition that the subject exists before language (a premise of Chomskyan linguistics) and that history exists as some kind of original or context or *ur-ground*.<sup>31</sup>

But even as later critical writings like "The Novel Today" might seem to court an ahistorical sort of poststructuralist textuality, Coetzee does not simply disavow context altogether. In this regard, consider especially his metafictional concern with the authority of the author figure in his later fiction, as for example in *Diary of a Bad Year*. The novel consists of three bands of text. The top section, the longest, consists of the protagonist's JC's thoughts and opinions. In an opinion entitled "On authority in fiction," he writes,

What the great authors are masters of is authority. What is the source of authority, or of what the formalists called the authority-effect? If authority could be achieved simply by tricks of rhetoric, then Plato was surely justified in expelling poets from his ideal republic. But what if authority can be attained only by opening the poet-self to some higher force, by ceasing to be oneself and beginning to speak vatically? . . . The god can be invoked, but does not necessarily come. 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)

The text invites us, of course, to equate JC with the author of *Diary of a Bad Year*, to discover in JC's denouncing of formalism an echo of Coetzee's resisting the idea that content is a mere function of form. Yet we ought to be dissuaded from doing so both by the authority effect achieved by the rhetorical form of passage itself and by attending closely to what JC is saying; even as poetry may exceed any finite linguistic or other context, it cannot be wholly unbounded. In light of Coetzee's dissertation, the paradox appears as entirely Beckettian: no mere "trick" could be responsible for the effect great writers achieve, even as their writings necessarily consist of words on a page.

This paradox of the authority of the author as articulated in *Diary of a Bad Year* has its roots in what appears in Coetzee's dissertation as the notion of a "fictionalised intelligence" ("EFSB" 159). This intelligence attaches to neither the biographical-historical author nor to the narrator or principal character, but to a third position, portending Coetzee's later extensive use of agentless sentences, free indirect discourse, and third-person present tense narration.<sup>32</sup> This account of authorship as both interior and exterior, as constituting but a single context rather than an ultimate source of meaning, accords with the account in the dissertation's conclusion of reading in fundamentally temporal terms, and with later writings that expand on that critique of the synchronic and perfective forms of structuralist analysis. In *Doubling the Point*, for example, Coetzee describes an "automatism built into language," the effect of which is that "writing writes us" (*DP* 18). Writer and reader are thus subject both to automatism and, at the same time, to a "push into the future," one that situates the work in relation to a present both indeterminate and, thus, as open to revision.<sup>33</sup>



To be open to revision, to write without authority or guarantee of origin, is not to simply float free from history into a realm of pure Barthesian textuality. Rather, such openness constitutes the premise of the ethico-political commitment inherent in Coetzee's poetics of embeddedness. "To write without authority is," as Chris Danta (2013: xii) observes, is "to make authority a question in and through one's writing." In the same way that, for Coetzee, authorship both depends on and lacks authority, he represents history itself as both impossible and necessary. In the post-Apartheid novel *Disgrace* (1999), for example, this sense of history emerges through the novel's thematization of language. Lurie confesses that "he would not mind hearing Petrus's story one day. But preferably not reduced to English. More and more he is convinced that English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa" (*D* 117). This truth that exceeds words points to the impossibility of representing the sheer horror of historical violence, but also to our necessary embeddedness in language (a condition thematized in the novel but also performed by its reliance on a free indirect discourse that wholly circumscribes the narrative voice). As Sam Durrant (2004: 24) thus suggests, "Rather than providing a direct relation of the history of apartheid, Coetzee's narratives . . . teach us that the true work of the novel consists not in the factual recovery of history, nor yet in the psychological recovery from history, but rather in the insistence on remaining inconsolable before history." Here, we can see how attending to Coetzee's dissertation helps illuminate how his poetics of embeddedness pushes postcolonialism beyond the kind of symptomatic criticism that reproduces the very mastery associated with binary or "Apartheid Thinking."<sup>34</sup>

Following the doctoral work of the 1960s, Coetzee's continued interest in the vexed relation between word and world is evidenced by a flurry of articles that appeared between 1980 and 1982, three of which were republished in *Doubling the Point*: "The Rhetoric of the Passive in English" (1980), "The Agentless Sentence as Rhetorical Device" (1980), and "Isaac Newton and the Ideal of a Transparent Scientific Language" (1982). In these, Coetzee remains concerned with the core issues identified in the dissertation, specifically Richard Ohmann's notion of style as "epistemic choice" (quoted in Coetzee 1969: 157), the ineluctability of metaphor, and the broader context of linguistic relativity and determinism. These essays also evidence a greater engagement

with the question of metaphor, as in "Isaac Newton and the Idea of a Transparent Scientific Language" (1982), for example, where Coetzee finds in Newton's *Principia* "a real struggle . . . to bridge the gap between the nonreferential symbolism of mathematics and a language too protean to be tied down to single, pure meanings" (DP 194). Recalling the critique of stylostistics in the dissertation, Coetzee here sees Newton's struggle to describe a reality perceived in mathematics (pertaining to theory of gravitational force) as a struggle for a *characteristica universalis*, for a "pure language in which a pure, pared-down, unambiguous translation of the truths of pure mathematics" (193–94) could be found.<sup>35</sup>

Because, as the narrator of Beckett's *The Unnamable* puts it, we are obliged to speak the "words of others" (U 25), the pure rationality the Enlightenment claims for itself necessarily remains embedded in one context or another. Indeed, Coetzee's works highlight precisely how claiming such a purity allows religion to be smuggled back into the frame. This is staged time and again through recurring instances of language purified into unintelligible silence: Magda's private language of immanence and affect in *In the Heart of the Country* (1977); the Barbarian girl's silence in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980); Michael K's quietude in *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983); Friday's dancing in *Foe* (1986); Lucy's silence about the rape in *Disgrace*; JC's illegible handwriting in *Diary of a Bad Year*. That such instances of purity so often involve the silence of characters dispossessed of the means of expression discloses the fundamentally political orientation of Coetzee's writing. This orientation is not simply a question of thematizing; as the dissertation demonstrates, for Coetzee literary meaning has little to do with themes per se or extractable truths. Accordingly, we see how what Jane Poyner (2009: 184) terms the paradox of postcolonial authorship—"That getting one's voice heard is always at the cost of imposing authority"—can be seen to emerge from the fundamentally Beckettian context of linguistic skepticism.<sup>36</sup> In other words, in their fundamental ambiguity, as they exceed any definitive reading Coetzee's fictions disclose the intricate complicity of reason and mastery.

Just as Coetzee's dissertation anticipates how his South African writings and later metafictional engagements with authorship resist any direct relation to history (including biography), so too does it distinguish Coetzee's aesthetics from any naive humanism. This manifests again through Coetzee's engagement with linguistic skepticism. His first

novel *Dusklands* (1974), represents a figure based on stylostatistician Wilhelm Fucks's vision of what Coetzee (1971: 94) describes as a "linguistic engineer" seeking a universal "formalized language." In that essay Coetzee presents Fucks as resisting the idea that languages have "built-in epistemological biases" and proposing instead that "linguistic engineers" will design a language of universal objectivity; for Coetzee, however, such a language would risk tying "succeeding generations into a twentieth-century positivist mythology more tightly than natural languages tie us into mythologies of the past." In the novel, the self-sufficient position of the linguistic engineer is embodied in Eugene Dawn, and his mental breakdown signals the complicity of twentieth-century techno-scientific positivism with the military industrial complex. From the first, then, Coetzee's fiction concerns both the fallacy of Enlightenment rationality (a concern culminating in his 2003 novel *Elizabeth Costello*) and the condition of necessary embeddedness in linguistic and material forms.

It is in the recent Jesus novels, however, where the ideas of the dissertation are most fully developed in fiction. Resembling "Platonic dialogues," as Anthony Uhlmann (2020: 215) notes, these works explicitly stage the embeddedness of forms and of the relation between language and thought. Set outside of recognizable historical and geographic contexts (although everyone speaks Spanish), the novels chart the life and times of the Christlike David, focusing especially on his unusual education. Following *The Childhood of Jesus*, *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016) and *The Death of Jesus* (2019) continue to explore David's divine status in relation to his refusal to think in terms of abstraction. Like Watt, David is an idealist, but Coetzee explores this in terms of verbal determinism and of numerical determinism both. David scorns arithmetic, having been taught that

integral numbers are divinities, heavenly entities who existed before the physical world came into being and will continue to exist after the world has come to an end, and therefore deserve reverence. To mix the numbers one with another (*adición, sustracción*), or chop them into pieces (*fracciones*), or apply them to measuring quantities of bricks or flour (*la medida*), constitutes an affront to their divinity. (DJ 8)

Just as JC sees no correlation between the authority of an author and the linguistic or rhetorical materials that make up the work, so too David

sees no correlation between numbers and the world, a source of his authority. Numbers cannot be used to perform mere tasks; nor are they instruments of reason. Rather, as the scurrilous Dmitri reports, "Number rules the universe—that, I can now divulge, was part of David's message (but only part)" (187). But in keeping with Coetzee's wider fictional engagement with the idea of a pure language—where form would be content and content would be form, as Beckett writes of Joyce—David's pure mathematics is undercut by the logic of embeddedness informing Coetzee's metafictional ruses and formal experiments (including the implicit staging of a contest between literary dialogue and Platonic dialogue).<sup>37</sup>

David's ambiguous status as messiah ultimately works not to orient us to some divine or postsecular outside or beyond but, rather, to the insufficiency of our rational forms of sense making in the face of what we might justifiably term the mystery of life itself. In this, the Jesus fictions are illuminated by Coetzee's (2016a: 1152) recent comments on the rise of digital technologies: "As the reach of digital devices extends further and deeper into our daily existence, one can only foresee a further and deeper takeover of mental life—at least among human beings—by what I loosely call binary thinking, and the corresponding spread of a form of mental constraint that conceives of itself quite innocently as freedom." Despite being himself at the forefront of digital age in the 1960s, Coetzee's creative and critical endeavors taken together present a challenge to what Tom Eyers (2017: 34) diagnoses as the recent "prodigious growth of neo-positivist methodologies in the humanities." Coetzee's decision to set the Jesus fictions in a nondigital world appears in this light to demonstrate a return to his dissertation and a thinking through of what is at stake in the digital revolution of our new century. Writing to Paul Auster, Coetzee is adamant that he will not "write novels in which people go around with personal electronic devices," conceding that the "telephone is about as far as I will go in a book, and then reluctantly" (Coetzee and Auster 2013: 226–27)—a deep skepticism toward new rationality of digital devices we can trace back to the rejection of quantitative methods of literary analysis in the dissertation. In the Jesus fictions life itself is thematized as incalculable. David evades the state census; he remains uncountable in every sense—a "universal exception" (*DJ* 22).

Derived from his early study of Beckett and the concept of style, Coetzee's poetics of embeddedness manifests both the impossibility of

mastering the present and the necessity of being bound to it. Beckett put the dilemma this way: “You have to work in an area where there are no possible pronouns, or solutions, or reactions or standpoints. . . . That’s what makes it so diabolically difficult” (Juliet 1995: 165). Coetzee concludes his dissertation with an enigmatic reflection on Beckett’s composition of *Watt* during the Second World War: “[*Watt* was] begun in 1941 and completed in draft in 1944. It is not entirely strange that during these years, while a statistician in Cambridge was copying *De imitatione Christi* word by word on cards . . . that an Irishman in France should have been recording for posterity all the permutations which the nouns *door*, *window*, *fire*, and *bed* can undergo” (164). Just as it appears in this final moment that the historical Beckett is allowed to slip back into the picture, the focus on seemingly futile labor in the face of historical catastrophe suggests that the inescapability of history is not to be linked to its unequivocal importance as a matter of record or representation. Indeed, in conversation with David Attwell, Coetzee suggests that “history may be, as you call it, a process for representation, but to me it feels more like a *force* for representation” (1992: 67). At its end, the dissertation offers a vision of the literary enterprise as neither subordinate to history nor evasive of history. Ultimately, by adapting and adopting Beckett’s compact with failure, Coetzee’s poetics of embeddedness affords a position against all possible positions—a nonposition resisting complicity in those modes of representation that, attempting to master history, cannot respond to the unquantifiably finite but always embedded present.<sup>38</sup>

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## Notes

1. For two examples of Coetzee's engagements with Beckett's legacy, see Tajiri 2008 and Dukes 2019. Tajiri (2008: 365) takes a thematic approach, considering that legacy in terms of thematic parallels such as "attachment to mother, vagabondage in dispossession, aloofness from society and, most important, a critique of storytelling." Drawing on the discourse of cybernetics, Dukes (2019: 307) argues for the political implications of Coetzee's inheritance of Beckett's "rhythm of doubt."
2. *Verbal determinism* is a term I take from one of the earliest critical pieces on the relation between Beckett and Coetzee, Stephen Kellman's "J. M. Coetzee and Samuel Beckett: The Translingual Link" (1996). Kellman's emphasis on translingualism is slightly hampered by Coetzee's focus on Beckett's English fictions.
3. Coetzee ultimately rejected the central presupposition of his dissertation's own structuralist-inspired approach, that the meaning of a text could be isolated, defined, and quantified. His failing to achieve a synthesis of quantitative method and literary meaning means for Coetzee that "we find precious little about Beckett that we might not have guessed," and that "it is no consolation to be told that our guesses have at least received numerical confirmation" ("EFSB" 148). In discussing with his supervisor, Thomas Whitbread, the oversimplifying tendency of stylostatistics, Coetzee offered a mischievous smile, which, as J. C. Kannemeyer (2012: 153) interprets the scene, "told Whitbread something about his candidate's sense of humour and his insight into the relative value of his work."
4. There is a strong connection between Beckett's *Watt* and the work of the Austrian language philosopher Fritz Mauthner. For a sustained focus on the relation between Mauthner and Coetzee, see McDonald 2017. It should be noted that Coetzee's interest in linguistic skepticism derives also from the structuralist milieu in which he was writing in the 1960s (notably the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis).
5. Other commentators have sought to build on the dissertation to account for a more capacious understanding of Coetzee's own style (Zimbler 2014; Attridge 2009) and of Coetzee's vexed relation to the realist novel (Hayes 2010). Patrick Hayes (2010: 38), for instance, does so to connect Coetzee's critique of the "logocentric illusion of objectivity" to Beckett's own. Derek Attridge (2009: 86) emphasizes the often neglected comic affinity between the two writers, noting in particular the shared "comic apprehension of the absurdity of the human claim to be in charge of the body."

6. In a 1986 interview, Coetzee says, “Much of my academic training was in linguistics. And in many ways I am more interested in the linguistic than in the literary side of my academic profession. I think there is evidence of an interest in problems of language throughout my novels. I don’t see any disruption between my professional interest in language and my activities as a writer” (Sévry 1986: 1).

7. As Dirk Van Hulle and Shane Weller (2014: 26) note, “The first real fruit of Beckett’s Mauthner-influenced conception of a literature of the unword was the novel *Watt*.”

8. For a detailed consideration of the archive and its relation to Coetzee’s writings, see Farrant, Easton, and Wittenberg 2021.

9. Stylostatistics can be understood, as Peter Johnston (2014) writes, “as a branch of stylistics concerned with those features of a text’s style that can be subjected to numerical analysis.” Johnston’s unpublished dissertation, “Presences of the Infinite: J. M. Coetzee and Mathematics” (2013) remains the definitive study of Coetzee’s relation to mathematics and quantitative literary studies.

10. This essay constitutes one of several on Beckett, republished in *Doubling The Point* (1992), that derive from the dissertation. They include also “The Comedy of Point of View in Beckett’s *Murphy*” (1970) and “The Manuscript Revisions of Beckett’s *Watt*” (1972).

11. For Coetzee, Beckett’s later postwar writings manifest an aesthetics of disembodiment and automatic negation. It is seen as “utterly appropriate for an artist to whom defeat constitutes a universe that he should march with eyes open into the prison of empty style” (*DP* 49).

12. As David Attwell explains, Coetzee’s doctoral research in Texas coincided “quite dramatically it seems, with the emergent moment of linguistics in the West, both as method and as a model for the analysis of culture” (*DP* 23). This was a moment when the power in American linguistics was “shifting from the American structuralism associated with Leonard Bloomfield to generative–transformational grammar,” the latter associated with Noam Chomsky. Responding to Attwell, Coetzee writes, “It makes a great deal of sense to assimilate Chomskyan linguistics to structuralism . . . if only because of the similar weight the two enterprises give to innate structures” (24). As Coetzee notes in the dissertation, “Recently, however, there has been something of a philosophic revolution in linguistics, led by Noam Chomsky, against logical empiricism and in favor of a revived Cartesianism in which the ‘mental act’ is distinct from the verbal act” (“EFSB” 156). At the same time,

Coetzee began reading continental thinkers such as Roland Barthes and Claude Lévi-Strauss. For a detailed account of this intellectual background see Kannemeyer 2012: 145–50.

13. Coetzee himself critiques Bloch's quantitative stylistic methodology, arguing that such positivist "ideology" prevents the critic from "explaining stylistic features in the light of an overall conception of the work" ("EFSB" 6–7). For Coetzee, in failing to reckon with the incommensurability of stylistic features and literary meaning, Bloch fails to attend to the ways form and content are necessarily mutually constitutive.

14. Coetzee speculates that Beckett's transition to writing in French is driven by his distaste for English's "grammatical laxity and sensory evocativeness" ("EFSB" 7). Later, Coetzee (1973a: 47) suggests that the switch to French is explained by the fact that "the tendency of English towards chiaroscuro is notorious."

15. Where the dissertation focuses on Beckett's subversion of and resistance to statistical analysis, Coetzee's (1963: x) master's thesis focuses on Ford Madox Ford, whose work is put forward there as "probably the finest example of literary pure mathematics in English."

16. Although Coetzee's dissertation privileges Beckett's English fiction, in a later essay Coetzee (2008: 169) writes, "It can be fairly said that Beckett did not find himself as a writer until he switched to French and, in particular, until the years 1947–51."

17. Coetzee evokes here Kenner's own comments about *Watt's* style: "It is an austere prose, not narcissistic, nor baroque. It is not opulent. It moves with the great aim of some computation, doing a thousand things but only necessary ones" ("EFSB" 9–10).

18. As Johnston (2014) argues, "Watt's consciousness [is thereby] analogous to the type of deterministic formal axiomatic system of which the modern computer is perhaps the most familiar model."

19. A recent example of a quantitative or digital approach, more attuned to the epistemological peculiarities of the literary object, is outlined in Ramsay 2011. In recent years the technological and methodological limitations Coetzee contended with have been superseded by approaches that aim beyond the stylostatistical analysis of lexical features. But in their understanding of texts as quantifiable data sets, the digital humanities scholars of the Stanford Literary Lab (such as Mark Algee-Hewitt, Eric Fredner, and Hannah Walser) can thus be seen as successors to Coetzee's pioneering work in the 1960s.



20. In “The Manuscript Revisions of Beckett’s *Watt*” (1972) Coetzee elaborates this insight, suggesting that the bulk of Beckett’s revision to the manuscripts is directed to reinforce this “principle of symmetry,” which is “the stylistic reflection of the mental rhythm ‘On the one hand X, on the other hand not-X’” (DP 39–40).

21. An example of Coetzee’s enduring interest in questions of linguistic skepticism can be witnessed in a letter to Paul Auster:

One cannot be friends with an inanimate object, says Aristotle (*Ethics*, chapter 8). Of course not! Who ever said one could? But interesting nonetheless: all of a sudden one sees where modern linguistic philosophy got its inspiration. Two thousand four hundred years ago Aristotle was demonstrating that what looked like philosophical postulates could be no more than rules of grammar. In the sentence “I am friends with X,” he says, X has to be animate noun. (Coetzee and Auster 2013: 2)

22. Interestingly, Beckett too draws on a notion of economy in “Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce,” where he describes Joyce’s *Work in Progress* as constituted by a “savage economy of hieroglyphics.” Similarly, for Beckett, the notion of Joyce’s “economic directness” is also conceived as a form of thinking and is described as an “exteriorisation of thought” (“DBVJ” 29).

23. For Coetzee, any such definition of the norm, whether in idealized terms of language as a unified whole or as a limited sample appropriate to a specific analysis, ultimately has to contend with the insurmountable problem of historical contingency: “There is no reason to believe the approaches which we today regard as divergent will always remain so” (“EFSB” 155). As he writes in regard to a discussion of infrequent nouns in *Watt*, “But we have now opened the floodgates. For we are not concerned, for example, with absolute rarity (whatever that is) but with rarity in a context” (49).

24. In a later essay, “Linguistics and Literature,” Coetzee (1982: 43) explicitly draws on the concept of metaphor itself to describe the inadequacy of syntactically based stylistic approaches: “Chomsky’s syntactically based grammar of the 1960s provided no way of dealing with metaphor except as an infringement of lexical category boundaries, such as the boundary between animate and inanimate.”

25. In a discussion of Russian formalism, Coetzee observes that, “Any theory or style as deviation from the norms of language as a whole would be riddled with tautology” (“EFSB” 14).

26. In other words, in the absence of what Coetzee terms a “special literary language” (“EFSB” 13), the meaning of a work cannot therefore be reduced to the level of statement (seen as correlate to an isolable zone of literary language) but is linked to an ability to *perform* meanings (and therefore to the embodied site of performance).

27. It is this understanding of literary style as a mode of thinking that's at stake in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (2014) review of *The Childhood of Jesus*, where she describes Coetzee as a “creative writer of theory.”

28. For an extended analysis of Coetzee's writings in relation to questions of the human, see Weigandt 2020.

29. In “The Novel Today” Coetzee (1988: 2–3) discusses the literary work in relation to history in terms of “supplementarity” or “rivalry” and aligns himself with the position of rivalry against his contemporaries, notably the social realist praxis of Nadime Gordimer.

30. In their *Critique and Postcritique*, Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski (2017: 1) see the surface and depth binary as underpinning the “suspicion hermeneutics” in literary and cultural studies (of which they themselves are suspicious). They are in the vanguard of a movement that laments the pervasive critical commitment to “demystifying, and defamiliarizing,” especially insofar as this establishes an opposition between the manifest or surface level of a text and a latent or deeper level of meaning (hidden, typically, from the author, the characters, and the casual reader).

31. Noam Chomsky (1965: 25) famously advances his nativist conception of the “innate linguistic theory” of language acquisition in *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*.

32. For Chris Ackerley (2011: 30) the middle voice constitutes one of “Beckett's gifts . . . perhaps the most insistent and enduring.”

33. In *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee expands on the processes of writing, reading, and interpretation with great attention to the nuances of critical and theoretical debates. What emerges is an account of the work of art according to which the writer is also always the reader, both active and passive in the production of the work: “Writing shows or creates (and we are not always sure we can tell one from the other) what our desire was, a moment ago” (*DP* 18). As Carrol Clarkson (2009: 44–45) elucidates, “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. . . . The

writer's intentions are [therefore] not reducible to the meanings produced, just as the production of meaning is not reducible to authorial intention.”

34. Against the trend that seeks to move beyond symptomatic or theoretical criticism, as typified by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's essay “Surface Reading: An Introduction” (2009), Coetzee describes the pitfalls of a symptomatic approach in *Doubling the Point*: “In the act of triumphantly tearing the clothes off its subject and displaying the nakedness beneath—‘Behold the truth!’—it exposes a naïveté of its own. For is the naked body really the truth?” (*DP* 106).

35. Coetzee focuses on Newton's attribution of agency to a gravitational force and discusses Newton's early reception in terms of a debate about the relative novelty of a theory that, by “attributing agency and even volition” (*DP* 188) to celestial bodies without cause, seemed as animistic as medieval physics. To suggest Newton's awareness of the problems involved in popularizing his work, Coetzee turns to an approach first articulated in his dissertation, Richard Ohmann's account of style, which hypothesizes that syntactic patterns mirror habits of meaning and have “psychological correlates” (quoted in Coetzee 1992: 161).

36. Shane Weller (2018) has argued that this context of linguistic skepticism marks Beckett as specifically late modernist and is key to understanding modernism itself.

37. I explore the ethico-political consequences of Coetzee's poetics of embeddedness in the Jesus fictions, especially in relation to the concepts of finitude and sacrifice, in “Finitizing Life: Between Reason and Religion in J. M. Coetzee's Jesus Novels” (2019).

38. In a 1992 interview, Coetzee gets at this sense of embeddedness without direct engagement with History proper (in the form of public life or the prevailing discourses that demarcate the contemporary). In response to a question regarding whether his literature has cut itself off from a general reading public, Coetzee answers, “Yes, I may indeed be cutting myself off, at least from today's readers; nevertheless, what I am engaged in doing is more important than maintaining that contact” (Begam 1992: 430).

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