

J.M. Coetzee and the Problems of Literature

by

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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This dissertation traces the evolution of J.M. Coetzee's thinking concerning literary form in the non-fiction he wrote between 1963 and 1984. During the first two decades of his career, Coetzee completed a Master's thesis on Ford Madox Ford, a doctoral dissertation on Samuel Beckett, and numerous articles on topics ranging from quantitative stylistics, to linguistics, to classical rhetoric. Although Coetzee's novels have become among the most widely studied contemporary fiction in the world, his earliest writing about literature has been widely ignored. I argue that in neglecting Coetzee's early work on literary form scholars have neglected much of his most important thinking concerning both the nature of the novel as a literary genre and literary form itself. If Coetzee's novels are important in large part because of how they rethink the conventions of fiction, then it is critical to understand that his novels are extensions of the thinking he did as a doctoral candidate in linguistics and literature, and as a professor.

This dissertation is also a study of how practicing novelists conceive of fiction writing. Coetzee's thinking about literary form and the novel genre cannot be properly understood without understanding how practicing writers generally, and Coetzee in particular, understand the craft of fiction writing. A full grasp of Coetzee's writing is

unattainable in isolation from his ideas about writing as a vocation. These ideas, in turn, are inaccessible without an understanding of his early writing on literary form and stylistics. As I study Coetzee's work on Ford Madox Ford (Chapter One), Samuel Beckett (Chapter Two), and Gerrit Achterberg/Franz Kafka (Chapter Three), I demonstrate how Coetzee's studies of literature are uniquely shaped by a novelist's conception of fiction writing.

Acknowledgements and Dedication

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Introduction

Solving the Problems of Literature: On the Writing of J.M. Coetzee

The purpose of this dissertation is to develop ideas that have their origins in several feelings I have had, and continue to have, about the writing of J.M. Coetzee and the field of study that surrounds him. I use the word “feelings” not because I wish to be less than precise in my thinking, but because the ideas and arguments that fill this dissertation began as feelings—as acutely felt intuitions about the workings of the literature I was trying to understand: as a feeling of conviction about what was missing in Coetzee studies; as a feeling of frustration about what seemed to be a lack of concern among literary scholars for the unique ways in which novelists think and write about the fiction writing process; and as a feeling of excitement about the importance of Coetzee’s early writing to both a proper understanding of his novels and to a proper understanding of how Coetzee’s thoughts on the craft of writing color his theories on literature in profound ways.

This dissertation is my attempt to transform these feelings and beliefs into writing. It is also my attempt to explore what I call *problems of literature* as they appear, and are worked through, in Coetzee’s essays and fiction. What I mean by the term *problems of literature*, and how these problems (and Coetzee’s attempts to solve them) figure into my greater project, is discussed in the latter half of this introduction. As a way

of explaining how the arguments in this book came about, and as a way of putting the *problems of literature* in their relevant contexts, I explain below where these intuitions and feelings came from, and what sort of arguments and forms of thinking they led to.

When I first began reading criticism of J.M. Coetzee's novels (this was six or seven years ago), I felt that nearly all of the criticism on his work portrayed Coetzee as an author who wrote fiction that could just as well be read as literary theory, or that was actually political allegory (a kind of facile literary journalism written in code), or whose interest was primarily as an example of modernist or postmodernist forms and themes. Criticism was less about Coetzee's writing understood on its own terms and more about what his work meant to a set of debates that were then going on in the field. The early books on Coetzee were of this sort: Teresa Dovey's work was explicitly Lacanian, Dick Penner's *Countries of the Mind* delved into the colonial and Cartesian heritage of Coetzee's early fiction, Sue Kossew published *A Post-Colonial Reading of J.M. Coetzee and André Brink*, and David Attwell, in *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, elegantly put Coetzee's novels in their political and literary-historical contexts.

With rare exception, the articles and anthologies and special journal issues devoted to Coetzee followed suit. Politics and history were dominant; attention to form was mostly hedged toward allegory, or to matching up the metafictional components of Coetzee's writing to some corresponding epoch in the development of literary style. Appreciation for Coetzee's writing on its own terms – as constituting a way in which literature takes on meaning, and seeks out and embodies truth, that is superordinate to the political and historical realities of which it is a part and from which it emerges – was barely existent. My feeling, then and now, about the general spirit that characterizes

Coetzee studies is: Writing about Coetzee is mostly a matter of figuring out how to slot him in to history, or politics, or literary theory. Upon re-reading much of the early criticism, I continue to feel much the same way, though there was more writing against the grain than I had initially believed there to be (for instance, the early work of Mike Marais). I also (for the most part) found the early neo-Marxist criticism of Peter Knox-Shaw, Michael Vaughan, and Michael Chapman urgent and passionately connected to South African reality, as opposed to naïve about Coetzee's motives as a writer (which, I confess, was my original response).

Then Derek Attridge wrote *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*. Principally, it is a deeply critical response to the way of understanding Coetzee's fiction that I have just described. But it is also an attempt to explain what it is about literature that makes programmatic historical and political readings unequal to the singular inventiveness and complexity of literary fiction. In Attridge's hands, Coetzee's writing is representative of the singular nature and power of literature; Attridge calls for critics of literature generally – and of Coetzee in particular – to write in a way that does justice to the singularity of the literary by being equal to the challenges that that singularity poses to the critic who faces the task of writing thoughtfully and accurately in response to it. “A literary work is not an object or a thesis;” writes Attridge, “literature *happens*” (xii). “The singularity of the literary work is produced not just by its difference from all other works, but by the new possibilities for thought and feeling it opens up in its creative transformation of familiar norms and habits: singularity is thus inseparable from *inventiveness*” (11). And, he says, “What I am trying to counter is the common view of the literary work...as a static, self-sufficient, formal entity which, while it may be the product of historical processes and the

occasion for various interpretations across time, is a fixed linguistic structure without a temporal or performative dimension” (10). In contrast to this “common view,” the singularity of literature (characterized by its unpredictability, its resistance to being reduced to banal discourses, its recourse to ways of meaning only possible in literature) is at the very core of the “effectiveness [of Coetzee’s fiction] as literature” (6).

For Attridge, this singularity is intrinsically ethical: “In doing justice to a literary work, we encounter the singular demands of the other. Coetzee’s works both stage, and are, irruptions of otherness into our familiar worlds, and they pose the question: what is our responsibility toward the other?” (xii). Literature – because its unique formal properties can embody and express ethical experiences and ideas in ways that go beyond a merely instrumental discourse on ethics – is ethical by its very nature, in so much as its singularity is a form of otherness or alterity that requires that the reader (if he is responsible) respond to the ethical demand made by that singular otherness.¹ Attridge’s frequent use of terms like “otherness” and “alterity” (which I adopt to represent his work) reflect the extent to which his thinking is formed by, and is meant to be in conversation with, the work of Derrida and Levinas.

What the singularity of literature means for the literary critic is central to my thinking in this book, so I will quote Attridge’s thoughts on this matter at length:

In order for a literary work to take place, the act of reading must be responsive to its singularity. This is hardly a new or controversial assertion, but what is less easy to grasp is that singularity in this sense exists not in opposition to generality. The literary work is constituted, that is, not by an unchanging core but by the singular fashioning of the codes and conventions of the institution of literature, as they exist and exert pressure in a particular time and place. Its singularity is a

¹ I explore the singularity of literature in a psychoanalytic context in my forthcoming book *The Analyst’s Ear and the Critic’s Eye: Rethinking Psychoanalysis and Literature* (co-author T. Ogden).

uniqueness derived from a capacity to be endlessly transformed while remaining identifiable—within the institutional norms—as what it is. A response that might be called “responsible,” that simultaneously reenacts and brings into being the work as literature and not as something else, and as *this* work of literature and not another one, is a response that takes into account as fully as possible, by re-staging them, the work’s own performances—of, for example, referentiality, metaphoricity, intentionality, and ethicity. (9)

In *The Singularity of Literature*, a companion work to *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, Attridge writes, “To read a work responsibly...is to read it without placing over it a grid of possible uses, as historical evidence, moral lesson, path to truth, political inspiration, or personal encouragement. It is to trust in the unpredictability of reading, its openness to the future” (129).

It should be noted that Attridge’s statements (both about critical responsibility and about the relationship of the novel to history and politics) are in keeping with Coetzee’s own thoughts on how literature is frequently misappropriated and poorly handled. Here is Coetzee on criticism in *Doubling the Point*: “What can it ever be, but either a betrayal (the usual case) or an overpowering (the rarer case) of its object? How often is there an equal marriage?” (61). And, in a 1987 address at the *Weekly Mail* Book Week, Coetzee takes a stance on the correspondence of literature to history by endorsing a novel of “rivalry,” which is

a novel that operates in terms of its own procedures and issues in its own conclusions, not one that operates in terms of the procedures of history and eventuates in conclusions that are checkable by history (as a child’s schoolwork is checked by a schoolmistress). In particular I mean a novel that evolves its own paradigms and myths, in the process (and here is the point at which true rivalry, even enmity, perhaps enters into the picture) perhaps going so far as to show up the mythic status of history—in other words, demythologizing history. Can I be more specific? Yes: for example, a novel that is prepared to work itself out outside the terms of class conflict, race conflict, gender conflict or any of the other oppositions out of which history and the historical disciplines erect themselves. (“The Novel Today” 3)

Despite such warnings, Coetzee's novels have continued to be read in just the way that Coetzee was hoping to discredit. In many ways, Attridge's notion of singularity is an extension of Coetzee's vision of a novel of "rivalry."

The proof of the importance of Attridge's work to Coetzee studies is in the pudding. The books on Coetzee that have followed from Attridge's book reflect a turn in the field toward matters of the literary, and toward matters of form: Stephen Mulhall's very rigorous book on what the debates between literary scholars and philosophers over *Elizabeth Costello* say about the nature of each discipline; Patrick Hayes's *J.M. Coetzee and the Novel*, which looks at how Coetzee's work situates itself within the novel genre while interrogating its conventions; Gillian Dooley's formally minded exploration of the "power of narrative" in Coetzee's works; and *J.M. Coetzee and Ethics*, a collection of essays assembled by Anton Leist and Peter Singer, which despite being oriented toward ethical and philosophical discussions still reflects—in the very nature of the arguments contained within it—how, after Attridge, the singularity of the literary in Coetzee must always at least be contended with.

Though Attridge's work should be credited with having given rise to an era in Coetzee studies in which the formal and the literary dimension of Coetzee's writing is paramount, I do not think that it is true that these contemporary Coetzee scholars are engaging (when they do) with the form of Coetzee's work in a way that is in keeping with Attridge's notion of reading, or that does justice to the singularity of Coetzee's innovativeness. This is because most "close readings" of Coetzee only point to aesthetic patterns as a way of arriving at a set of conclusions about the thematic interests and general meaning of some part of Coetzee's writing. In these cases, form is of interest for

what it can reveal about politics, history, gender, ethics, and the many other heuristics under which literary studies sections literature. The uniqueness of the writing – understood in the context of the field of language in which it comes to the reader – is reduced to something that is checkable by aesthetics (just as Coetzee’s writing is often reduced to something checkable by history or politics). Close reading is really a misnomer, in that the critic is no closer to capturing what is going on in the language than if he were to merely read the text as thinly disguised historical allegory. Unfortunately, in these cases, form becomes something like content—rather than something that, through the effects of language, carries in it a significance which, to understand it, requires a new way of writing developed during the effort of responding to the full range of meaning built into the language.

This project testifies to the impact of Attridge’s writing on my thinking. But my work is also a reaction to Attridge’s work. It is an attempt to make my own discoveries and to develop my own lines of thinking, and so, in places, to disagree with Attridge, and to apply different methods of analysis.

For Attridge, much of the interest of the singularity of literature is in the ethical demands it places on readers, and for what this singularity means for literature’s relationship to ethics (understood both as a set of philosophical ideas and as a way of thinking, feeling, and behaving in relation to others). There is, he says, “an ethical dimension to any act of literary signification or literary response,” so “formal innovation...is therefore a kind of ethical testing and experiment” (*J.M. Coetzee* 11). I do not disagree. As a basic proposition it seems self-evident, and Attridge’s way of exploring the relationship between formal innovation and ethics is wonderful. There can

be no doubt that the singularity of Coetzee's writing in and of itself constitutes ethical "testing" that is fundamental to the literary-ethical import of his work.

However, it also seems that if formal innovation is always a form of ethical testing, then formal innovation can also always be read as ethical testing. This of course opens any critic up to the danger of invariably reading formal innovation as *an example* of ethical testing—as nothing but ethical testing. This, just as clearly, would reduce formal innovation to something that can be reduced to ethics and ethical testing, which would, in turn, inadequately address the singularity of literature that constitutes the prized form of non-instrumental ethical discourse being expounded. As soon as we pledge ourselves to reading formal singularity for its ethical significance, we risk *mining* the writing—treating it not as an event but as something to be plundered for discrete conclusions. Attridge is exceedingly careful not to do this, even as his readings of Coetzee are of an ethical caste all the way through. To avoid doing what he has set out not to do (to make literature into something that is simply checkable by ethics), Attridge avoids claiming that Coetzee's work has a uniform ethical outlook, and instead tries to see how Coetzee's formal innovation and experimentation are attempts on Coetzee's part to work through (using the particular capacities of literary form) the issues and ideas that he wishes to engage with in his writing.

Nonetheless, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* is ethically minded. It endeavors to demonstrate how formal innovation carries in it ethical meaning in a way that keeps open the possibility for Coetzee to continually reinvent the relationship between form and ethics in his writing—there is no formula that can account for the correspondence of formal innovation and ethics because literature is ethical in its

fundamental *otherness*. But, even so, the readings are still oriented toward the ethical because responsiveness to otherness in any form, in Attridge's thinking, is inherently ethical.

My point is that despite the brilliance of Attridge's readings of Coetzee, and despite his remarkable vigilance in keeping alive the singularity of Coetzee's writing at every moment in relationship to its embodiment of ethical dynamics, it is still the case that the singularity of Coetzee's formal innovation is directed toward an ethical dimension, which has the effect of turning this singularity – to some extent – into something to be read in an ethical frame of mind. I do not believe that it was Attridge's intention to turn singularity into ethics. I imagine that his own responses to Coetzee's writing were frequently ethical, and naturally he wanted to explore at length the ethical valence of Coetzee's work. Still, whereas for Attridge the singularity of literature (because it constitutes an *otherness* to which the reader must respond) makes reading something to be understood as a fundamentally ethical act, for me this way of framing the reader's response to singularity is inhibiting in so much as, no matter how much it attempts not to, it always foregrounds a way of thinking that is colored by ethical debates and concepts.

So, if readers must be responsive to the singularity of Coetzee's writing, they must be responsive to its singularity in a variety of ways, and they must be exceedingly careful not to close down this singularity by feeding it into preset methodologies or theories, or by writing about it using terminology culled entirely from long standing debates (which frequently grow stale as the writing hardens). This is to say that the singularity of literature requires a singularity of criticism to match it. This kind of

criticism will respond to dimensions of Coetzee's writing in ways that are not necessarily ethically committed, and will moreover attempt to engage with Coetzee's work in a way that, in and of itself, is singular and inventive. This means writing critically in a way that does not recycle the accepted academic vocabulary for discussing and understanding Coetzee's works, but instead invents new ways of writing about, and thinking about, Coetzee's work that calls upon the expressive capacities of language to say and do something *else*.

This also will mean that a reading of Coetzee will be new partly due to the *way that it is written*. Part of proper responsiveness to the singularity of literature, I believe, demands a form of receptivity that is only possible when one invents a way of writing that, because it eschews technical language and fixed methodologies, has developed during the process of writing in response to the particular demands that the text places on the reader. Where particular works are under the control of a particular set of concepts and terms and debates (fed through staid academic jargon), a singularity of criticism will write away from the parts of the debate that have grown uselessly stale (unresponsive to formal innovation), and once again write in a way that is newly responsive to the singularity of that work. It is my belief that many of the debates in Coetzee studies have hardened into conceptual arguments (with the arguments themselves becoming the object of study, not the work), and it is one of the principal goals of this project to write about Coetzee in such a way as to bring about a new awareness of other ways of thinking through Coetzee's writing—of other concepts that might be brought to bear on his work.

This brings me to another set of related considerations, as well as to another of the feelings with which this project began. It is indisputable that Coetzee's oeuvre reflects an

ongoing exploration of novelistic conventions and the limits of the novel genre. A good deal of Coetzee's singularly formal inventiveness is due to the sheer energy with which he has attempted to "theorize" literary form, to defamiliarize the most familiar novelistic conventions in his own novels, and to write books that challenge the classifications for genre and structure that scholars have devised to sort and categorize books. Certainly, his novels are meant to test the discursive conventions of literary form itself. But they are also devised for the purpose of testing and thinking through the conventions of literary interpretation and analysis. A book with the tiered construction of *Diary of a Bad Year*, for instance, not only asks that the reader be especially conscious of the act of reading, but also that the reader reconsider the implications of the most axiomatic literary conventions (notably the convention of reading novels top to bottom, on unsegmented pages). It also *fundamentally demands that we read and think differently*, that we develop a new way of reading literature and writing about it that is commensurate with the challenges it poses.

This leads me to my feeling. The more I read of Coetzee's writing, and the more criticism I read of his work, the more I feel that the particularly radical singularity and formal innovativeness of Coetzee's most unorthodox works *may be best responded to in a form of criticism that is itself innovative*—that sets out to think and write *differently*, and whose methodology is very much carried in the sensibility that the writing conveys. Could it be that a work like *Elizabeth Costello*, which is written and structured so as to make it incredibly difficult to say what genre it belongs to or how to go about making sense of it, necessitates the invention of forms of critical thinking and literary analysis that are predicated on a different set of assumptions? Is there a correspondence between

radical innovation in the form of a novel and the innovations in criticism required to do justice to this new type of novel?

My feeling is that, if we wish to have a better understanding Coetzee's work, we must develop a more inventive criticism, one that is responsive to the most perplexing elements of Coetzee's work. Part of my project is to write about Coetzee's work in a way that does justice to the complexity of Coetzee's thinking—not by plunging it back into the same debates, but by looking closely at *the thinking that is occurring in Coetzee's writing as it happens*. Coetzee's early work is interesting on its own terms, not just for what it reveals about his fiction. In fact, Coetzee's thinking, as it manifests itself in his writing, and understood as part of an ongoing and evolving interest in certain literary questions, reveals more about him as a fiction writer than any conclusions one might draw from the themes and concepts and theories that his work ostensibly trades in.

In so far as I understand Attridge's project, a more flexible, less pragmatic response to Coetzee's writing is entirely in keeping with (and perhaps a confirmation of) Attridge's notion of a receptive and responsible attitude toward the singularity of innovative literary writing. In *The Singularity of Literature*, Attridge uses the term "creative reading" to describe a way of responding to the alterity of literature.² "A creative reading is not one that overrides the work's conventionally determined meanings in the name of imaginative freedom" writes Attridge, "but rather one that, in its striving

² "Creative reading" is a term borrowed from Ralph Waldo Emerson's "The American Scholar." For Emerson, "there is then creative reading as well as creative writing" (35) with "creative writing" characterized by its combination of "labor and invention" (35). The term also alludes to the concept of "creative criticism," which was coined and developed by Joel Elias Spingarn (most extensively in *Creative Criticism: Essays on the Unity of Genius and Taste*).

to do full justice to the work, is obliged to go beyond existing conventions” (80). He goes on,

To read creatively in an attempt to respond fully and responsibly to the alterity and singularity of the text is to work against the mind’s tendency to assimilate the other to the same, attending to that which can barely be heard, registering what is unique about the shaping of language, thought, and feeling in this particular work. It involves a suspension of habits, a willingness to rethink old positions in order to apprehend the work’s inaugural power. (It is this rethinking that will continue to have effects as one reads other works.) In its encounter with the other, an encounter in which existing modes of thought and evaluation falter, creative reading allows the work to take the mind (understood in the broadest sense) to the borders of its accustomed terrain. And there is no single “correct” reading, just as there is no single “correct” way for an artist, in creating a new work, to respond to the world in which he or she lives. (80)

It is difficult to place the idea of *creative reading* in the context of the history of literary criticism because what constitutes an example of “creative reading” is very much a matter of judging the extent to which a critic has been *particularly* attuned to the demands that a text has placed on the critic. Drawing a line in the sand separating creative reading from other examples of excellent reading is a somewhat arbitrary business, and becomes a matter of taste, and of how one defines creative reading, and of what influences one calls one’s own. Certainly, the word “creative” brings to mind “experimental” and willfully unorthodox forms of criticism. It is easy, and I think right, to point to the works of Roland Barthes (particularly *A Lover’s Discourse*), Jacques Derrida (memorably in *Glas*), and Deleuze and Guattari (I am partial to *A Thousand Plateaus*, particularly its notion of the *rhizome*) as examples of inspired, formally inventive criticism.³

³ In a paper entitled “Quantum Criticism” (currently under review at *Poetics Today*), I recreate in my criticism the unusual layout of Coetzee’s *Diary of a Bad Year* in order to develop a form of “creative criticism” that can respond to the complexities of postmodern and global novels such as *Diary*. Much like the “creative criticism” of Barthes, Derrida,

But I would argue that there are many more examples of creative reading by authors whose style is not outwardly ground-breaking in form or subject matter. There is nothing brazenly avant-garde about the form that this project takes. Far more than Derrida or Deleuze, the writing of Cleanth Brooks, Randall Jarrell, and Stanley Cavell come to mind when I think of literary criticism that comes the closest to communicating the full significance of a work of literature in how they write. T.S. Eliot's criticism, though couched in relatively unadorned language, is nonetheless a supreme example of creative reading in my eyes, as the frameworks of its arguments seem to be secondary to the language Eliot finds to express the full complexity of his own experience trying to think about the matters that abound in great literature. Still, more than anywhere else, I look back to the preface of Joseph Conrad's *Nigger of the Narcissus* for both a definition and a supreme example of a creative and luminous response to literature:

A work that aspires, however humbly, to the condition of art should carry its justification in every line. And art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to

and Deleuze and Guattari, "Quantum Criticism" presents a different way of writing about literature, one that is characterized principally by the fact that (like *Diary of a Bad Year*) it appears in three tiers on a single page, and by the fact that each of these tiers can present substantially different, even opposing, arguments on the same topic. I call this form of criticism *Quantum Criticism* because of its conceptual and metaphorical relationship to quantum mechanics. Quantum Criticism is a poetics predicated on simultaneity and multiplicity—on the possibility that presenting multiple arguments on a single page will have the effect of putting such arguments into an inevitable conversation with one another, and that this conversation will generate a field of thinking in which forms of thought will arise that could not have arisen had these arguments not appeared jointly within the same work. Though in this paper I specifically address how Quantum Criticism can contribute to the study of global literature and book history, it has broader implication for the future of Coetzee studies. Implicit in the methodology of Quantum Criticism is the suggestion that Coetzee's experiments with the novel genre require non-traditional forms of critical response. It may be that a piece of criticism that uses the layout of *Diary of a Bad Year* can say, or discover, certain things about *Diary* that conventional criticism cannot. I hope to follow "Quantum Criticism" with a companion article in which I read *Diary* using the methodologies developed in "Quantum Criticism."

light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect. It is an attempt to find in its forms, in its colours, in its light, in its shadows, in the aspects of matter and in the facts of life, what of each is fundamental, what is enduring and essential – their one illuminating and convincing quality – the very truth of their existence. The artist, then, like the thinker or the scientist, seeks the truth and makes his appeal. Impressed by the aspect of the world the thinker plunges into ideas, the scientist into facts – whence, presently, emerging they make their appeal to those qualities of our being that fit us best for the hazardous enterprise of living. They speak authoritatively to our common-sense, to our intelligence, to our desire of peace or to our desire of unrest; not seldom to our prejudices, sometimes to our fears, often to our egoism – but always to our credulity. And their words are heard with reverence, for their concern is with weighty matters: with the cultivation of our minds and the proper care of our bodies; with the attainment of our ambitions; with the perfection of the means and the glorification of our precious aims. It is otherwise with the artist. Confronted by the same enigmatical spectacle the artist descends within himself, and in that lonely region of stress and strife, if he be deserving and fortunate, he finds the terms of his appeal. (xlvii)

I quote so much because Conrad gives the reader no natural stopping place: every line is justified, and perfectly adjusted to the subject as he understands it at that moment. It does, I hope, the difficult work of making self-evident both a recognition of the ways that literature has of justifying its meaningfulness, and of how a response to this meaningfulness must develop – through the discoveries and efforts of writing – the terms of its own appeal, which are, as in Conrad's preface, fundamentally a matter of calling upon the innate capacities of language to express the most elusive of sentiments. I hope that I can let Conrad's writing speak for itself as a definition and illustration of the properties of literature and literary criticism of which I am attempting to persuade the reader.

This brings me to another of the feelings with which this book began. As I began to think about the formal singularity of Coetzee's writing, I began to feel that in order to appreciate the singularity of Coetzee's work and the demands that his formal innovations place on the reader one must also understand Coetzee's own thinking (as presented in his

extensive early writing) on the nature of literary form. In his non-fiction, Coetzee has rigorously explored literary form from the perspective of stylistics (most notably in his Ph.D. dissertation on Samuel Beckett's transition from French to English), grammar, linguistics, computational stylistics and rhetoric. (Though, of course, these are not discrete disciplines, and in his work Coetzee often calls upon concepts or methodologies from several different fields.) If one wishes to understand *how* Coetzee writes – how he articulates his thinking – one must naturally look to his most sustained studies of language and literature: the non-fiction that Coetzee wrote between 1963 and 1984. That is one of the goals of this dissertation: to trace the evolution of J.M. Coetzee's thinking concerning literary form in the non-fiction he wrote during these two decades. If it is the singularity of Coetzee's writing that generates the problems that fascinate critics, then it would be imperative to study Coetzee's own attempts to think though and write about seemingly insoluble literary problems.

And yet, despite the plain importance of Coetzee's early scholarship to questions surrounding his writing, very little work has been done on Coetzee's early investigations of literary form. In fact, Carrol Clarkson (whose work I discuss below) is the only scholar to have devoted significant energy to Coetzee's earliest essays. David Attwell touches upon Coetzee's early career in his interviews with Coetzee in *Doubling the Point*, but mostly he broaches certain themes, which Coetzee either chooses to take up or evades. More commonly, scholars pay lip service to Coetzee's work on linguistics and stylistics in passing, usually in order to account (in a cursory way) for Coetzee's preoccupation with post-structural theory in his novels. Given how much of Coetzee's stature rests on the ways in which his novels self-consciously address issues of language and literature, it

is remarkable that so little has been written about a significant part of Coetzee’s oeuvre—particularly when that part of his oeuvre includes his most rigorous thinking about literary form. This project, which is devoted to making sense of Coetzee’s thinking about literary form over the first two decades of his writing career, is partly a response to a substantial critical deficit.

It is important that I speak further about Carrol Clarkson’s *Countervoices* because, until my own project, it was the only work of criticism to pay sustained attention to how Coetzee’s conception of fiction writing shapes his early literary-philosophical studies.⁴ In this sense, Clarkson’s project is akin to my own: we share an interest in Coetzee’s linguistic studies, and in putting those linguistic studies into conversation with the exigencies of fiction writing as Coetzee understands them. Clarkson’s work elegantly conveys the breadth of Coetzee’s thinking during this period—it manages to capture the full scope of Coetzee’s erudition, and to supplement Coetzee’s erudition with its own.

However, the larger mission of *Countervoices* is in important ways different from my own. Principally it is different in that Clarkson’s goals are ethical and philosophical. She sets out to pay “sustained attention to the *link* between Coetzee’s explicit preoccupation with language from the perspective of the linguistic sciences on the one hand, and the ethical force of his work, from a literary-philosophical perspective, on the other” (2). She demonstrates, very convincingly, that “linguistic questions are at the core of his [Coetzee’s] ethical enquiries” by “tracking a path back [from Coetzee’s fiction] to his studies in the linguistic sciences” (16). From Coetzee’s early work, Clarkson selects

⁴ As Clarkson says, “Whether he [Coetzee] is speaking about other novelists, or about poets, or linguists, or literary critics, or even scientists or philosophers, Coetzee treats them as *fellow-writers*. As a *writer*, each thinker confronts specific, if complex, challenges in the activity of working” (6).

and extracts a set of explicit grammatical formations, and then studies them for their importance to ethical debates in, and around, Coetzee's work. All of this is done extraordinarily well, and I learned a great deal from Clarkson's work. However, it seems to me that *Countervoices* is pledged to reading Coetzee's work ethically in much the same way as Attridge's book. Though *Countervoices* is remarkably insightful and discerning, I have the same questions and concerns about Clarkson's approach as I have about Attridge's approach. Ultimately, an ethical branch of literary theory and philosophy is central to Clarkson's methodology (as it is for Attridge), and to the conclusions she wishes to draw about Coetzee's relationship to ethics and aesthetics.

My project is different. I do not read Coetzee's early work with any sense that it must reveal something about ethics, politics, history; I do not have any pre-commitments as to what significance or interest Coetzee's work will have or must have. Though I do address historical and political issues where the work calls for it (and it frequently does), I begin with close textual analysis before arriving (if I do) at any broader conclusions. Much of what my readings of Coetzee's work reveal about ethics or history or politics is implicit, and I leave some things implicit so as not to "check" Coetzee's work against "class conflict, race conflict, gender conflict" ("The Novel Today" 3) or ethical conflict in the way that Coetzee has warned against.

The result of such an approach is that I avoid treating Coetzee's early studies as merely supplementary to his novels. Although I do on occasion look at the relationship between Coetzee's non-fiction and fiction, I am chary of using Coetzee's early work to explain his fiction; to do so, it seems to me, is to compromise the significance the early work has on its own terms. Being that his early fiction is just now attracting the attention

it deserves, and being that the early work will no doubt eventually be funneled into the academic nomenclature, it is particularly critical at this juncture that his early non-fiction be given a chance to stand on its own. What Coetzee wrote before, and around, the time of *Dusklands* is not important simply for what it reveals about Coetzee's fiction. To expect that the non-fiction will explain the fiction is to reduce his early work to a series of conclusions to be extracted and transposed upon the fiction. The thinking that is evident in the early work *must be granted its own singularity*, and must be responded to in a way that honors that singularity.

Let me return now to one of the intuitions with which this work began. The intuition was this: at the very core of the compulsion so many scholars have to read Coetzee's novels as history or philosophy or politics (or, where their interest is formal, to "close read" Coetzee in a way that merely turns form into a set of aesthetic patterns) is a reluctance among those scholars to take seriously how writers think about the craft of writing, and how writers go about creating a book which is true in the way that fiction can be said to be true. And, the feeling continues, that Coetzee's writing on literary form – even when it is couched in the most rigorously logical and positivistic language – has to be understood in relation to Coetzee's understanding (culled from personal experience and study) of how literary form "works" for practicing writers, and of how writers work at getting the work "right."⁵ This is not mere intuition: Coetzee has said as much, "As

⁵ For a better sense of how I explore a writer's sense of his own creative process, see my articles on Philip Roth and Phawane Mpe: "Formal Antagonisms: How Philip Roth Writes Nathan Zuckerman" and "The Palimpsest of Process and the Search for Truth in South Africa: How Phaswane Mpe Wrote *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*." I would also direct readers to Myra Jehlen's work. Jehlen explores the way in which fiction arrives at uniquely literary truths in her book *Five Fictions in Search of Truth*, and in a pair of

you write—I am speaking of any kind of writing—you have a feel of whether you are getting close to ‘it’ or not. You have a sensing mechanism, a feedback loop of some kind; without that mechanism you could not write” (*Doubling the Point* 18). Later, I refer to this sense of getting closer to getting the work right as the poetics of execution, in the sense of having “carried out fully” or “accomplished” something.⁶

This last feeling about the relevance of Coetzee’s conception of how writers write to their own satisfaction, I believe, is supported by empirical evidence. Coetzee’s positivistic explorations of literary form (in many respects) never come together into a unified theory of literary form because none of his investigations into the literary ultimately would support the conception of the nature of the literary that Coetzee was aspiring to during that period of work—*a conception that would encapsulate positivism with the author’s understanding of the singularity of literature*. Positivism was shown to have its limits, and even where Coetzee acknowledged and anticipated those limits, he found it increasingly difficult to develop an empirical theory of literary form that either felt true to his own experiences writing, or resulted in an explanation of literary form that described literature – and the writing process – in a way that felt adequate to their singularity. Furthermore, Coetzee’s expositional statements about literature changed over time, from a more deterministic and positivistic stance in his earlier years to a less stylistically minded viewpoint. The latter perspective (which, I would argue, is more in

essays published in *Raritan*: “On How, to Become Knowledge, Cognition Needs Beauty” and “How Georges Simenon Knew Where to Place the Couch.”

⁶ For an excellent survey of the various ways in which Coetzee has represented the figure of the artist in his fiction, see Derek Attridge’s “Coetzee’s Artists; Coetzee’s Art.” It is interesting that the person of the artist – his psychology, his style of being, and of course his aesthetic outlook – in Coetzee’s fiction seems to draw such a contrast with the philosophy of writing developed by Coetzee during his early career. The former’s passion seems out of place next to the latter’s fastidious workmanship.

keeping with an author's understanding of his work) is expressed quite transparently in "The Novel Today," Coetzee's 1987 address at the *Weekly Mail* Book Week in Cape Town.

This does not mean that the writer's conception of his own craft, or the writer's beliefs about how literature ought to be understood, should be taken as a higher order of thinking borne out of his or her access to a realm of thinking unknown to those who are not "real" writers. It is also of course not to say that all writers experience the challenge of writing well in the same way. It is, however, to say that for every writer the effort to solve the great puzzle of how to write well is an experience that informs their conception of the literary, and of how literature "works" or can be understood, and that this viewpoint is both a legitimate and essential way of understanding literature and a way of thinking that will come into play whenever a serious writer tries to write about literary form. I do not believe that the writer's way of viewing literature is superordinate to other ways of understanding how literature is put together and functions, but I do believe that it is a way of understanding literature that is remarkably un-revered by literary scholars, that is sadly out of fashion right now, and that is widely misunderstood. That may be a controversial stance, but it is the stance I hold to and will develop in this book.

What I am gesturing toward here is a (potential) incommensurability between, broadly, the literary scholar's and the novelist's conceptions of literature—their separate views of how literature ought to be read and written about, what kind of truths it achieves, its relationship to history and politics and literary theory. Coetzee has, at certain

moments, attested to this seeming incommensurability.⁷ When, in “The Novel Today,” Coetzee champions a “novel of rivalry” – which is “prepared to work itself out outside the terms of class conflict, race conflict, gender conflict” (3) – he is casting aspersions on what he feels are the reductive ways in which critics address his novels (and novels generally). Critics who “check” novels the way schoolmistresses check homework misunderstand novels and novelists; they ignore how novels work themselves out, and as a result desecrate the understanding that novelist’s have of how their novels work, how they take on meaning, how they fall into a unity.⁸

This is not Coetzee’s bugaboo exclusively. Nadine Gordimer is even more stringently divisive than Coetzee. In her preface to the collection of essays *Critical Perspectives on J.M. Coetzee* (Huggan and Watson), she writes:

It might be better to call this an anti-preface rather than a preface. I understand a preface to a book of this nature to require a preview of the contents in relation of the authors of the critical essays to their subject but I, as J.M. Coetzee’s fellow-writer, naturally take the subjective view, which is that of the writer to the critics. Whichever way, the relation is a We/They one; for me, John Coetzee and I are We and the critics are They. As a writer, I must break with the conventional function of the preface and present a view of the written-about rather than the writers-about. (vii)

This remarkable statement posits a fundamental divide between writer and critic. Not between fiction writer and critic, but between writer and critic: as if critics don’t write.

⁷ The incommensurability thesis is most commonly associated with the scientific arguments of Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend. See Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* and Feyerabend’s “Explanation, Reduction, and Empiricism.”

⁸ David Attwell is correct when he says that *Elizabeth Costello* is “simply the latest in a series of efforts to give to fictionality an authority to challenge the demand for public accountability” (“Life and Times” 34). Part of this resistance to “public accountability” stems from what sort of answers the public wants. Often, it seems to be the case that the kinds of answers critics want are the very answers that novelists feel misrepresent their work.

Writing and criticism are taken to be two fundamentally different projects, two different categories, two separate *spheres of experience* and *modes of consciousness*.

Beyond this, Gordimer suggests that criticism not only has its limits, but that it is an outsider (an Other) to the writer. She goes on:

What service is criticism to its subject, the writer and the writer's work? In many instances, the critique imposes the intent of the critic on the intent of the writer. This may be subconscious on the part of the critic, nevertheless the writer receives it as intent. Yes, yes – the critic is seeking out the hidden intent of the writer, but does he/she find it?...The critic sets out on this expedition armed with the compass, sieve and latest model Geiger-counter of literary theory, but the writer has to forge the literary theory he or she knows, before beginning to write...The writer forgets about the summations of metafiction in order to be in the naked state of grace – no less – in which his/her intent will be worked out. In all humbleness...only we know what our motives and purposes are, when we write. *Only we know what we were saying.* (viii-ix, italics are Gordimer's)

Gordimer evidently believes that the writer's knowledge of writing is privileged, not simply because of the epistemological limitations of the critical enterprise but for the simple fact that writers who write well do so in a spirit, and with a method, that is unknown to critics. Gordimer posits a stark divide between writer and critic. The writer may cross over and join the critics, but the critic who is not a writer may not cross over and join the writers.⁹

⁹ Though in his review of Gordimer's *The Essential Gesture*, Coetzee implicitly contrasts his outlook as a writer with Gordimer's – unlike himself, Gordimer's "intelligence is practical rather than theoretical" in that she is interested "in what she can learn from them [other writers] and use for her own purposes" (*Doubling the Point* 386) – the truth is that Coetzee, despite his theoretical proclivities, is as interested as Gordimer in what he can learn from other writers and use for his own purposes. His early essays are evidence that his description of Gordimer is very much a description of himself. Both Coetzee and Gordimer seem – at one level – convinced that criticism is doomed, perhaps by its very nature, to disappoint and frustrate novelists. This is certainly not to say that their conceptions of the role of the writer are one and the same—Gordimer's review of *Michael K* ("The Idea of Gardening"), and their very public disagreement over the imbroglio surrounding the decision to rescind Salman Rushdie's invitation to speak at the 1988 *Weekly Mail* Book Week after the publication of *Satanic Verses*, make this quite

Both Coetzee and Gordimer frequently write as if fiction and criticism were two different “language games” (to draw on Ludwig Wittgenstein concept as it is developed in *Philosophical Investigations*). In fact, taken as separate language games, these two paradigms are, in fact, remarkably akin to Jean-François Lyotard’s notion of a “differend,” which he famously describes as a “a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments” (*The differend* xi). Writing and criticism are, viewed in this way, two separate discourses; each discourse is defined by its own set of rules, which are legitimated by a “contract” into which “players” implicitly enter. No “rule of judgment” can bring about an accord between them because they are legitimated by two incompatible sets of rules and assumptions. Viewed through this lens, the enmity between writers and critics is due to the fact that the “players” (writers and critics) are playing very different games. I am not convinced by this argument—Coetzee’s novels seem to integrate critical and novelistic discourse in ways that would suggest they do not belong to utterly separate language games. However, I do think there are considerable differences between the two disciplines, and oftentimes the terms on which their respective methodologies are founded make conversation between the two sides exceedingly difficult—so difficult that the distance between them can seem insurmountable.¹⁰

clear. For a more detailed discussion of Coetzee’s and Gordimer’s relationship to one another, and for Coetzee and Gordimer’s significance to wider debates about the relationship between literature and political commitment, see Ian Glenn’s “Nadine Gordimer, J.M. Coetzee, and the Politics of Interpretation.

¹⁰ In *The Wounded Animal*, Stephen Mulhall explores a similar incommensurability: that between literary critics and philosophers. Mulhall explores debates between critics and philosophers over Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello*, and what these arguments reflect about the kinds of truth that each discipline is interested in discovering.

What then does this mean for the critical enterprise? Does this mean that criticism has its own ends, and that these ends have little, if anything, to do with how writers conceive of literature? Is the critic under any obligation to honor the writer's unique perspective (if it is indeed unique), or is it imperative that the critic develops his own methods and procedures separate from the writer's methods and procedures? Can the writer's perspective and the critic's perspective ever be reconciled? And, if not, what sort of relationship should these two domains have? This dissertation presumes that, despite their separate worlds, dialogue between writers and critics is necessary—a discussion over the nature of the impasse that Gordimer alludes to is critical.

This project also suggests that Coetzee complicates this impasse between writers and critics, in that he is both a writer and a critic. Though his reputation is staked on his fiction, his career as a critic and academic is a robust one, and he has given as much thought to the critic's perspective on literature (his theories and methods) as he has to the writer's perspective (the worldview to which Gordimer refers). Having worked as a computer programmer for IBM, having been trained in mathematics at the University of Cape Town, and having studied linguistics and literature as a Ph.D. student at The University of Texas at Austin, Coetzee examined literature with methodologies drawn from these subjects. He did not simply extract theories from these disciplines and apply them to literary texts; as his writing demonstrates, he *thought* as one who *is* a mathematician, a linguist, a programmer. And, in much the same way as Coetzee's non-fiction reflects the ideas that are most integral to the disciplines that shaped his thinking, Coetzee's thinking *as a novelist* is also reflected in the essays he wrote during the early

period of his career. Part of my project is to demonstrate that Coetzee truly is a hybrid—a writer-critic, a critic-writer.

In fact, it may be that Coetzee's work is so intractable precisely because of this hybridity—because it performs within it a dialogue between the writer's perspective and the critic's perspective that is rarely undertaken, is sometimes dismissed as impossible (as Gordimer seems to suggest), and is utterly under theorized. Coetzee's work may be so consternating in part because (to put it crudely) it “mixes” the writer's language game and the critic's language game—in Coetzee's writing, the two games are attached, indivisible, and yet distinct, like conjoined twins. This project aims to take the writer's perspective seriously by investigating Coetzee's conception of his creative process in relation to his work as a scholar and literary critic. It also takes Coetzee's explorations of literary form as models through which to explore the writer's and the critic's dual perspectives on literary form. Coetzee's writing, I argue, embodies the intersection of the two worlds that Gordimer describes; it does this not by reconciling them, but by enacting a vociferous dialogue between them in writing.

One of the challenges of this project, then, is to say exactly what Coetzee's conception of craft and literary form is, and to puzzle out where, how, to what extent, and in what ways that form of thinking is brought to bear in the critical writing and the fiction. In Coetzee's case there is a great deal of non-fiction material that is unequivocally concerned with the nature of the literary: a Master's thesis on Ford Madox Ford, which is a lengthy literary biography written to explain how Ford came to be able to write a book as perfectly executed as *The Good Soldier*; extensive work on Beckett's style; plodding but insightful studies of grammar and syntax in relation to reality and

meaning in Achterberg's "Ballad van de gasfitter" and Yvonne Burgess' *The Strike* (as well as in his essays "The Rhetoric of the Passive in English" and "The Agentless Sentence as Rhetorical Device"); and a particularly nice piece on Newton's difficulty developing a "transparent scientific language" to describe a mechanical physical world. Of course, there are also both explicit and implicit interrogations of literary form and convention in his fiction, though I hope to build a picture of Coetzee's thinking on the literary that does not initially rely on speculation about metaphor in his fiction. And there is also a certain amount of extemporaneous thinking on the literary that shows up in various interviews and speeches, though we do not have from Coetzee the range of thinking on craft that we have from a writer like Henry James. In some ways all this material makes things easier. There is a lot with which to work.

However, determining just what a writer thinks about craft is not simply a matter of finding the best paraphrase for his views. It is also a matter of doing several other things. To a large degree it is a matter of being cognizant that a writer's thinking about literary form will often not manifest itself as a set of discrete concepts or as a cohesive argument. It may be that to demand that any writer explain his understanding of what he is doing when he writes in an unambiguous way is to ask that he reduce the singularity of literature to something that is checkable as a set of rules for writing. As Coetzee says in response to David Attwell's question about an interpretation of *Life & Times of Michael K*:

What I say is marginal to the book, not because I as author and authority so proclaim, but on the contrary because it would be said from a position peripheral, posterior to the forever unreclaimable position from which the book was written. (I might even venture: the author's position is the weakest of all. Neither can he claim the critic's saving distance—that would be a simple lie—nor can he pretend

to be what he was when he wrote—that is, when he was not himself). (*Doubling the Point* 206)

Rather, an author's thinking about literary form in relation to his own experience as a writer will more likely be evident in *how* the choices he makes in tackling issues of form presuppose a certain conception of the machinery of fiction, or implicit in the way he writes about literature (the language and diction he uses in different situations), or how he goes about completing certain literary projects. It is part of the way he thinks about things. The challenge ultimately falls to the critic, who must write with enough discernment to capture the author's thinking as it forces its way into his writing in many different ways, both explicit and implicit, both conscious and unconscious.

To make it easier to talk about and think about the totality of Coetzee's thinking on the matter of the literary – which encapsulates the evolving tension between his positivistic impulses and his sense of the rightness of a literary work, as well as the desired synthesis of the two which would bring about an idealized system that would formulate the full singularity of literature – I have developed two related ideas: the *problems of literature* and the *poetics of execution*, concepts that I develop at length in the first chapter of this book. Briefly, I argue that one of the ways that Coetzee writes about, and thinks through, many important debates surrounding literature and literary form is to conceive of the writing of literature as a problem that a writer sets out to solve – whether that be an author's problem of writing a work of fiction that accomplishes the task he set himself in his work, or a critic's problem of writing a work of criticism that does justice to the singularity and complexity of the text he is working on, or a scholar's problem of accounting for some aspect of literary style. In the broadest terms, these are debates, having to do with the nature and form of literature, which Coetzee poses as

problems in order to address them more clearly in his writing. That is, the problem posed in the work – or by the very form of the work itself – is not a problem that necessarily has a solution, but is a problem of fundamental importance to an understanding of “the literary” broadly understood. A solution to such problems – even when they are partial or poorly reasoned conclusions – is then a reflection of Coetzee’s attempt to address dimensions of literature, literary form, and (quite often) the novel genre.

At the risk of getting too far ahead of myself, but feeling the need to establish that Coetzee does indeed formulate problems in his work, I will point out that Coetzee often begins his novels by explicitly posing problems.¹¹ *Disgrace* begins, “For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well” (1). *Elizabeth Costello* opens with a problem perhaps more pertinent to my project, in that the problem it raises is self-consciously literary: “There is first of all the problem of the opening, namely, how to get us from where we are, which is, as yet, nowhere, to the far bank.” And, in *Diary of a Bad Year*, we get a problem at the intersection of literary form and politics:

Every account of the origins of the state starts from the premise that “we”—not we the readers but some generic we so wide as to exclude no one—participate in its coming into being. But the fact here is that the only “we” we know—ourselves and the people close to us—are born into the state; and our forebears too were born into the state as far back as we can trace. The state is always there before we are. (1)

Here the problem is implied, as opposed to directly stated: the problem of the relationship of the citizen to accounts of state origins.

¹¹ For a more extensive analysis of the problems posed in the first sentences of several of Coetzee’s novels, see my article, “The Coming into Being of Literature: How J.M. Coetzee’s *Diary of a Bad Year* Thinks Through the Novel.”

These are only a few examples of where problems are clearly raised. Nonetheless, together they make it evident enough at this early stage that one of Coetzee's most common narrative techniques is to raise problems as a way of organizing his thinking in his novels. The problems Coetzee raises in these novels are in fact returns to problems that he posed, and grappled with, at much earlier stages in his career. The work that Coetzee did in stylistics, grammar, and linguistics when he was in his twenties and thirties deals, systematically and positivistically, with many of the problems that are addressed obliquely in his fiction: the problem of the "coming into being" of literature, the problem of the correspondence of literary form to its own rules and to external reality, the problem of the singularity of literature being domesticated by the political and literary context into which one might say it is "born," the problem of inheriting a language (and a state) that is so much a part of our accepted reality that we find ourselves essentially powerless to undo it or reimagine it.

These problems of literature, which are addressed in both his fiction and non-fiction, frequently engender answers that draw upon both Coetzee's background in linguistics and upon Coetzee's more idiosyncratic – though no less legitimate – sense of how literature seeks out its own kind of truth that is based upon his understanding of how writers write. For Coetzee, in his theorizing about the nature of literature, it is often true that a satisfactory answer to a literary problem can only be an answer *that satisfies him both as a fiction writer and as a literary theorist and linguist*. The way that a fiction writer understands literary form, and therefore how he would answer the problems about literature being posed, is quite different from how a linguist or stylist trained as a scholar would answer them. And yet, being both, and having his understanding of literature

formed by both, Coetzee (I argue) struggles to formulate literary theories that are satisfactory to both the senses in which he understands literature.

I review the specifics of this struggle at length in Chapter One. I only raise this issue here in order to say that *poetics of execution* is the term I use to characterize the set of intuitions and assumptions underlying Coetzee's engagement with questions surrounding literary form between, roughly, 1963 and 1984. I use the word "execution" in all its etymological complexity—to mean to carry out, to accomplish, to bring to death. I use it more specifically to characterize the ongoing tension between the sense in which literary form can be theorized in a purely positivist manner (here the "execution" is the creation of a totalizing rational explanation for some dimension of literary form) and the sense in which literary form can only be fully explained when the explanation takes into consideration the other way of understanding literature that was fundamental to Coetzee: the author's understanding of how he went about solving the problem of writing a book so that it represented a truth in literature (this is execution in the sense of have gotten something right).

This latter sense is rather crudely rendered here because it is a highly complex and evolving way of conceiving of literature that must be addressed in its proper place. Nonetheless, it is my belief that the ways in which Coetzee goes about trying to solve these problems reveal a great deal not only about his various early "theories" of literary style, but also about his career long rethinking and interrogation of the novel in his fiction. A more comprehensive, less declamatory, picture of how these issues play out in Coetzee's writing takes shape over the remainder of this project.

The work that follows says a great deal more about these feelings and ways of thinking, and should continue to clarify a set of very difficult, and at times amorphous, ideas. Coetzee's writing on literary form will be put in its proper contexts (biographical, intellectual, historical), and I will say more about how my understanding of the craft of writing fits into larger debates about literary form and literary history, in particular as it pertains to stylistics and theoretical debates within post-structuralism. I will also take up, to varying degrees, the thorny but unavoidable considerations that crop up in any study of the nature of the literary: correspondence between form and content, between text and reader, between textual form and external reality, and so on. I have left some of this more rigorously theoretical thinking for the chapters ahead.

With the goal of tracing the evolution of Coetzee's thinking about literature in relation to his scholarly and "creative" pursuits, Chapter One begins with an examination of Coetzee's 1963 Master's thesis, "The Works of Ford Madox Ford with Particular Reference to the Novels," completed not long after Coetzee had received an undergraduate degree in mathematics. Coetzee's thesis has received very little attention from critics, in large part because it is, quite honestly, terribly boring—it is windy, prolix, and lacks momentum; the few conclusions it draws, while interesting, are sunk by extensive plot descriptions of nearly every one of Ford's novels.

Still, its banality belies its importance. For, in fact, it is Coetzee's first attempt to struggle with the questions surrounding literature and language that were just then beginning to interest him, and which he would develop and pursue in various ways over the next twenty years. In his study, Coetzee argues that *The Good Soldier* is Ford's "best achievement," "probably the finest example of literary pure mathematics in English" (x);

the thesis “attempts to trace in earlier novels experiments without which *The Good Soldier* would have been impossible” (x). The thesis is, then, a formal study of Ford’s work, one that tracks the improvement in Ford’s novels over time; in this sense, it gives its readers a glimpse of what Coetzee believed, at this time, made a novel successful at the level of form. The fact that it is onerous reflects, I believe, that its author was a young, ambitious thinker trying desperately to wrap his head around the secret of Ford’s stylistic excellence—this was a secret that he knew to be there, but that he could not land upon in his writing. Reading his thesis is like seeing a powerful automobile stuck in a sand trap, its tires throwing out arcs of sand as it tries to free itself—we get a more palpable sense of the car’s engine power when the car is stuck than we do when it is moving easily down the road. *The fight* between Coetzee’s impressive critical and deductive powers and the secret of Ford’s masterpiece *The Good Soldier* is quite remarkable.

The work is also of interest for what it reveals about the relationship between Coetzee’s first “theory of literature” and his training in mathematics. Coetzee’s choice of the phrase “literary pure mathematics” (x) was certainly not incidental; it reflects the extent to which his background in mathematics (and in the logical underpinnings of the field of pure mathematics) organized his conception of literary form, and his vision of the particular kind of mathematical elegance to which great stylists like Ford aspire. Coetzee’s thinking, I show, emerges directly from his training in mathematics, his understanding of structuralism, and his interest in how great novels are written.

Building upon what we learned in Chapter One of the role that mathematics and structuralism played in Coetzee’s early intellectual development, Chapter Two focuses on

those disciplines that next drew his attention: linguistics and stylistics. In 1965, Coetzee entered a Ph.D. program in literature and linguistics at the University of Texas at Austin. He focused most of his academic energy on literary style and the work of Samuel Beckett. His dissertation uses a number of different stylistic and linguistic methodologies as a way of studying Beckett's decision to stop writing in English and begin writing in French; more broadly, the dissertation aims to test the validity of linguistic criticism, and in so doing to consider the ways in which literature resists being reduced to linguistic patterns and statistical data. From this dissertation came a series of articles on Beckett and stylistics published in the 1970s. Linguistic stylistics (in which the linguistic properties of a text are related to its meaning) was at its apogee in the late 1960s, and Coetzee was influenced by, but skeptical of, the promise of a methodology that could bring literary studies under the umbrella of the sciences. I demonstrate that, for Coetzee, the failure of linguistic criticism is not only a matter of the logical inconsistencies inherent in its methodologies, but is due to its incompatibility with the writer's understanding of the singularity of literature (represented by Beckett's statements about his own fiction). Coetzee's challenge is in addressing a debate about the nature of literary form between dissimilar parties: linguists and fiction writers. Being both, Coetzee struggles to harmonize them.

The third chapter focuses on the period in which Coetzee begins to think of himself as a literary critic, and to write as one aware of literary criticism as a genre with its own horizon of possibilities. Coetzee wrote on a variety of topics between 1974 and 1984. He tried on many different hats: literary critic, cultural critic, book reviewer, rhetorician, linguist. Though Coetzee has become a rather prolific critic and reviewer, his

attitude toward criticism has been consistently ambivalent. He has said that while “the *feel* of writing fiction is one of freedom, or irresponsibility” (*Doubling the Point* 246) criticism is a “tight discourse” that does not interest him sufficiently to expend the effort required to liberate it.

In actuality, Coetzee’s criticism during this period reflects his interest in challenging and reinventing the conventions of literary criticism in quite radical ways. The nature of the criticism of this period suggests that there was a time when Coetzee was as interested in “liberating” the “monological” (*Doubling the Point* 246) discourse of criticism as he was in reinventing the novel genre. In his essays on Gerrit Achterberg, Franz Kafka, and Isaac Newton, Coetzee’s writing reflects a conception of the writer as one who both plays within and reinvents the rules of language—as one who both plays the game itself, and who plays the rules of the game. In my discussion, I draw from Wittgenstein’s notion of “language games,” from Lyotard’s development of Wittgenstein’s linguistics in his definition of the postmodern, and from George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s theories about cognitive metaphors to explore the various ways in which Coetzee has conceived of the writer’s attempt to play within a rule-bound language; I follow the various (often subtle) ways in which his criticism is a form of play—it both plays the game (adheres to the rules of language and literature) and reinvents the rules of the game by circumventing them, reimagining them, challenging them. Ultimately, I suggest that certain conceptual metaphors fundamentally organize Coetzee’s thinking about literature and language, and that an understanding of these conceptual metaphors can shed light on particular aspects of both his early and late-career fiction.

Chapter One

The Early Coetzee: Ford Madox Ford and the Promise of Literary Mathematics

In 1962 and 1963, aged twenty-two and twenty-three, while he lived in England and supported himself as a programmer in the computer industry, J.M. Coetzee researched and wrote his Master's thesis on the life and novels of Ford Madox Ford. The thesis is well over three hundred pages long and quite dry, but it is deserving of critical attention for a number of reasons: because scholars have burned few calories making sense of it (only one rather obscure article has been written about it)¹²; because it is Coetzee's first substantial piece of prose; and because it is a sustained and purposeful attempt to think about many of the questions regarding literature and the artistic process that preoccupied Coetzee during the period in which he was first becoming a fiction writer and a scholar. Many of these questions have continued to occupy him to a greater or lesser degree throughout his career.

Since the thesis is in certain respects amateurish and slow moving, its value to scholars lies not in what Coetzee's project reveals about Ford's novels, but in what the work reveals about the intention behind, and the thinking that went into, Coetzee's first long literary endeavor. What does it tell us about Coetzee's "sense of how writing was achieved" (*Doubling the Point* 24), and his thoughts on the nature of literary form, at this time in his life? What did Coetzee believe is the relationship between an author's

¹² David James, "By Thrifty Design: Ford's Bequest and Coetzee's Homage," in *International Ford Madox Ford Studies*. Amsterdam: 2008.

conception of his own creative process and what one is doing when one tries to understand and write critically about literature? How does Coetzee go about “theorizing” literary style in his thesis, and how does his early interest in how fiction is composed and structured inform his career-long engagement with the literary, the novel genre, the correspondence of form to content, and so on? In what ways does Coetzee write about literature so as to frame it as a “problem” that he then goes about trying to solve to his satisfaction, and what conclusions can be drawn from the successes and failures of his solutions in both his fiction and non-fiction? What significance do the answers to these questions have for wider debates within Coetzee studies? These questions, understood in the non-technical and simple spirit in which I have presented them, are the motor for this dissertation.

Though Coetzee’s thesis on Ford is a work that many will dismiss as inconsequential (mostly because one of its techniques is to eschew overt theorizing), I believe that there is an understandable desire that drove Coetzee to write what he wrote, and that the work has at its core a deliberately sought after type of coherence. Though colorless on the surface, the thesis in fact reflects the conception of literature that Coetzee would spend the first two decades of his career testing, developing and refining; it establishes a unique perspective toward literature from which many of Coetzee’s later, more sophisticated theoretical positions on literature emerge. As I explained in the Introduction, Coetzee’s way of conceiving of literature (both in his thesis and in many of his other works) is to imagine the task of writing a novel as a problem (how can one write a novel that is coherent, that works?) with a possible solution; when the problem has been solved, the novel “works,” by which I mean that it is properly executed according to

whatever criteria the author and the work itself seem to establish for measuring the work's success. There is a way in which a work of literature needs to "work" (to have accomplished what it set out to accomplish), and making a work of literature "work" in this way is the problem that the author must solve.

Figuring out the nature of this problem for each work, and understanding how the writer went about trying to solve that problem, is how Coetzee goes about trying to see how a book falls into coherence as a result of both the deliberate psychological effort of the author and as a result of the intrinsically logical and unitary nature of literature and language. As Coetzee has said,

Writing, then, involves an interplay between the push into the future that takes you to the blank page in the first place, and a resistance. Part of that resistance is psychic, but part is also an automatism built into language: the tendency of words to call up other words, to fall into patterns that keep propagating themselves. Out of that interplay there emerges, if you are lucky, what you recognize or hope to recognize as the true. (*Doubling the Point* 18)

By "the true" Coetzee means something similar to what Henry James means by "quality" in "The Art of Fiction,"

The form [of a work of literature], it seems to me, is to be appreciated after the fact; then the author's choice has been made, his standard has been indicated; then we can follow lines and directions and compare tones. Then, in a word, we can enjoy one of the most charming of pleasures, we can estimate quality, we can apply the test of execution. (392)

One of the ways to approach Coetzee's writing (as I will do for a number of his works) is to try to pinpoint the motivating intuition that compelled him to write what he wrote, to try to judge how Coetzee went about trying to solve the problem of how to turn that intuition into a cohesive project, to then say what the project itself suggests about Coetzee's lines of thinking and emerging convictions about writing, and from there to look at where and why the project failed or succeeded.

This way of reading and writing about Coetzee's oeuvre will be how I examine Coetzee's emerging understanding of literary form and the craft of writing. That is my project in this dissertation: to examine, chronologically, Coetzee's evolving sense of how writing is achieved by reading his works as objectively as I possibly can, though with an eye for the motivating intuitions and desires that reflect Coetzee's way of solving the problem of how to write novels and how to write criticism. I hope to track Coetzee's evolving thinking about the vocation and craft of writing, to track the relationship between Coetzee's scholarly interests and "the business of producing fiction" (*Doubling the Point* 24), and to see how Coetzee's thinking on the literary is reflected in the changes that have occurred in the form and content of his fiction over several decades. This is not a methodology, but a beginning point for thinking, one that takes it that Coetzee is a writer who had something in mind in every work, and that in every case he ran up against the problem of how to solve the problem of writing what he had in mind so that it "worked" (so that it got executed) as a novel, as a piece of criticism, as a work of scholarship, as whatever.

This is to follow Coetzee's own thinking: "As you write—I am speaking of any kind of writing—you have a feel of whether you are getting close to 'it' or not. You have a sensing mechanism, a feedback loop of some kind; without that mechanism you could not write" (*Doubling the Point* 18). By Coetzee's own logic then, the very fact that he did write any given piece – however unevenly or unsuccessfully in certain cases – is evidence that he felt himself to be getting closer to "it," to "what you recognize or hope to recognize as the true" (*Doubling the Point* 18), which at this stage we might say is the execution of the writer's thinking in writing.

What, we must now ask, is the “it” that Coetzee was trying to get closer to when he produced “The Works of Ford Madox Ford with Particular Reference to the Novels,” a thesis, so the title page reads, “Presented in the Faculty of Arts of the University of Cape Town for the degree of Master of Arts by John M. Coetzee”? What beliefs, thoughts, intuitions and ideas about literature are behind this thesis? And if there are indeed weighty ideas about literature underneath the veil of an otherwise unmagisterial work of scholarship, what bearing do they have on the course of development of Coetzee’s writing (both fiction and non-fiction)? How, moreover, do these fledgling hunches about literature figure into the most important theoretical debates surrounding Coetzee’s body of work?

Between this preamble and my attempt to think through and write out an answer to these questions, I must insert an intermediary step. I must introduce the concept of the poetics of execution, which is the heuristic that I will use to describe what I take to be one way of characterizing the set of intuitions and assumptions underlying Coetzee’s engagement with questions surrounding literary form between, roughly, 1963 and 1984. The poetics of execution is one way of speaking about certain ideas or qualities or methods of analysis that characterize Coetzee’s engagement – as a developing fiction writer, linguist, and literary scholar – with literary form as an object of study. In particular, it is a way of speaking about Coetzee’s tendency to view a literary work as a project that is either adequately brought to completion or not brought to completion—a task that is either executed or not executed. This heuristic is not meant to prescribe an inviolable framework into which can be incorporated any piece of writing in Coetzee’s early work. It is simply one way of typifying the most salient ideas and points of greatest

interest (as I see them) in a broad range of texts in relation to my own particular point of interest: Coetzee's thinking on literary form and the craft of writing.

If the poetics of execution is meant to encapsulate Coetzee's diverse but nonetheless cogent philosophy of literature, then the Master's thesis on Ford is a very early sub-stage in a larger stage of thinking about literary form that began in 1963 and tapered off in the early 1980s. The stage begins with the Ford thesis, continues through Coetzee's Ph.D. dissertation on Samuel Beckett (1969), extends through a productive but wayward period of stylistic and rhetorical analysis of literary form (mostly in the 1970s and early 1980s), and includes his first work of fiction, *Dusklands* (1974), his first full length novel, *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), and to varying degrees the fiction and scholarship he produced in the early 1980s. However, this form of thinking never died out entirely, and so the place I have chosen as a breaking point – 1984, with the publication of the essay “Confession and Double Thoughts” – is very much critic-made and contestable. And, to be clear, my discussion of Coetzee's work during this period will extend well beyond this organizing principle; the poetics of execution will be one of several ideas that I will use to give a loose but essential shape to a lengthy study that otherwise eschews ready made terminology.

The poetics of execution, as a descriptive phrase, is meant to invoke two similar phrases in Coetzee studies: David Attwell's use of the term “poetics of reciprocity” (58) in *Doubling the Point*, and Coetzee's use of the terms “poetics of failure” (87) and “poetic closure” (86) in a 1977 essay on Gerrit Achterberg's long poem “Ballad of the Gasfitter.” I could have avoided such associations by giving my heuristic a different name, but I have chosen to foster these associations because I like Attwell's selective,

cautious, and intermittent use of the phrase “poetics of reciprocity.” In *Doubling the Point*, Attwell comes to the themes and ideas in Coetzee’s oeuvre with a light touch, broaching possible ways of thinking about Coetzee’s work in such a way as to allow Coetzee to think openly and flexibly about his own writing.

Attwell’s use of the term “poetics of reciprocity” is a case in point, and as such I have tried to incorporate elements of his handling of the poetics of reciprocity into my own handling of my term: poetics of execution. In *Doubling the Point*, Attwell says to Coetzee:

In the essay on Achterberg, you begin with patterns of reference in I and You. Your terms are drawn from linguistic descriptions in Emile Benveniste (on pronouns) and Roman Jakobson (on “shifters”). The I-You relation, however, connects with larger things in the whole corpus of your work, what I would like to call broadly the poetics of reciprocity. This takes various forms: in *Dusklands* it seems to draw, among other things, on the failed dialectic of master and slave in Hegel’s *The Phenomenology of Spirit*; later versions in *Michael K* and *Foe* involve questions of authorship, the tensions between readers, storytellers, and the subjects or characters of stories; forms of this relation can also be traced through to your interest in problems of consciousness, and of desire and its objects. Reciprocity and, by implication, the problem of identity are obviously of central importance in a colonial literature. You raise this question in the introduction to *White Writing*, where you speak of the problem of the European finding a language in which reciprocity is possible, and in the Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech you speak of “the failure of love” in South Africa. (58)

This leads Attwell to declare that his “question has to do with the connection, or tension, between the thematics of reciprocity, on one hand, and their fictive status on the other.”

This eventually results in an actual question: “How do you recall the balance of these factors [the linguistic conditions of fiction, and the historical setting of fiction], especially in *In the Heart of the Country*?” (59).

What I appreciate about Attwell’s approach, and what compels me to allude to it, is not the accuracy of the term poetics of reciprocity, but the fact that Attwell uses the

term not to interpret Coetzee's work, but only to make thinking about Coetzee's work easier. That is, Attwell's term is actually so broad that it cannot really be counted as a methodology or paradigm for analyzing any part of Coetzee's work; by reciprocity Attwell only seems to mean dialectical relationships or tensions understood in the broadest terms imaginable, and to point that out about Coetzee's work is only a statement about something of which most readers are already aware. So why say it? It is to make it easier to think about, and thus to discuss in the interview, several of Coetzee's books by grouping them in such a way that they are set off from Coetzee's other works, but not reduced to an artificial organizing principle. Attwell does not thematize these novels; he conjectures that they "seem to draw" on certain dynamics, that they "involve" and "raise" certain "questions," that they have reflected in them particular relationships that can "be traced through" to Coetzee's interest in "problems of consciousness." This is the broaching of general ideas in the interest of facilitating a conversation in which something new can be discovered.

Even the question Attwell poses is uninterested in either the usefulness of his own term or the putative meaning of the works under discussion: "How do you recall the balance of these factors, especially in *In the Heart of the Country*?" (*Doubling the Point* 59). The question is about Coetzee's recollection of a balance of elements that are present, in one way or another, in the thinking that goes on in the works. What Attwell wants is not an answer, but *a memory of thinking*. He wants to prompt Coetzee to think out loud, to work over difficult questions at his own pace and on his own terms. This is the great strength of Attwell's approach. It is a form of collaborative literary criticism that is effective because it has no set agenda, because it is unconcerned with proving a

point. It is because of questions such as these that the interviews in *Doubling the Point* continue to be among the most interesting things ever written about, or by, Coetzee. And it is because of the relation between my own project and the technique displayed in this line of questioning that I have alluded to Attwell's phrase.

So Attwell's sensibility is the thread connecting my poetics to his. This is not quite the case for the relevance of Coetzee's "poetics of failure" to my own poetics of execution. The significance of Coetzee's phrase to my own derives from Coetzee's attempt to give a name to a particular literary technique in which a "certain elegance of poetic closure is always obtainable from the maneuver in which a poem ends by swallowing its own tail—denying, denouncing, or erasing itself" ("Achterberg's Ballad," in *Doubling the Point* 86). Coetzee's contention, addressed at greater length in Chapter Three, is that the "central symbolism" of "Ballad of the Gasfitter" can only be understood in relation to how I and You "signify in the field of language and in the field of the poem" (70). Coetzee writes,

The poem that incorporates a denunciation of itself (sub specie aeternitatis or however) paradoxically acquires the ontological self-sufficiency, and therefore extends the ontological challenge, of the self-consuming artifact: Can language reach outside itself? The tradition, represented by Don Quixote and Tristram Shandy, of self-reflexive undercutting of the mimetic pretensions of fiction...raises the same question.

...I intend no more than to point to what lies behind the metamorphosis of fiction from the adventures of the self in nineteenth-century classic realism to metafictional commentary on the fictionality of self that precipitates such fictions as Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* and that forms the whole of Beckett's *The Unnameable*. The poetics of these works is a veritable poetics of failure, a program for constructing artifacts out of an endlessly regressive, etiolated self-consciousness lost in the labyrinth of language and endlessly failing to erect itself into autonomy. The poetics of failure is ambivalent through and through, and part of its ambivalence is that it must parade its ambivalence; thus Beckett can speak of an art that is "the expression that there is nothing to express." The poetics of failure erects absence by an undenied trick of

prestidigitation, whose success nevertheless depends on the left hand's not knowing what the right hand is doing. (*Doubling the Point* 86-87)

Coetzee comes to the conclusion that “In such a case the formula formulates itself, turning in upon itself. It is clear that Achterberg was after this and this alone” (88). What is clear from the passage above is that Coetzee’s thinking about literary form is rooted in a conception of literature as existing within a field of language, which is to say within a potentially self-enclosed, self-referential system built according to rules and guidelines established by linguistic and stylistic conventions (the extent to which Coetzee’s conception of literature is organized around the metaphor of a field of play is taken up at length in Chapter Three). Literature is made in, and by, language itself. Moreover, the “program for constructing artifacts” that is explicit in the works of many twentieth century authors (and that is implicit, usually in more subdued ways, in earlier realist fiction) is a project that must either succeed or fail.

This means that one procedure for evaluating the quality of a work (whether it succeeds or fails) is by judging the extent to which the author manages to create a self-erasing artifact. If, in other words, as is the case for Achterberg (who “was after this and this alone”), the goal of the piece is to create a self-erasing artifact, then the piece works, and thus succeeds or fails, only in so far as it works (in so far as it becomes an artifact). Of course, Coetzee has inverted matters in this instance, making Achterberg’s success an example of a perfect failure; success is a case of an ideally executed failure, with failure being a poetic trick in which all is cancelled out in the labyrinth of language. The intention of the author (who consciously builds the artifact), the rules according to which the piece can be said to work or not to work, and the degree to which something can be said to succeed or fail as a work of literature, are all strung together.

The variable that confuses matters (that perhaps problematizes a systematic view of literary form) is the question of whether literary language can “reach outside itself” (*Doubling the Point* 86). How can there be “poetic closure” if the relation between language and reality is (perhaps) ambiguous, shifting, and ultimately undefinable? Or, perhaps, “poetic closure” is only possible if the link between language and what it denotes (some aspect of reality) is severed, or at the very least papered over for the purpose of creating the illusion of closure? These problems plague Coetzee’s thinking about literature, and are never convincingly resolved. If they had been solved Coetzee would not have to speak of a “veritable poetic of failure.” Why “veritable”? It can only be because the “elegance of poetic closure” that Coetzee is aiming for in his thinking on literary form is never achieved; his theory of the literary never realizes its obvious ambition: to account for literary form in such a way that it becomes a perfect system, something that “works” in all possible ways simultaneously.

What, then, is the poetics of execution, and what has all this to do with it? The poetics of execution is a term that is meant to make it possible to encapsulate both Coetzee’s thoughts on the craft of writing (an author’s feeling that he is getting closer to getting it “right,” to “it,” to the “true”) and Coetzee’s thoughts on the cohesiveness or systemic unity of literary form (the way in which literature can be said to become a self-enclosed artifact, to have succeeded as a project according to whatever rules or guiding principles it is governed by, to fall into patterns predetermined by the rules of language). The term is meant to highlight the evolving and tendentious relationship in Coetzee’s writing between two facets of his understanding of how novels work: the facet that is born out of his experience as a practicing writer (for instance, his notion of a “feedback

loop”) and the facet that is born out of his scholarly studies of literary form, style, and linguistics.

Of course, in practice, these two facets are not mutually exclusive, and the point where personal experience stops and empirical study starts is amorphous and undelineated. And that is exactly my point. Any attempt to understand Coetzee’s conception of the literary (understood in the broadest sense) must be able to work in the muddled region where these two motivating methodologies are in conversation with one another. One must be able to handle both registers simultaneously, working out how Coetzee’s thinking on the nature of literary form is informed by (oftentimes) a need to reconcile these two potentially competing methodologies, or at other times to ignore one facet or the other, or in certain instances to interrogate these two facets as antagonistic competitors.

Still, even this caveat does not go far enough, for it posits these two facets of thinking as divisible concepts, when in reality they are inseparable elements of Coetzee’s thinking that are embodied in Coetzee’s writing. They do not only appear as philosophical concepts or as methodologies associated with particular disciplines (stylistics, rhetorical and grammatical analysis, deconstructionism). They appear as a fundamental problem: what is the relationship between the author’s sense of the rightness of what he writes and the rule-governed rightness of literary form?

I am not interested in answering the question of how Coetzee solves this problem, because it is not a problem with a solution. Rather, I am interested in exploring how, in his writing, he thinks through this dynamic, and in seeing how his thinking develops and changes over time as he expends ever more energy on this insoluble problem. My goal is

not to say what Coetzee's overall theory of literary form is, or to supply my own theory about the "true" relationship between authorial craft and literary form; I may speculate and conjecture at certain points, but to "solve" the problem laid out in Coetzee's work is to misrepresent the true nature of things, which is that the singularity of literature (in Attridge's sense) requires a singularity of response in which the "truth" is less a totalizing answer or solution, and more an apt way of writing about the thinking that goes on in writing.

Lastly, I wish to say that I deliberately chose the word execution (as opposed to "closure" or "completion" or "mathematics," which I also considered) to characterize the course of development of this stage of Coetzee's thinking in no small part because the etymologies surrounding the word are so suggestive and, to my ear, apt. "Execution" (from the Anglo-French *execucioun*, later from Latin *executionem*) can mean "carrying out" (as of an order), or the "accomplishing" or fulfillment of a task. It also has associations with legal penalties: the "act of putting to death" or the "carrying out of the sentence of death." It can also mean "the action of carrying something into effect." The poetics of execution carries within it each one of the aforementioned resonances: an attention to the ways in which writing can be said to be the process of "carrying out" writing such that in the end writing is something in which the order or task of writing is fulfilled; a conception of writing as an action that brings "something into effect" in the sense of bringing about the singular effects of a particular piece of literature; a reminder of the extent to which "carrying out" writing is also to complete writing, to bring closure to writing, and therefore to put writing to death. In the economy of writing, the fulfillment of the task of writing is also to "carry out the sentence of death" on writing.

Only after choosing the term “execution” did I serendipitously come across Coetzee’s evocative use of the word in relation to his early difficulties writing fiction,

As I remember those days [of struggling to write fiction], it was with a continual feeling of self-betrayal that I did not write. Was it paralysis? Paralysis is not quite the word. It was more like nausea: the nausea of facing the empty page, the nausea of writing without conviction, without desire. I think I knew what beginning would be like, and balked at it. I knew that once I had truly begun, I would have to go through with the thing to the end. Like an execution: one cannot walk away, leaving the victim dangling at the end of a rope, kicking and choking, still alive. One has to go all the way. (I could have used a metaphor of birth, I realize, but let it stand as it is). (*Doubling the Point* 19)

The various connotations of the word execution should be kept in mind during the course of this discussion.

Let us now turn to Coetzee’s Master’s thesis. Coetzee declares the object of his thesis in the Introduction:

The present study is not biographical. It does, however, attempt to suggest the main lines of Ford’s life and their immediate effect on his writing. Concentrating principally on his fiction, to which he gave himself most wholly, it examines his novels in chronological order and attempts to trace a course of development in them. This seems particularly necessary to do in the light of the legend Ford himself, with some excuse, spread that *The Good Soldier*, in fact his seventeenth independent novel, sprang from him unheralded in his forty-first year. The conclusion of this study is that *The Good Soldier*, probably the finest example of literary pure mathematics in English, is, as Ford considered it, his best achievement; but it attempts to trace in earlier novels experiments without which *The Good Soldier* would have been impossible. (“The Works of Ford Madox Ford” x)

This is really the earliest example we have of expository thinking by Coetzee about stylistic development and literary form. It shows us how he made sense of what makes a book “work” or “not work,” of how a mature style could evolve from an immature one, and of how a writer’s life (both the one that really happened and the one the author claims happened) gets into his writing and gives it a shape.

Above all, we learn from this passage that Coetzee's way of approaching and understanding the work of a major writer such as Ford (and this continues to be more or less true in Coetzee's later work on Beckett) is not in terms of the historical or political importance of his work, nor in terms of the themes and issues with which his work is generally concerned, but in terms of Ford's success as a novelist, *judged exclusively on a scale of formal execution*. The "development" that Coetzee tracks in Ford's novels is from formally bad to formally better to formally perfect, and it is on the basis of a particular kind of formal execution (a "pure mathematics" of style that is the actualization of many failed efforts at formal perfection in Ford's early work) that these judgments about success or failure are made. *The Good Soldier* is Ford's "best achievement" – a "technical triumph" ("The Works of Ford Madox Ford" x) – because it achieves a level of formal execution that operates like "pure mathematics": it is a self-enclosed, internally relational, and symbolic system that establishes for itself a set of rules and conventions by which to determine how the system works and what the value and proper place is of any element in the system (much as in mathematics the underlying logic of algebraic rules determine what the values of the variables a and b can and cannot be in the equation, $a^2 + b^2 = (a+b) \times (a-b)$). The evidence of the success of *The Good Soldier* as a novel is the extent to which it constitutes an ideally structured formal system (akin to a mathematical system reduced to its most elementary logic principles) that for Coetzee is a rare example of what he calls "literary pure mathematics." In his quasi-memoir *Youth*, Coetzee speaks of the thrill that the "pure mathematics" of Ford's plots gave him, "He is dazzled by the complicated, staggered chronology of Ford's plots, by the cunning with which a note, casually struck and artlessly repeated will stand revealed, chapters later, as

a major motif” (53). In his thesis, Coetzee goes so far as to suggest that style is such an unimpeachable and surefire means of evaluating literary development that it gives the lie to many of the myths propagated by authors about their own work. Proof that Ford lied about the origins of *The Good Soldier* is in the style itself.

It should be noted that I take the phrase “pure mathematics” quite literally. I assume that Coetzee is using the term not only as a loose metaphor for perfection, but as a concept meant to refer to a particular branch of mathematics. To suggest that Coetzee is applying mathematical ideas to literature at this point in his career is not farfetched. Coetzee was, after all, trained both in mathematics and literature at the University of Cape Town, having received his B.A. in English in 1960 and in Mathematics in 1961 (he began work on his Master’s thesis in 1962). Furthermore, only a few years after completing his thesis on Ford, Coetzee would complete a dissertation on Samuel Beckett in which he uses quantitative and statistical methods to study the styles of *Murphy* and *Watt*; his use of mathematical ideas in his work on Ford is a precursor to his more sophisticated use of mathematics in his work on Beckett.

In light of this background, it seems all but certain that Coetzee deliberately fostered a connection between a certain type of formal execution (exemplified by *The Good Soldier*) and mathematics. At one level, to invoke mathematics is to invoke the promise of mathematics, by which I mean the ideal of a symbolic language strung together into proofs of unimpeachable elegance in which no element is superfluous or unnecessary; all contribute to the truth of the whole. In this respect, language and mathematics are analogical. In a review of *Strange Attractors: Poems of Love and Mathematics*, Coetzee writes, “Scientific discoveries often start with a hunch that there is

some connection between apparently unrelated phenomena. So there are a priori grounds for thinking of poetry and mathematics together, as two rarefied forms of symbolic activity based on the power of the human mind to detect hidden analogies” (Coetzee, *Strange Attractors* 944). To some extent Coetzee is holding up the mathematical proof – with its economy, its inherent but seemingly mysterious truth, its claim to objectivity – as something after which good literature can strive.

However, it is important to point out that Coetzee’s phrasing does not invoke mathematics generally, but “pure mathematics,” which is a branch of mathematics devoted solely to abstract concepts and rigorous proofs (it is often contrasted with the field of applied mathematics).¹³ Pure mathematics is particularly appropriate to the study of literary style because pure mathematics is so closely linked historically to the philosophy of language and, later, to linguistics. One can trace modern pure mathematics back to nineteenth century mathematics, which was then embroiled in debates about its foundational concepts. There was growing interest in understanding why it is that mathematics can be understood in terms of proofs, which can then be applied to the natural sciences. What, in other words, is the nature of mathematical truth? What does it mean for an abstract mathematical proof to be true or untrue? Why do algebraic equations “work” for an infinite set of numbers? And, edging into the philosophy of mathematics, is

¹³ Here is Bertrand Russell’s description of pure mathematics: “Pure mathematics concerns itself exclusively with the deductive element. We obtain propositions of pure mathematics by a process of purification. If I say: ‘Here are two things, and here are two other things, therefore here are four things in all,’ I do not state a proposition of pure mathematics because here particular data come into question. The proposition that I have stated is an application of the general proposition: ‘Given any two things and also any two other things, there are four things in all.’ The latter proposition is a proposition of pure mathematics, while the former is a proposition of applied mathematics.” (“The Philosophical Importance of Mathematical Logic” 36)

mathematics a language that describes physical phenomena (and is therefore to some extent a human creation or discovery), or is the mathematical nature of reality simply an a priori quality of reality? In response to these questions, there arose a movement in the philosophy of mathematics (beginning with the work of the Austrian logician Gottlob Frege) to reduce all of mathematics to a branch of logic. Mathematics could then be shown to be true because it is inherently logical. The goal was to demonstrate that all of mathematics could be derived from a limited set of logical principles and propositions.

In order to determine the logical structure of mathematics, one would have to develop a “logical symbolism” (sometimes called a predicate logic, or a propositional calculus) whereby mathematics could be derived from a set of logical formulae that would demonstrate the innate logic of mathematics. Ideally, this would result in a set of logical propositions that could determine the “truth value” (whether any element in a mathematical proof is logical or illogical, and therefore true or untrue) of any element in a mathematical notation. A mathematical system works or does not work to the extent that it behaves according to the logical rules that dictate how it functions.

Important for our purposes, these developments in the philosophy of mathematics were inseparable from similar developments in the philosophy of language. The great philosophers of mathematics are also very frequently the great philosophers of language (Frege, Bertand Russell, G.E. Moore, Ludwig Wittgenstein). If mathematics was beginning to be examined as a symbolism that was true because of a set of elementary logical propositions, then language too was beginning to be viewed as a symbolism that could be understood according to logical principles. Philosophers of mathematics naturally became interested in whether language (being a system made of up of

abstractions put to use in an indefinite number of combinations) could be reduced to a limited number of logical propositions in much the same way as mathematics might be. As a result of the application of mathematics to language, much of the first half of the twentieth century was devoted to the development of artificially constructed formal languages (as opposed to natural languages) whose logical grammar could be presented via logical symbolism. Philosophers of mathematics, interested in the logical make-up of language, began constructing formal languages that functioned according to elementary logical rules. In a formal language the semantic truth-value of any proposition (the truth or falsity of an assertion in language) can be determined by a logical grammar; whether language was meaningful could be determined by logical induction, which could be presented in logical symbolism.

Mathematics and language, then, are both underwritten by the possibility that they operate by universal principles of logic. They can both be treated logically, and thereby come under the purview of the sciences. By this reasoning, language and mathematics are branches of logic, and the proper study of both falls to logicians. I will not go so far as to say that Coetzee falls into this camp, though the possibility that literary form could be reduced to quantitative stylistics (a methodology in which mathematics is used to study the linguistic data of literary texts) clearly intrigued him at this early stage, and would be a line of thinking he pursued with great fervor in the late 1960s. In fact, Coetzee would say of his later interest in linguistic stylistics:

It was part of the rather positivistic optimism in which I had been brought up, and which I had not sufficiently questioned, that a new and mathematicized stylistics would, by its capacity to define terms rigorously, to build theorems, to construct analytic procedures, and so forth, be able to answer all the questions about the relation of form and meaning that the schools of rhetoric had been fumbling helplessly with for two and a half millennia. (*Doubling the Point* 141)

Clearly, the seeds of this mathematical linguistic model had been sowed by 1963.

Coetzee's use of the term "literary pure mathematics" suggests that the line separating mathematics from literature is not all that great: both are symbolic systems that can be reduced to universal principles that govern their operations. Neither mathematics nor language is arbitrary; in each the rules of the system determine the value of the elements and their logical or illogical position in the system. *The Good Soldier* is "pure mathematics" not only in a metaphorical sense (though the metaphoric sense is certainly present). *The Good Solider* works so well as a piece of literature because it functions according to a small set of underlying principles for how literary language operates; it is possible that pure mathematics can teach us something about how to divine and articulate these rules. These underlying rules may be linguistic and they may be mathematical; or, perhaps, literary style is underwritten by linguistic patterns which themselves can be reduced to mathematics.

This very point is repeated and developed in Coetzee's later stylistic studies, in which various possibilities having to do with the substrates of literary style are explicitly explored. In his dissertation, Coetzee's approach to Beckett's *Watt* begins

...from the assumption that there is a generative principle behind the language of *Watt*, a principle which, applied to many given contents, could turn them out in a form recognizably *Watt*-like. The style of *Watt* is thus not an aggregate of stylistic characteristics with interrelationships forming what we can call a structure, but a set of patterns generated from a common source and therefore logically one. ("The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett" 76)

Coetzee's approaches to Ford and Beckett are in this way remarkably similar, both being predicated on the search for an etymon which will lead to an understanding of "the works as artistic wholes" ("The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett"18).

It should be noted that the oddly worded phrase “literary pure mathematics” only reinforces the idea that the line between literary form and mathematics is not definitive. For within the term itself the noun is “mathematics” and the adjective is “literary.” Coetzee does not say “mathematically pure literature.” The wording suggests that literary mathematics could possibly be a branch both of mathematics and of literary studies. The phrase embodies this hypothetical, precarious hybridity.

Let us turn once again to the passage in which Coetzee states the purpose of his thesis. Coetzee’s description of his project begins with two assertions that are, at face value, contradictory: “The present study is not biographical. It does, however, attempt to suggest the main lines of Ford’s life and their immediate effect on his writing” (“The Works of Ford Madox Ford” x). If the thesis draws conclusions about the effect of Ford’s life on his writing, then in what sense is Coetzee’s thesis “not biographical”? We may be able to accept that the work is not “biography,” or even that it is not orthodox “literary biography,” but it is difficult to accept the claim that the work is not in any way “biographical” when Coetzee draws our attention to the central role of biographical information in the thesis.

Coetzee’s understanding of his own work in relation to the genre of biography is, then, fundamentally paradoxical. He does not feel that his work is “biographical,” and yet he must grudgingly admit that, in some sense, his work is biographical. He does not want his work to be reduced to literary biography, but he cannot deny that he has done what literary biographers do: he has demonstrated the effect of the author’s life on his writing. Since many dozens of pages in the thesis are straightforwardly biographical (including the entirety of the first chapter) we can only read Coetzee’s profession that the thesis is

“not biographical” as reflecting a failed attempt on his part to express that in his thesis biographical information is put to use in a way that is fundamentally different from how it is put to use in either standard biography or literary biography (even as his work shares many characteristics associated with both genres). Coetzee is having difficulty saying how his work is any different from traditional biographical criticism.

What Coetzee seems to be struggling to express clearly is that, though his thesis is finally biographical, and though his thesis does attempt to demonstrate how Ford’s life has an “immediate effect” on his writing, the thesis at no point claims that Ford’s biography has any effect on how we are to judge the success or failure (the formal execution) of any individual work. In other words, biography may have some effect on the writing, but the success or failure of any individual novel (the quality and totality of its formal execution, its achievement of “literary pure mathematics”) is to be understood apart from whatever effect biography has had on the writing. The writing is to be judged on its own merits, according to how well it has been executed and how well the writing works, and when judging formal execution, the effect of biography on the writing – while interesting for its own sake – has no bearing on the autonomous formal execution of the work.

It is in this sense that the thesis is not biographical: its basic assertion and conclusion (meant to confirm the perfect execution of *The Good Solider*) remain the same whether we know anything, or know nothing, of Ford’s life. This perhaps accounts for the tedious thoroughness of the work: discussions of Ford’s life (and the intersection of his social position with the aesthetic trends of his day), are followed by longwinded recapitulations of the plots of nearly every one of Ford’s novels, which are themselves

followed by examinations of the technical and stylistic merits of each novel. Coetzee is unaware of the basic flaw in his methodology; he continues piling up biographical data on Ford in the mistaken belief that it is relevant to this thesis. As a result, Coetzee's description and explication often seem to lack an argument.

Coetzee's statement about the conclusion he arrives at in the thesis confirms that this is his position, "The conclusion of this study is that *The Good Soldier*, probably the finest example of literary pure mathematics in English, is, as Ford considered it, his best achievement; but it attempts to trace in earlier novels experiments without which *The Good Soldier* would have been impossible" (x). Coetzee is trying to make the point here that despite the fact that the conclusion of the thesis is that Ford achieves perfect formal execution, the thesis also affords the reader the opportunity to see how Ford's life shaped what he wrote, and how he wrote. The use of the preposition "but" demonstrates that Ford's biography has no effect on the system of relations that defines the formal execution of any work, even though it does have an effect on how Ford developed and grew as a stylist.

Two models of stylistic analysis are operative in the thesis: the historical model and the formal model. Though the historical model seems to affect the formal model, it ultimately does not. They are simply two distinct ways of studying Ford's style. It is this point – which admittedly hinges on a distinction between methodologies that can be difficult to grasp – that Coetzee is trying to convey, but seemingly cannot. His struggle to explain this point is understandable, as it demonstrates that *the historical content of the thesis is inconsequential to the formal conclusion of the paper*. Coetzee is trying to distinguish between, on the one hand, ahistorical facts about the formal system (the fact

of its “pure mathematics”), and, on the other hand, facts about the history and evolution of that formal system.

Ultimately, Coetzee sees literary style, and the evolution of that style, as subject to historical and biographical pressures. But, at the same time, the execution or non-execution of the literary style is determined, as in any mathematical proof, by the proper arrangement of all its elements into a logical system that operates independently of anything outside of it. A novel’s form can only be judged structurally, though to some extent it can be understood causally. And literary form (as well as the structural patterns it falls into) is to be judged as having been successfully or unsuccessfully executed by how well the form, taken to be a complete and working system, operates like “pure mathematics.”

Though Coetzee never acknowledges his indebtedness to structuralism (quite possibly because he was not conscious of having drawn so heavily on its ideas), his distinction between the historical development of Ford’s style and the systemic and structural nature of that style at any given stage in its evolution, is directly derived from European structural linguistics and structuralist methodologies as they were popularized in non-linguistic fields such as anthropology (in the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss), psychoanalysis (Jacques Lacan), and literature and culture (Roland Barthes). Structural linguistics, which began with Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Course on General Linguistics* (1916) is founded on the principle that language is a “structural system of signs – to be intended as arbitrary relations between a form (*signifiant*) and a content (*signifié*) – whose elements receive a value from their position in the system and from the reciprocal

interrelations with the other parts of the system” (Lenci 23), and that in any system “units are not positive entities but the nodes of a series of differences” (Culler 11).

In structuralism the proper object of language study is the language system, not the historical transformations of languages over time. To distinguish between these two modes of language study, Saussure distinguished between *parole* (occurrences of spoken language) and *langue* (the rules and norms that makes spoken language possible). The study of the system of language is to be studied synchronically (the system of relations that constitute language at any given moment in time), rather than diachronically. Changes in language over time are understood as a series of synchronic stages, not as a history of speech acts that “caused” changes in how people speak. Given the structural nature of language, an event in language is only possible because of the rules of the system to which it belongs. So, while diachronic study of the historical development of language may be appreciated for its interest to historians, language can only be intelligible when it is understood as a synchronic system. Language is a “system of interrelated items and the value and identity of these items is defined by their place in the system (synchrony) rather than by their history (diachrony)” (Culler 13); because of this the history of a language has no explanatory value for the present state of its synchronic structure. Structuralism was a monumental overhaul of historical linguistics in that it challenged whether it is logical to assert that the diachronic changes in language can in any way be brought to bear in understanding language.

So the objective of structural linguistics was to collect, record, and categorize the phonological features of natural languages, and to understand on the basis of this corpus of data how individual natural languages function systematically and synchronically as an

interrelated system of signs. This constituted the fundamental difference between philosophers of mathematics and linguists: structural linguists were not interested in developing an abstract theory of universal grammar; they were interested in what the corpus of data they collected said about the underlying grammar of individual natural languages (and to a much less extent of all languages). The structuralist method is not one of simple data collection and taxonomy; it does not simply reduce life to arbitrary signs that it then arranges in an indefinite series of binary oppositions. Structuralism is guided by an awareness that any event (any utterance or written phrase) has meaning according to the nature of the system underlying that event. That is to say, structuralism posits a “linguistics of execution” in which any phenomenon must be placed within a system so that the system is complete, so that it works, so that it is “brought to an end.”

One can see now that Coetzee’s treatment of Ford’s style is fundamentally structuralist, in that it separates the diachronic/historical dimension of his writing from the synchronic/systemic dimension, and then treats the diachronic history as a series of synchronic systems (each of Ford’s novels being its own autonomous structural system). The “course of development” in Ford’s novels is intelligible and visible only as several autonomous systems existing at different times whose diachronic (causal) relationship to one another is tenuous. Still, even as his methodology is fundamentally synchronic, Coetzee sometimes unwittingly lets his synchronic method slip into a diachronic one; he resorts to thinking about Ford’s style diachronically, even as he clearly knows the diachronic model is conjectural, and that Saussure’s synchronic model renders the historical model insignificant to the system of language. This is not a problem unique to Coetzee; the distinction between diachronic and synchronic ways of understanding

language change is a tricky one, and many have objected to the shift away from historical linguistics.

Interestingly, Coetzee address the synchronic/diachronic conundrum head on his next major project, his Ph.D. dissertation, in which he asks the very questions about Beckett that we wished he had asked about Ford: “What does ‘development’ mean? What is the difference between saying ‘Beckett’s style developed in such-and-such a way between 1934 and 1938’ and ‘The style of this work, published in 1934, is such-and-such, and the style of this work, published in 1938, such-and-such’?” (122) Coetzee answers:

In this essay [his dissertation] I use the word “development” in no qualitative sense. The development of a style is thus simply a handy term to describe the set of lines that can be drawn from the stylistic features of one work to those of others in a chronological series. When the lines consistently assume the same shape, “development” in my sense merges with “development” in the everyday sense, for the lines then indicate a consistent pattern or growth. (“The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett” 124)

Though Coetzee has put his finger on the problem, his answer to the problem is an unsatisfying and disappointing dodge. Of course “lines can be drawn” between two works, but this tells us little about how diachronic repetition maps onto those synchronic structures that take on meaning independent of the development of other systems.

I hope that my reading has demonstrated that Coetzee’s rather unassuming statement about the nature of his project in fact conceals a rather complex set of assumptions and beliefs about how literary form can be understood and judged; in trying to account for Ford’s style, it works on two fronts simultaneously, as if to converge in the end on some final understanding both of the internal formal rigor of Ford’s masterpiece,

and of the historical and biographical circumstances under which he wrote, the collaborations that informed his work (particularly with Joseph Conrad), and the climate in which he developed and wrote about his conception of literature and literary style. According to Coetzee, Ford's efforts to perfect his own style take the form of a series of attempts to bring his work into a formal whole; this is the writer's conception of his own method, which Coetzee uses as the sole means of measuring the quality of any of Ford's novels.

So the dual stylistic analysis that Coetzee uses, drawn principally from structuralism and mathematics, is an attempt to account for Ford's style by demonstrating both its synchronic formal execution and its diachronic evolution. In doing so, his project is to create a positivistic account of Ford's style. However, the question becomes: is Coetzee's method successful? Does he account for all aspects of Ford's style? In other words, does he ultimately demonstrate that a painstaking diachronic and synchronic study of style will give a satisfactory account of Ford's style and its development?

Coetzee seems to imagine that, because all aspects of form should be accounted for in the diachronic and synchronic models, his project will land on a complete and satisfying account of Ford's style. For over three hundred pages it grinds away, trying to arrive at that point. But it never does. It never does because it cannot; something is missing. What is missing, I would argue, is the aspect of the poetics of execution that is concerned with the "business of producing fiction," with that aspect of writing that falls outside both the positivistic "pure mathematics of literary style" (what Coetzee elsewhere calls "the poetics of failure" or the "elegance of closure") and outside of the historical, social, political and linguistic contexts that are relevant to a writer's work. One cannot

successfully explain Ford's, or any other writer's, style without addressing that aspect of an author's style that reflects a conception of his efforts to write fiction so that it works in the way he intended, but that cannot ultimately be reduced to a theoretical model of style. The diachronic and synchronic approaches cannot include "workable and working models of craftsmanship" (D. James 246); they do not account for "the exigencies of his artistic practice" (Attwell in *Doubling the Point* 13). Ford's conception of the formal execution of novel writing is never properly tied to his personality, or to the nature of his ongoing efforts to work through the relationship between, say, formal execution and ethical vision. Ultimately, the thinking that Ford does in his writing may make itself known in ways that do not show up in positivistic conceptions of literature. In this sense, literature is not mathematics, and it is not mathematics in large part because of the non-discrete, non-positivist ways in which writers make their thinking felt in their work.

That a structuralist or mathematical account of style cannot articulate this particular dimension of fiction writing is explicitly borne out by Coetzee's own comments. Pressed to say something about the importance of structuralism to his thinking in the 1960s, Coetzee says:

Yes, the actual productions of structuralist analysis—Jakobson's readings of short poems, Levi-Strauss's readings of myths—though meant to show the creative mind at work, never provided me or any other writer, I believe, with a model or even a suggestion of how to write. In that sense structuralism remained a firmly academic movement. Barthes's phantasies disguised as science were far more valuable. (*Doubling the Point* 24)

Coetzee is uncharacteristically adamant that structuralism has nothing of any value whatsoever to say about "how to write," or even models or ways of thinking from which practicing writers could learn. Perhaps one can even say that the type of understanding that is of use to writers manifests itself in ways that are not immediately evident in

synchronic formal systems, and so structuralism in this sense cannot account for some very important aspect of style. It is this very aspect of literary writing that is absent from Coetzee's structuralist reading of Ford.

In an interview with David Attwell, Coetzee speaks only very briefly about his thesis, and about Ford's influence on him. His comments demonstrate precisely that aspect of the writer's thinking (of Ford's thinking) that left its greatest mark on Coetzee, and that aspect of Ford's thinking that Coetzee never could capture in his thesis because it has no clear place in either a diachronic or synchronic explanation of style. Coetzee says:

I had read Ford Madox Ford as an undergraduate and been much attracted to him: to the Tietjens tetralogy in the first place, then to *The Good Soldier*. I had come to Ford via Pound, who thought him the finest prose stylist of his day. The kind of aestheticism Ford stood for struck a chord in me: good prose was a matter of cutting away, of paring down (though Ford actually wrote voluminously); novel-writing was a craft as well as a vocation; and so forth. But I now suspect that there was more to the attraction than that. Ford gives the impression of writing from inside the English governing class, but in fact he wrote as an outsider, and as a somewhat yearning outsider at that. His father was an anglicized German, and his mother was born into the Pre-Raphaelite circle—bohemians of a kind. Ford's social aspirations drove him to become in many ways plus *anglais que les anglaises*. He cultivated a kind of gruff stoicism, which he thought of as Tory (old-fashioned Tory, of course) and embodied in his hero Christopher Tietjens. I now suspect that what attracted me to Ford was as much the ethics of Tietjens as the aesthetics of *le mot juste*.

Which is not to say that when I myself write I do not quite laboriously search out the right word. I do believe in spareness—more spareness than Ford practiced. Spare prose, and a spare, thrifty world: it's an unattractive part of my makeup that has exasperated people who have had to share their lives with me. On the other hand, I was reading George Bourne the other day, on rural England pre-1914. The key word for Bourne, a complex, value-laden word with a long history, is thrift: the culture of the western European peasantry was a culture of thrift. My family roots lie in that peasant culture, transplanted from Europe to Africa. So I am quite deeply ambivalent about disparaging thrift. (*Doubling the Point* 20)

As Coetzee acknowledges, the economy of Ford's prose is a significant part of Ford's style and aesthetic philosophy. Despite his voluminous output, Ford believed that "the first province of style is to be unnoticeable" (*March* 843) and that "if you are not simple you are not observant" (*Return* 53). In his thesis, Coetzee stresses Ford's laconism as the hallmark of his style,¹⁴ so it would be natural to suppose that stylistic minimalism was the chief lesson that Coetzee learned from Ford.

But, as Coetzee explains, the mark that Ford's work left on him is not exclusively a stylistic sparseness. What Coetzee finally remembers of Ford is his "gruff stoicism," which is both a quality of Ford's style reflected in his sparing diction and a quality of Ford's psychological outlook that seeped into his writing in ways that are not solely formal. Gruff stoicism is not only an aspect of Ford's style; it is an aspect of his ethical vision, and a part of his psychology that bears upon the instincts that shape the thinking present in his writing. As David James writes, "Formal thrift affects both sides of the writing process, from structural rules to habits and intuitions. A perfectible, objectively discerned part of narrative design, thriftiness also taps into a writer's personal attitude to available materials" ("By Thrifty Design" 244). To equate Ford's stoicism with a terse writing style is to misrepresent what Ford's unique brand of stoicism is, and to gloss over the many ways in which stoicism manifests itself in his writing. No diachronic or synchronic formal study of Ford's style could ever account for the "gruff stoicism" of Ford's work because that "gruff stoicism" comes about at the intersection of ethics and stylistics in the unique event of Ford's writing.

¹⁴ "Selection was to be the keynote everywhere. Selection of impressions, selection of instances, and, in the province of style, selection of *le mot juste*, as long as the word was not too surprising" ("The Works of Ford Madox Ford 2.30).

David James correctly points out that what Coetzee “finds rewarding in Ford is the correlation of stylistic priorities and the demands of moral and psychological enquiry” (“By Thrifty Design” 247). But, as James fails to see, this is precisely the aspect of Ford’s work that a structuralist/formalist reading of the kind Coetzee constructs in his thesis cannot account for; moreover, it is that aspect of Ford’s work that must be convincingly explained in a satisfactory account of Ford’s writing. The unique event that is Ford’s writing is inexplicable if Ford’s writing is simply reduced to formal patterns and rhetorical strategies that can be understood in terms of aesthetic theories and biographical data. A proper understanding of style requires that the critic have some feeling for the underlying intuitions and patterns of thinking that are at the heart of the formal choices the author makes; one must be able to “tap into a writer’s personal attitude” (D. James 244) to understand what it means for a writer to be gruffly stoic in how he thinks and writes; and, if one wishes to apply this understanding to one’s own writing, one must find one’s own way to be gruffly stoic in one’s own writing. In the thesis, however, Coetzee’s synchronic readings of Ford’s individual works reduce “gruff stoicism” to perfectly orchestrated workmanship. In the diachronic readings of Ford’s aesthetic and personal development, gruff stoicism becomes a feature of his personality that goes some way toward explaining his anti-impressionist aesthetic ideology. In neither case is the form of understanding I highlighted above achieved.

For Coetzee, as he would understand years later, “gruff stoicism” was Ford’s gift to him as a writer. He drew from it as an ethical and stylistic outlook that could guide him in the day-to-day business of writing fiction. It became, in Coetzee’s hands, what he calls “thrift.” Like stoicism, thrift is “a complex, value-laden word with a long history”; in

contemporary usage, thrift usually means tight-fisted and cautious to a fault, but etymologically (as David James points out) it has both a Middle English meaning of “prosperity” and “acquired wealth” and a Norse meaning of *thrifa*, which is the “act of grasping or getting hold of some valued possession” (“By Thrifty Design” 251). Its historical connotations suggest not stinginess, but prudence and endurance. It carries in it the ethos of the peasantry that Coetzee feels he belongs to, and which so resonated with him in the writing of George Bourne.

Thrift, then, is not only a stylistic imperative in Coetzee’s work, but an ethical and a cultural imperative as well. It is an attitude toward life, and toward writing, that is reflected in his constitution, in the way he speaks about writing, in the themes he chooses to explore, in many of the settings of his work. It is, I think, an aspect of his writing that many scholars have erroneously attributed to either his minimalist writing style or to the dismal, arid tone of much of his work. However, thrift is neither in one nor the other. It suffuses him, and suffuses his writing. It is part of the very structure of his thinking, and as such makes its presence felt not only in his style but also in his very conception of the “exigencies of his artistic practice” (*Doubling the Point* 13).

It is important to see that there is a stage in Coetzee’s thinking in which his inability to develop a conception of writing that includes the writer’s conception of his own craft (the writer’s psychological investment) also precludes him from understanding something about the intersection of ethics and language in literature. The ability to understand the writer’s mind, and his conception of his craft, is to grant the possibility of non-systemic, ethical, psychological and formal events that push back against literary pure mathematics, and against generalization and abstraction. The writer’s perspective is

not only an aspect of the work that in this case falls outside the synchronic and diachronic models, but one that pushes back against the tendency for language to fall into systems. These systems may appear to be identical to artistic wholes, but in fact there are larger artistic wholes comprised of both structural systems *and* the writer's unique investment in his work (which is nonetheless a part of these structural systems). There is in this sense an enormous ethical imperative to understand the exigencies of fiction writing, for they make a certain kind of ethical thinking about literature possible, and they give readers greater access to how writers introduce ethics into their writing even when those same writers are aware of the unavoidable structural and linguistic imperatives intrinsic to writing.

At the beginning of this chapter, I spoke of what I call the problems of literature. I suggested that one of the ways in which Coetzee imagines both the task of fiction writing and the critic's response to fiction is by formulating the challenge of writing a novel, or writing about a novel, as a problem that a writer or critic can go about solving. In his thesis, the problem of literature that Coetzee formulates is both his own problem (as the literary critic) and, largely, Ford's problem: to discern the underlying structure (the code; the mathematics; the *langue*) within which the work of literature refines itself. Literary perfection is equated with formal execution (with mathematics), which is itself equated with both Ford's goal as a writer and with the effectiveness of *The Good Solider* as literature.

What this tells us about Coetzee's conception of literature and the craft of writing is that, at this stage, a novel's singularity (to return to Attridge's term) is not so much its unique innovation, but its formal execution; it is the extent to which the author has solved

the problem of achieving formal execution in his work—with formal execution closely tied to mathematics. The literary critic succeeds to the extent that he identifies the nature of this mathematics, and understands the rules that govern it. In this respect, Coetzee is very much an idealist. His theories are neither provisional, nor conjectural; he does not treat of one section of one work, or a few works in an author's oeuvre. He treats the entirety of any given work of literature, and as close to the entirety of Ford's massive oeuvre as any critic could. His project is totalizing. His judgment works at the level of the individual novel, and the oeuvre as a whole.

Still, though there was no place for “gruff stoicism” or “thrift” in Coetzee's idealistic study of Ford, it seems that the promise of something that joined language and craft was the impetus for Coetzee's project. The thesis does not sideline this aspect of Ford's work and thought; it posits it (through the feeling the reader has of its absence) as the thing that will finally bring about execution—as the final act that will bring about “poetic closure.” *Coetzee's struggle to reconcile the diachronic and synchronic forces at work in Ford's style is a search for those aspects of Ford's mind and craft that he knew were there but, at this time, could find no place for in his conception of literature.*

Though Ford, in his masterwork, may have solved his own problem of literature by coming as close as any writer has to achieving “poetic closure” in a novel, Coetzee fails as a literary critic in so far as he only understands Ford's “poetic closure,” his purely formal execution. The promise held by structuralism and mathematics is the promise of closure, but in fact – at least at this stage of his theorization of literary language – these disciplines close off the possibility of a different, more complete type of closure, which I have called the poetics of execution.

This raises an important point, one that bears upon wider debates within Coetzee studies. Particularly, it bears upon debates over the extent to which Coetzee's novels function as allegories of postmodern discourse in which textuality is foregrounded and meaning is endlessly deferred or, conversely, the extent to which his work resists such theoretical categorization and posits something – a metaphysics, an ethics, a rewriting of history, a post-colonial reimagining of discursivity and colonial power, a speaking for or with the marginal figure – that cannot be reduced to postmodernist game playing. As Dominic Head has said, “A staple point of debate in Coetzee studies [is] that the novels can be read as self-referential allegories in which the use of discourse is held up for examination” (*Cambridge Introduction to J.M. Coetzee* 95).¹⁵ Teresa Dovey has argued that Coetzee “wittingly inhabits prior modes of discourse in order to deconstruct them from within,” and that “in this sense the novels may be described as postmodern allegories, which undermine the authority of the appropriated discourses” (“J.M. Coetzee: Writing in the Middle Voice” 19). Building from Dovey's premises, Susan VanZanten Gallagher's *A Story of South Africa: J.M. Coetzee's Fiction in Context* not only places Coetzee's works in their South African contexts but presents Coetzee's novels as postmodern allegories; both Gayatri Spivak and Helen Tiffin have organized their post-colonial readings around poststructuralism's concern with textuality, with Tiffin arguing that, “Language, text and author/ity and the discursive fields within which these operate, become the subject of *Foe*” (28). In many ways, this is a debate over whether Coetzee's

¹⁵ This debate can also be reframed politically, the question becoming whether Coetzee's work functions as a national allegory or whether the novel cannot be reduced to any one-to-one correspondences between art and life. Debates have raged over how Coetzee's self-consciousness about textuality (often taking the form of ambivalence toward literary realism) figure into a post-colonial paradigm. I address these issues and debates at greater length in Chapter Two.

novels function as literary pure mathematics or whether such a reading overlooks those aspects of Coetzee's work that cannot be dissolved so easily – for Derek Attridge what resists such a reductive reading is literature's singularity (*The Singularity of Literature*), for Stephen Watson it is the way in which Coetzee's works do not evade colonial history but give “insight into the colonizing mind, as well as the dissenting colonizing mind” (“Colonialism and the Novels of J.M. Coetzee” 36).

Several critics have tried to situate themselves within this polarizing debate by attempting to reconcile the “mathematical” and “non-mathematical” aspects of Coetzee's work. David Attwell has called Coetzee's novels “a form of postmodern metafiction that declines the cult of the merely relativist and artful...Coetzee has absorbed the lessons of modern linguistics—the textual turn in structuralism and poststructuralism—yet seriously addresses the ethical and political stresses of living in, and with, a particular historical locale, that of contemporary South Africa” (*J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* 1). In “Charting J.M. Coetzee's Middle Voice,” Brian Macaskill presents a fair picture of both the extent to which Magda finds herself “imprisoned by tautology” (73) – something of “an exemplar from a primer on deconstruction” (74) – and the extent to which Coetzee “powerfully illustrated the extent to which individual agents may position themselves in such a way as to resist the determinism of structure” (78). Stephen Watson and Michael Marais have each produced works that concede the fundamental importance of poststructuralist theory in Coetzee's fiction while exploring various ways in which his nonetheless falls outside of such a heuristic.¹⁶

¹⁶ See Watson's “Colonialism and the Novels of J.M. Coetzee” and Marais's “Languages of Power.”

However, as I have begun to demonstrate in this chapter, and as I will demonstrate further in later chapters, Coetzee's studies of literature seem to complicate this debate in important ways. Implicit in Coetzee's view of literature are two conceptions he has of literature: one is that the writer's conception of his craft brings a literary work into a state of unity, and that this state of unity is difficult (if not impossible) to reconcile with the prevailing theories of literary form and style in literary studies and linguistics. His other sense is that, above and beyond the writer's unity, a methodology that incorporates both the unity of the writer's conception of his craft and the literary theorist's conception of form holds the promise of a higher unity. The name I have given to this unity is the poetics of execution—a promise of closure that oscillates between the writer's unity and the greater unity of writer and critic. Behind Coetzee's studies of form is the search for this higher unity. In his thesis, Coetzee had been after Ford's secret as a writer (just as, later, he will be after "a secret of Beckett's" [*Doubling the Point* 25]), but had mistakenly believed that the combination of the synchronic and diachronic models would provide a complete picture of Ford's style; he had tried to understand Ford's style at a depth, and in a way, not allowed for by the methodologies he used. Moving forward, Coetzee's project will be to think through the relationship between these unities, and to think about these matters from the perspective of both a novelist and a scholar.

If the various forms of compromise that Coetzee scholars have made between poststructuralist unity and other forms of non-unity may seem merely to split the difference between the two positions, Coetzee's search for a higher unity – a poetics of execution – carries in it the possibility for a unity of a different order, one that can

incorporate the local instances of unity and disunity that many scholars have tried to force together. The critic's method may require him to move from the "poetics of closure" to the poetics of execution.

Regardless of whether such a higher unity ever reveals itself, Coetzee indisputably feels the presence of such a unity, and his way of thinking about this possibility ought to complicate the picture we have of Coetzee's writing. It ought to complicate it both by compelling critics to understand more precisely the catalyst for Coetzee's thinking about literary form, and by insisting that the writer's sense of his own craft be incorporated into the studies of Coetzee's work in a way that does not reduce the writer's perspective to formal mathematics (synchrony) or historical/political/social influences (diachrony).

What this may mean is that, in order to judge Coetzee's novels, one must have some way of critiquing and evaluating different types of execution. That is, we must explore whether a novel that achieves perfect formal execution should be considered a success. If the writer is driven by a sense of getting closer to "it" (as Coetzee claims), and if this "it" is closely associated with the true or the ideally executed, then we must acknowledge the imperative of aesthetic judgment in the writer's process. And, we must then also acknowledge the place of aesthetic judgment both in Coetzee's own criticism (Coetzee judges *The Good Soldier* a success as a novel because of its formal unity), and in criticism of his novels generally.

For example, one could argue that *Foe* is the novel of Coetzee's that comes closest to achieving "literary pure mathematics." However, one could also argue that its mathematical nature lends the novel an unsatisfying, orchestrated, programmatic quality.

Coetzee's thesis *demonstrates the importance of being able to evaluate the merits of different kinds of execution*, and of being chary of equating "pure mathematics" – and the promise of closure it dangles in front of the critic – with literary achievement. If the unity of Coetzee's works has been a principal point of dispute, then Coetzee's equation of unity and perfection facilitates what may be a much-needed debate about how to evaluate the literary merits of Coetzee's work. Although the merits of Coetzee's work have often been debated along political lines (with there being, broadly speaking, a division between those who find Coetzee's novels politically responsible and those that find them irresponsible), there has been less debate about other means – aesthetic, formal, structural – by which to evaluate the relative merits of Coetzee's work. It seems to me that responses to Coetzee's work often have less to do with political commitments and more to do with one's feeling about Coetzee's postmodernist game playing, or his investment in academic discourse, or even the stoicism of which he is often accused. How, I wonder, might a young Coetzee judge his later novels if he were to use the same formal criteria he used to judge Ford's novels?

Coetzee directly addresses the relationship between formal execution and the merit of a work of literature in his later writing. As I have already discussed, Coetzee has a professed interest in a type of literary work that works by creating "poetic closure;" this closure "is always obtainable from the maneuver in which a poem ends by swallowing its own tail—denying, denouncing, or erasing itself" (86). These auto-destructive works are ideal examples of literary pure mathematics, and Coetzee is certainly drawn to them as paragons of literary mathematics. However, as I explore in Chapter Two, Coetzee becomes wary of equating the pure mathematics evident in works that achieve "poetic

closure” with the sort of closure he was in search of – but failed to discover – in Ford’s work. Coetzee’s ambivalence about this kind of self-cancelling art is central to the next stage of his thinking about literary form.

In Chapter Two, I continue to track the structural and mathematical aspects of Coetzee’s thinking as they develop, and as they are altered by his growing engagement with stylistics and linguistics. I examine how Coetzee’s work on Samuel Beckett reflects a more advanced stage in his theorization of literary form. In this period, Coetzee’s idealism becomes more circumspect, which both threatens the promise of a “literary pure mathematics” and, at the same, begins to open up the possibility for other types of formal execution, and other ways in which authors may go about solving the problem of writing a work of literature that “works.”

Though to some extent he will become disillusioned by the possibility of a positivistic theory of language, he never abandons this ideal entirely as something toward which authors and critics can aspire. In some ways Coetzee corrects the central methodological weakness of his Master’s thesis, though in other ways he holds to his faith in a formal and structural procedure for understanding literary style. It is during this period of disillusionment that Coetzee moves away from the scholar’s inflexible stylistic stance toward a more nuanced theory of literary form, and a more fully developed conception of fiction writing. These years, more than any other, sow the seeds for Coetzee’s style in his fiction during the early stage of his career as a novelist. It is over the course of writing his dissertation – and of publishing several articles on Beckett drawn from his dissertation – that Coetzee comes to see what he was not mature enough to understand while he wrote his thesis: that the writer’s conception of his craft is integral

to the study of literary form. There can be no understanding style at the depth to which Coetzee strived to understand it without figuring how to integrate the writer's knowledge into stylistic theory.

Chapter Two

J.M. Coetzee in America: On Beckett and Stylistics

J.M. Coetzee came to America in 1965.¹⁷ He did not fly to the United States. He sailed there on an Italian ship, leaving England – and his career as a computer programmer – behind for good. Like so many others before him, he docked in New York harbor. From there, he made his way to Austin, where he began graduate school in linguistics and literature at the University of Texas. Coetzee describes these years in a brief but gracious memoir, “Remembering Texas.”

As a doctoral student (1965-1968), Coetzee took classes in bibliography and Old English, learned “the operation of the Hinman collator” (“Remembering Texas,” *Doubling the Point* 50) from William B. Todd, studied “the makeshift grammars put together by missionaries” and “the earliest linguistic records of the old languages of the Cape” (“Remembering Texas,” *Doubling the Point* 52). In the library’s manuscript collection, he began research into those histories of the Hottentots that had been written by white explorers and missionaries during the eighteenth century. This work on white writing in the Western Cape would eventually be absorbed into his first published fiction, *Dusklands*. In the same library, during the same period of time, he pored over the

¹⁷ A version of this chapter, entitled “J.M. Coetzee’s Earliest Theory of Literature: Beckett, Linguistics, and the Temptations of Allegory,” is under review at *Contemporary Literature*.

“exercise books in which Samuel Beckett had written *Watt* in the south of France, hiding out from the Germans” (“Remembering Texas,” *Doubling the Point* 51). To earn his keep, Coetzee taught composition to undergraduates, whom, he says, “might as well have been Trobriand Islanders, so inaccessible to me were their culture, their recreations, their animating ideas” (51). On Sundays, he played cricket on a baseball field with “a group of Indians,” they, like him, “nostalgic castoff children from the colonies” (51). Judging from the two novellas that make up *Dusklands*, Coetzee well understood the relevance of America’s war in Vietnam to his own position, which was that of a white South African opposed to, but vaguely complicit in, an atrocious colonial government.

Though one might question the simplicity of his account, taken at face value Coetzee’s memories in “Remembering Texas” come across as maturely wistful, as well as wry in their attitude toward the mixture of the absurd, the mundane, and the idly pleasurable that characterized his time in Texas. While grateful that his life as a hermetic graduate student became so pregnant with meaningful associations (with American neo-colonialism, with other expatriates similarly adrift, with seismic changes within his chosen field over the nature of language), he is equally grateful that these associations did not disturb the gentle, busy routine of graduate level work. He felt able to take in, and eventually use in his fiction, the experiences and ideas that he had there because they were not aggressively foisted upon him. “Coming or going, I had no regrets” he writes, “I departed, I thought, unmarked, unscathed, except by the times. No one had tried to teach me, for which I was grateful” (“Remembering Texas,” *Doubling the Point* 53). Though there is a fair bit of irony in these words, the irony is directed toward the paradoxical

nature of adult education itself (he learned because he had not been taught), not at the University itself, or at his professors, or at his classmates.¹⁸

Some of the good feeling Coetzee seems to have for this period of his life is plainly emotional. After several years in England of being so very much himself – hibernant, studious in a paranoid way, tormented by his calling as a writer, his energy spent squaring off against his identity as a South African emigrant and his intractably awkward and solitary nature – Coetzee had now come to a time in his life when he seemed not to feel those pressures so acutely. Rather than always being so hard on himself (as he is in *Boyhood* and *Youth*), in Texas he is more capable of letting himself off the hook a little. At no other time in his life does he seem so self-forgiving (though the tender self-parody of *Diary of a Bad Year* is a species of self-forgiveness).

It is not coincidental that “Remembering Texas” is written in first-person singular, rather than in third-person singular, as are *Boyhood*, *Youth*, and *Summertime*. One can draw conclusions from Coetzee’s decision not to stylize Texas in the way he stylizes his South African childhood, his British early adulthood, his manhood in Cape Town. The decision not to treat Texas with the metafictional devices common to his early work (which is a decision, in some sense, not to fictionalize Texas) has something to do with the sense he had then (and, I think, continues to have) that in Texas he left the bubble of childhood and entered into the longer stream of adult time. The perspective that he was incapable of having during the emotional tumult of his teenage years and early twenties, and that it would not be possible to have once he became a professional novelist whose

¹⁸ In 2011, the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin acquired Coetzee’s archive. Coetzee said that it “is very satisfying to know that my papers will find a home at the Ransom Center, one of the world’s great research institutions.” This is no doubt further evidence of Coetzee’s fondness for the University.

life is fodder for his fiction, he had in Texas. For whatever reason, he has never felt the need to ruin this pocket of idealism by incorporating Texas into the games he plays with literary conventions.

Certainly, the pressure and impatience to become a writer that he describes in *Youth* still oppressed him during this period, but there was another part of him that no longer *had* to become a writer immediately; he no doubt yearned to be a great young novelist, but he was twenty five years old in 1965, and he could still be a great young novelist in 1968 or 1969 (when he hit thirty years old, the pressure returned with a vengeance; it was with a feeling of desperation that he began writing *Dusklands* on New Years Day 1970). Though he talks to David Attwell about the “nausea of facing the empty page” (*Doubling the Point* 19) that he experienced during those years, in “Remembering Texas” he never mentions his anxieties about becoming a fiction writer. Though there was still certainly some torment and anxiety and a sense of dread over his inability to write, his experience there does not seem to have been ruined or overrun by worry. The psychological maturity and self-growth that Coetzee had gone to England in search of but not found there, he seems to have found in the United States.

While in graduate school, Coetzee focused most of his academic energy on literary style, and on the work of Samuel Beckett.¹⁹ His dissertation, “The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett: an Essay in Stylistic Analysis,” uses several different branches of stylistics and linguistics in a consideration of Beckett’s move from English to French,

¹⁹ In addition to the articles on Beckett collected in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee has written on Beckett several times: “Samuel Beckett’s *Lessness*: An Exercise in Decomposition”; reviews of Deirdre Bair’s *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* and of Brigitte le Juez’s *Beckett before Beckett*; “Eight Ways of Looking at Samuel Beckett”; an introduction to *Samuel Beckett: The Grove Centenary Edition*, vol. 4; and a review of a volume of Beckett’s letters (*Letters*, vol. 1).

with the focus principally on *Murphy* and *Watt*. Out of this dissertation came a fair amount of work: a series of articles on Beckett and stylistics²⁰ published in the early 1970s, an op-ed piece about the Vietnam war,²¹ and a few recollections and peripheral statements made in various interviews and conversations during subsequent decades. It is these years, these writings, and this newfound immersion in high-level linguistics and stylistics that form the context, subject matter, and intellectual background of my work in this chapter.²²

To date, surprisingly little has been written about the work Coetzee did on style when he was in his late twenties and early thirties. David Attwell addresses Coetzee's intellectual formation in very interesting ways in *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, but his book is too wide-ranging to devote very much attention to Coetzee's dissertation. In *Countervoices*, Carrol Clarkson explores the linguistic conventions that factor into both Coetzee's fiction and non-fiction. However, as I discuss in the Introduction, Clarkson's interest primarily is in the ethical consequences of linguistic choices Coetzee seems to have made in his fiction, while mine is in the nuances of thinking that manifest themselves in the subtleties of Coetzee's scholarly work. A few

²⁰ Coetzee's most important works on Beckett are gathered in *Doubling the Point*: "The Comedy of Point of View in Beckett's *Murphy*" (1970), "The Manuscript Revisions of Beckett's *Watt*" (1972), and "Samuel Beckett and the Temptations of Style" (1973). All three articles are extensions of work that had previously appeared in Coetzee's dissertation; the articles on *Murphy* and *Watt* say little more than what had already appeared in the dissertation. "Temptations of Style," though, does give some additional insight into Coetzee's conception of style. I will discuss the salient additions at the end of the chapter.

²¹ "The Firing Line" (1967).

²² For my own stylistic reading of Beckett (without reference to Coetzee), see my article, "What Philosophy Can't Say About Literature."

others have written about the ways in which Coetzee's fiction is indebted to, or in conversation with, Beckett's work.²³

Though the history and intellectual context may be different, the purpose of this chapter is no different from the purpose of the last: to look at the development in Coetzee's thinking about the nature of literary form and the nature of fiction writing, and to suggest that these two aspects of his thinking work in tandem. The various ways in which these two distinct aspects of Coetzee's thinking come into conversation with one another in an effort to conceive of literature as something that has either been executed or not executed (has worked, or failed to work), I call the *poetics of execution*. Coetzee's tendency is to address issues surrounding literature and language by formulating them as problems to be solved—I call these problems the *problems of literature*. I am interested, then, in how Coetzee's writing during this period reflects a more advanced stage in his thinking about literary form, aesthetics, and fiction writing; in the intellectual and academic climate in which Coetzee found himself in the mid 1960s, and the effect it had on his thinking about literature; in the new forms of thinking that Coetzee brought to bear on literature during this period; and in what Coetzee might have taken from his studies of style and Beckett and applied to his fiction.

These distinct but indivisible conceptions of literature were as relevant to Coetzee during the period in which he immersed himself in Beckett's fiction as they were during the period in which he devoted himself to Ford Madox Ford. This is apparent in an exchange from *Doubling the Point*:

²³ For criticism on Coetzee and Beckett, see Chris Ackerley, Derek Attridge, Patrick Hayes, Nicholas Meihuizen and Gilbert Yeoh.

David Attwell: What are the implications of your search for the underlying matrix of Beckett's prose?

J.M. Coetzee: I think I have already hinted at an answer. Beckett has meant a great deal to me in my own writing—that must be obvious. He is a clear influence on my prose. Most writers absorb influence through their skin. With me there has also been a more conscious process of absorption. Or shall I say, my linguistic training enabled me to see the effects I was undergoing with a degree of consciousness. The essays I wrote on Beckett's style aren't only academic exercises, in the colloquial sense of that word. They are also attempts to get closer to a secret, a secret of Beckett's that I wanted to make my own. And discard, eventually, as it is with influences. (25)

Asked to speak about his interest in the “underlying matrix of Beckett's prose,” Coetzee acknowledges that his studies of Beckett were not merely “academic exercises”; they were his attempt to make the secret of Beckett's work his own. They were academic studies of style, but they also functioned as lessons in style for an aspiring novelist. In a single passage, Coetzee moves seamlessly (as if each separate focus were part of a broader area of interest that encompasses them all) from the importance of his academic work, to his ability to be influenced by Beckett, to an affirmation of the importance of both of these elements (the academic and the creative), to his fascination with Beckett, to a final casting off such influences in the spirit of writing in a voice that, while carrying in it the “oversounds” (Robert Frost 308) of his hero Beckett, is distinctly his own.

To prepare the reader for Coetzee's complex and unusual dissertation, and to give some sense of the intellectual climate Coetzee worked in during the 1960s and 1970s, I must take up the interdisciplinary field that is the study of literary language,²⁴ a field that encompasses stylistics (the study of literary style), linguistic criticism (the study of

²⁴ For a very readable overview of various theories of literature and the literary, see Terry Eagleton's *The Event of Literature*. Eagleton is especially good on developments within linguistic criticism that occurred after Coetzee's early work on Beckett, namely the rise of speech-act theory.

literature as language using linguistic methodologies), and literary criticism (the interpretation and appreciation of literature).²⁵ Coetzee's dissertation, though ostensibly aimed at understanding Beckett's decision to stop writing in English and begin writing in French, is really about testing (with Beckett as guinea pig) a wide range of theories concerned with literature and language generally. Coetzee makes this clear early in his dissertation:

Aside from an approach to the problem of Beckett's relations with the English language, then, the reader may expect a survey and critique of methods of stylistic analysis and some inductive conclusions about style, all of which may be seen as a tiny dialectic of theory and practice belonging in turn to the continuing dialectic of theory and practice which will one day decide which parts of stylistics will belong to mathematical linguistics and which if any to literary criticism. ("The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett" 13)

Some of these stylistic theories will be familiar to most readers ("close reading" methods drawn from Practical Criticism, New Criticism, Formalism, and Structuralism), others foreign (quantitative stylistics, functional linguistic criticism, transformational grammar). Coetzee draws from all of them, often combining them or focusing only on particular aspects of individual theories. He is, then, comfortable with stylistics not just as a set of discrete theories, but as a general way of thinking about literary language. He understands what it means to be oriented toward literature in a stylistic manner, but he can be oriented without being pledged to any single methodology. His interest is not only in developing his own theories for the study of literary language, but in testing and

²⁵ For an excellent overview of linguistic criticism see Roger Fowler's *Linguistic Criticism*; a few of the most influential collections of stylistic essays are Fowler's *Essays on Style in Language*; Sebeok's *Style in Language* (this includes Jakobson's indispensable "Closing Statement"); and Freeman's *Linguistics and Literary Style*. Jean Jacques Weber provides an excellent series of articles responding to canonical stylistic works in *The Stylistics Reader: From Roman Jakobson to the Present*.

evaluating a variety of preexistent theories in the spirit of coming to find out what use they might have for someone interested in understanding literature.

For these reasons, it is important to know something of the variety of theories the study of style has spawned, and particularly to know something of quantitative stylistics, which is the branch of linguistic criticism most central to Coetzee's work on Beckett. There may be no more natural place to begin a review of a contentious intellectual tradition than with Stanley Fish. One of Fish's best-known essays is "What is stylistics and why are they saying such terrible things about it?"²⁶ The first of the questions that he poses in his title is the question with which I will begin; Fish answers it so well that I will simply quote him,

The first of the questions in my title – what is stylistics? – has already been answered by the practitioners of the art. Stylistics was born of a reaction to the subjectivity and imprecision of literary studies. For the appreciative raptures of the impressionistic critic, stylisticians purport to substitute precise and rigorous linguistic descriptions, and to proceed from those descriptions to interpretations for which they can claim a measure of objectivity. Stylistics, in short, is an attempt to put criticism on a scientific basis. (*Is There a Text in This Class?* 69)

To this list of basic principles, I would add that stylistics by its very nature is interested in literature as language, as something that is made up of, and thus capable of being understood by means of, linguistic elements, structures, and patterns. The goal of stylistics, in the most general sense, is to relate particular properties of language to meaning.²⁷ Within many schools of literary criticism (Practical Criticism, New Criticism,

²⁶ See also Fish's essay "Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics" (1970).

²⁷ A more general review of stylistics, and of its roots in rhetoric, would include a review of the debates concerning the relationship between form and content. Generally speaking, theories of form and content have fallen into three categories: (1) a dualistic theory of ornate form in which an author's style (form) is a dressing up of meaning/content (words differently arranged can express the same meaning; style as deviation from a norm) (2) a monist position in which form and content are inseparable (here style as a concept to

a large part of Russian Formalism and the Prague School) this movement from language to meaning is accomplished through close attention to sentence structure, syntax, and grammar; to the way in which literary language deviates from conventional language in such a way as to self-reflexively call attention to its own formal structure. The focus here would be on the formal/structural makeup of literary language as opposed to non-literary language, and on the means by which the manipulation of the features of literary language (*foregrounding* in the Prague School, *defamiliarization* among Russian Formalists) constitute the verbal meaning of a work of literature (as opposed to the meaning foisted upon the work by the critic's taste).²⁸

some degree becomes untenable, in so much as style presupposes a manner of writing apart from meaning) and (3) an individual or psychological theory in which "style is the man himself" (Buffon) and an expression of the author's personality and unique conception of reality (style in this case is like a fingerprint, and the goal of the stylistician is to unearth a reoccurring stylistic trait by which an author can be identified). For literary critics and stylisticians, the importance of these different positions is in, firstly, what each one says about the relationship between the author (his psychology, his intentions) and his way of writing, and, secondly, what each position reflects about the critic's aesthetic attitude toward literature. That is, a dualistic position tends to be taken by those who view literature objectively and structurally (who view literary language as distinct from practical language in its manipulation of formal codes and techniques), while monist positions are usually taken by practicing writers and committed close readers, who tend to feel that the indivisibility of form and content is what gives literature its unique value.

²⁸ The Russian Formalists (Boris Eichenbaum, Roman Jakobson, Viktor Shklovsky, Boris Tomashevsky et. al.) argued that "poetic language is not only a language of images, that sounds in verse are not at all merely elements of a superficial euphony, and that they do not play a mere 'accompaniment' to meaning, but rather that they have an independent significance" (Eichenbaum 110). By "independent significance" they mean both that sound and form have a value as literary language apart from the meaning they express, and that formal structures and patterns have aesthetic meaning independent of the reader. Because literary language can call attention to its own existence as formally constructed (by deviating from practical language, by foregrounding certain rhetorical devices, by emphasizing sound and repetition more than semantic meaning), it can also be studied and evaluated through its formal patterns and linguistic structures without recourse to its semantic, philosophical, political or social meaning. For overviews and original essays,

For others (quantitative stylisticians, generative grammarians, linguistic critics) the move from form to meaning is accomplished through explicitly linguistic means. Instead of selectively drawing from linguistics and rhetoric to assess how, for instance, a poem foregrounds certain features by systematically deviating from non-poetic language (as formalists would), functionalists provide a rigorous “description of a text based on general linguistic theory” (Halliday, “The Linguistic Study” 217) and then find a correlation between specific linguistic elements and isolatable aesthetic effects. A general distinction can be drawn between the formalism of what is generally called “close reading” and the “functionalism” of those linguistically minded, positivist schools of criticism that seek to establish the function of linguistic elements in the expression of a particular effect. Whereas formalists identify and document stylistic and syntactical patterns so as to look at the formal nature of literary language, functionalists focus only on those linguistic elements that are stylistically significant. Their critical perspective is dependent upon being able *to judge the meaning or value of abstract linguistic elements*. A formalist drawn to quantitative methods (as a field, this is called *quantitative stylistics*), for instance, might use a computer program to compute the frequency of particular elements of language in the writing of a particular author, perhaps in order to show that an author’s style diverges from the style of other authors in the frequency of its nominalization, or its noun distribution, or any other reoccurring element. A functionalist would collect the same data, but perhaps would argue that the fact that an author uses more active verbs than most other authors is an indication that the author perceives of reality (unconsciously) as a series of actions, not as a static tableau.

see *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* and Wellek and Warren’s *Theory of Literature*.

Looking at a few seminal works of linguistic criticism, it is easy to see both the appeal and the fallacies of its methods. Louis Milic, author of *A Quantitative Approach to the Style of Jonathan Swift* (1967), wrote a well-known article for the anthology *The Computer and Literary Style* (1966) in which he compiles linguistic data for Swift's work in order to "isolate the distinctive features of Swift's style" (Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* 71). In "Unconscious Ordering in the Prose of Swift," Milic compares Swift's language with that of Macauley, Addison, Gibbon, and Johnson, presenting his findings in a series of tables: "Word-Class Frequency Distribution of All the Whole Samples of Swift" (92); "Percentage of Initial Connectives in 2000 Sentence Samples of Addison, Johnson, Macauley, and Swift" (88); "Frequency of Occurrence of the Most Common Single Three-Word Pattern as a Percentage of Total Patterns" (95). With this data in hand, Milic asks: "What interpretive inferences can be drawn from the material?" (104). His answer: "The low frequency of initial determiners, taken together with the high frequency of initial connectives, makes [Swift] a writer who likes transitions and made much of connectives. [Swift's] use of series argues a fertile and well stocked mind" (104). Here, the move from language to meaning is a movement from language to psychology.

However, as is almost always the case in studies of this sort, no criteria are offered for the interpretive leap from quantifiable linguistic data to psychological interpretation. The correspondence between literary form and psychological structure cannot be substantiated, and so the use of linguistic data is only a smokescreen meant to lend the data an objectivity that it does not have. Milic acknowledges, "no personality

syntax paradigm is available...neither syntactic stylistics nor personality theory is yet capable of making the leap” (105).

Milic’s risible conclusions represent a rather rudimentary stage in quantitative criticism. With the advent of transformational grammar and Chomskyeen linguistics, and with the development of far more discerning readings of linguistic data, the field of linguist criticism matured; its methodologies became more sophisticated, promising, and widely used. In “Generative Grammars and the Concept of Literary Style,” Richard Ohmann cleverly distinguishes between the styles of Faulkner and Hemingway by demonstrating that Faulkner’s style becomes unrecognizable when a few grammatical transformations are undone, whereas, after having undergone the same transformations, Hemingway’s style is still recognizable. For Ohmann, this is proof that Faulkner’s style can be traced back to a particular set of grammatical structures. “The move from formal description of styles to...interpretation should be the ultimate goal of stylistics,” and with Faulkner, “it seems reasonable to suppose that a writer whose style is so largely based on just these three semantically related transformations demonstrates in that style a certain conceptual orientation, a preferred way of organizing experience” (143) In other words, “these syntactic preferences *correlate* with the habits of meaning” (Ohmann, “Prolegomena” 405).

As Stanley Fish adroitly points out, however, the difference between Ohmann’s and Milic’s arguments “is a matter only of methodological sophistication, not of substance, for both critics operate with the same assumptions and nominate the same goal, the establishing of an inventory in which formal items will be linked in a fixed relationship to semantic and psychological values” (*Is There a Text in this Class* 75).

Though Chomsky's theories do not support any direct relationship between structural transformation and semantic meaning, Ohmann bases his argument on the assumption that such a connection can be drawn. His argument, like Milic's, fails to make the leap from linguistic pattern to literary interpretation.²⁹

All of these approaches return us to the question of whether linguistic patterns can have semantic meaning attributed to them, or whether any leap from linguistics to literary criticism represents a regression back to the impressionism that linguistics was dead-set on reversing. Coetzee's thoughts on this matter would appear, some years later, in the essay "Linguistics and Literature":

The history of stylistics since classical times has been marked by unsuccessful attempts to relate syntactic forms to meanings. Modern stylisticians have isolated, graphed and counted syntactic patterns; but the next step, that of interpreting the patterns in themselves, has not been confidently undertaken because linguistic theory has not provided means – or has denied that there are means – of talking about the meaning of abstract syntactic structures. In this respect there has been no real advance over classical rhetoric, which could at most link certain patterns to the presentation of certain states of mind or feeling in drama and oratory on the basis of a vaguely defined appropriateness. (43)

Coetzee goes on to say,

One may finally have to accept the position that a scientific stylistics is unattainable, that the step from stylistic description to stylistic interpretation always takes one beyond the limits of linguistics into criticism. If so, then the value of linguistics to stylistics will remain heuristic, and the findings of stylistic research, as acts of criticism, will not necessarily be invalidated by developments in linguistics. (45)

²⁹ For a reading that uses an even more sophisticated linguistic apparatus, see Halliday's reading of William Golding's *The Inheritors*, "Linguistic Function and Literary Style." The complexity of its method prevents me from describing it at length, but it is enough to say that Halliday uses a "category-scale grammar" to taxonomize any linguistic element in the text, concluding that the less linguistically complex Neanderthals in the text are supplanted by a more linguistically evolved peoples, and that the text can be interpreted in light of the type of linguistic development that a category-scale grammar isolates.

In his dissertation, Coetzee's thoughts are not so clearly formulated, but he does operate on a similar presumption: that both linguistics and literary criticism (despite their claims to objectivity) are most valuable as metaphor, and that any consideration of style will have to take into account what is true about both ways of making sense of literature.

Coetzee's dissertation is in many respects governed by this attitude. There is no one thesis, or mode of evaluation, that runs through the entire work. There is only the *trying out* of different conceptions of style on various individual works, with the aim of showing in which instances, and for what reasons, certain theories work at certain moments, don't work at others, or why they both work and don't work simultaneously (giving partial and incomplete explanations).

With these stylistic approaches in mind, I now turn to Coetzee's dissertation. In order to give a sense of Coetzee's style and approach, I present below quite a large portion of the opening of the dissertation. I then examine both those moments when Coetzee demonstrates the limitations of certain stylistic theories, and when he presents his own theory of style. I also demonstrate the importance of Coetzee's thinking on stylistics to several debates that have raged around Coetzee's work. Here is the opening of Coetzee's dissertation:

In the course of a fusillade against what he calls "the revolt against reason" in present-day humanistic studies, Joshua Whatmough quotes a pronouncement of David Hilbert's from 1918: "Everything that can be an object of scientific thought at all, as soon as it is ripe for the formation of a theory, falls into the lap of the axiomatic method and thereby indirectly of mathematics." By the time Whatmough's attack took place, Bernard Bloch had formulated his now classic definition of style, in which it was plain that style had indeed become an object of scientific thought...and was falling, not at all indirectly, into the lap of mathematics: to Bloch the style of a text was "the message carried by the frequency-distributions and the transitional probabilities of its linguistic features, especially as they differ from those of the features in the language as a whole."

Let this statement, and all its brothers, stand for the moment for one of the poles between which I shall be tracing my course in the essay in stylistic analysis. Place over against it two utterances by Samuel Beckett. The first is from 1937...and represents a reaction to the Flaubertian religion of style: "Grammar and Style! They appear to me to have become just as obsolete as a Biedermeier bathing suit or the imperturbability of a gentleman. A mask...Is there any reason why that terribly arbitrary materiality of the word's surface should not be dissolved, as, for example the tonal surface, eaten into by large black pauses, of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, so that for pages at a time we cannot perceive it other than, let us say, as a vertiginous path of sounds connecting unfathomable abysses of silence."

The second is from the middle 1950's, when he had already composed in French his *Nouvelles*, the trilogy of novels *Molloy*, *Malone meurt*, *L'Innommable*, the play *En attendant Godot*, and other works. Asked why he had turned from English to French, Beckett replied, "Parce qu'en francais c'est plus facile d'ecrire sans style."

Let these two statements, with their, to the linguist, obscurantist implications, stand for the other pole of this essay, entitled "The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett." Between the conceptions of style held by Bloch and implied by Beckett there are no doubt similarities: Beckett's "writing without style" could be interpreted as writing with the statistical features of the language as a whole, whatever that may be. But there is a deeper cleavage which gives the two viewpoints a polar and antithetic relation. Underlying Bloch's definition is the idea of the text as a collection of sets of linguistic features...which can be treated like members of statistical populations...To Bloch, a word can be conveniently reduced, for the purposes of study, to a dimensionless and immaterial point. For Beckett, on the other hand, the "terribly arbitrary materiality of the word's surface" was, we infer, at least in 1937, a burden. ("English Fiction of Samuel Beckett" 1)

Coetzee casts Beckett's and Bloch's statements as two theories of style at opposite ends of the spectrum of stylistic theory. Bloch stands for positivistic, quantitative, mathematical, and objectivist criticism in which literature can be reduced to language, and language reduced to numbers. Beckett's position is ostensibly one in which style is content, and content is style (style is done away with, creating a unity of language with its referents). Beckett speaks as a writer, his "theory of style" linked to his motives as a writer: he began writing in French "because in French it is easier to write without style."

Whereas Bloch is drily technical and calculated, Beckett is an aesthete, dismissive of “obsolete” literary tastes.³⁰

So, Coetzee equates Bloch and Beckett in so much as he takes both to be expressing what could be called theories of style. Beckett and Bloch are both regarded as having a natural place in the debates over style and language among trained stylisticians like Fish, Ohmann, Milic, Lodge, Jakobson, Halliday, Austin, and Chomsky. Certainly, to say that Bloch and Beckett are both expressing theories of style is, from a certain perspective, to state the obvious. However, from an alternate perspective, the ways in which Bloch and Beckett care to speak about style, the points they wish to make about style, and the audience they seem to be speaking to, are fundamentally different. It is *not* simply that their methodologies or epistemologies are different. It is that Bloch is writing against a scientific background, in which any hypothesis must be tested according to scientific method (it must have experimental validity, must be repeatable, must be subject to efforts to falsify it, and so on).

The context of Beckett’s statement, conversely, is his profession, his goals and purpose as a writer. For Beckett, the truth is not a matter of what can be proven beyond a doubt, but of what he knows to be true from personal experience. His “theory” is not devised to withstand the sort of scientific process of verification that Bloch’s is meant to withstand. It is principally devised to express his particular aesthetic vision, to convey something of his thinking about matters pertaining to aesthetics and style in his work

³⁰ Still, it must be noted, Coetzee feels compelled to qualify his endorsement of Beckett’s belief that style and content are indivisible. Coetzee adds in a footnote, “I cannot believe that the writer comes blank to the page. Content also determines form” (203). That is, Coetzee cannot imagine that style and form are one in the same because he cannot imagine that some sense of content does not precede the writer’s attempt to find an adequate form for that content.

during that particular time in his career; it is only secondarily a theory of style that can take its place in the history of philology, and in the then rigorous academic discussions pertaining to style. Beckett's statement belongs neither to the literary critics (with their interest in literary language, and the importance they place on judgment and interpretation), nor to the linguistic critics (with their interest in literature as language, and their tendency to oppose or delay interpretation until all the data has been collected and ordered), nor to the formalist critics who work with a mishmash of linguistic and rhetorical terminology. Beckett's statement, though certainly closer to the critics than the linguists, belongs to an amorphous area of stylistics practiced by those interested in demonstrating what style means for them *and for most writers*.³¹

My point here is that Beckett and Bloch are only diametrically opposed within stylistics in the most artificial way. It would have been more apropos for Coetzee to make Bloch and Spitzer, Ohmann and Wittgenstein, Milic and Stanley Fish the opposing limits of stylistic theory. To do so would have been to compare apples to apples, theorists to theorists. Beckett and Bloch may not be apples and oranges, but they are at the very least Granny Smith and Red Delicious.

Ultimately, Bloch and Beckett both have theories of style, *but they are not theories of style in the same way*. From anywhere within the world of Beckett, Bloch's

³¹ Some of the disagreement between Bloch and Beckett has less to do with their respective theories of style, and more to do with their general, implicit theories of fiction itself. Bloch's theory makes literature only incidentally fictional, in that fiction and non-fiction writing is both governed by rules common to language generally. For Beckett, as for most writers, fiction creates within itself the world that it describes, and in its self-fashioning creates the codes, rules, and conventions by which the work evolves according to its own internal logic. Interestingly enough, much of speech-act theory (so often touted as groundbreaking in advancing theories of fiction) is simply saying what writers have been insisting upon for a long time.

assertion (or any of its ilk) will be irrelevant, as it says nothing about style in the way that Beckett wants to discuss it. Bloch is useless to those who find Beckett useful. And from within Bloch's world, Beckett's assertion is mere impressionism, incapable of furthering the inquiry that Bloch and his cohorts would wish to make. They are both theories of style, but they are theories of style in such different ways that to compare them or combine them is to mix one's metaphors.

For Coetzee, the opposite of Bloch is not Spitzer or Jakobson or Leavis; style does not range from the objective to the subjective, or from the formal to the functional. *Style ranges from the theorist to the novelist*. This allows statements like Beckett's and statements like Bloch's to be put on the same plane in the dissertation, though they are really of different orders. That is, where Beckett and Bloch do stand on opposite poles is on a spectrum of *ways of addressing* the issue of style, with Bloch standing for the anti-artist (reducing literature to language) and Beckett standing in for the artist (fusing form and content; developing a personal aesthetic outlook for the purpose of saying general things about how a writer conceives of and makes use of style; speaking to those who share his perspective).

So, one of the purposes of Coetzee's dissertation is to account for a *feeling* that Beckett had that what he wanted to do as a writer couldn't be done in English, and presumably to see if Beckett's intuition as a writer was correct. Its purpose *is to test a writer's feeling about his own style, and to treat this feeling as if it were an objectively stated theory of style*. This puts an author's conception of style and craft on equal footing with theories of style devised to withstand scientific vetting—this is to try to reconcile the academic and the creative modes of thinking I have been examining. Coetzee is explicitly

testing a writer's thoughts about his own method of writing in order to see if a purely artistic decision (Beckett's move to French) is in fact a theoretically or quantitatively sound one. In this sense, the purpose of the dissertation is not to present the novelist's and the linguist's conceptions of art as antithetical. Coetzee is trying to reconcile the linguist's and the novelist's perspectives on literature by placing them into conversation with one another, using each to verify or undermine the other.

In order to do this, Coetzee reviews both Beckett criticism and the broader field of stylistics; he highlights the metaphorical and descriptive dimensions of the criticism, and the linguistic and mathematical dimensions of stylistics. The picture painted is of separate worlds: one too impressionistic and selective in its tastes, the other too objective and scientific in its methods and aspirations. In one sense, his dissertation is squarely aimed at debunking many of the pretensions of stylistics: "My criticism of their [the stylisticians'] position – that they do not, and seemingly cannot, integrate the study of style into overall literary study – will, I hope, come out in the pages to follow" (7). However, Coetzee also states a bold hypothesis regarding Beckett: "The hypothesis I suggest we must ultimately test is that in Beckett's English works form somehow becomes autonomous and determines content, while in his French work form remains subordinate" (5). That is, "the crisis in his relations with English points to a crisis in the relation of form and content in his fiction, one in which a certain kind of form, associated with the English language, is no longer adequate to express a certain kind of content. If such a conflict is not necessarily peculiar to Beckett – if...English *is* an inadequate medium for some kinds of expression – the importance of Beckett's move is clearly vast" (3).

This leads to a rare occurrence for Coetzee: a straightforward statement of his stylistic theory. “I therefore imply that there is in a literary work a content which exists in some sense prior to its expression, that the expression can be adequate or inadequate to the content, and that in the latter case one can perceive disjunction between expression and pre-existent content” (“The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett” 15). He goes on, “The form of a literary work is that conception of it which enables the reader to comprehend its entire structure of interrelationships and references. But not all elements of the work are parts of its content. The narrator of *Watt*, for example, is in the novel for formal reasons, and is thus a formal element” (15). From this follows the method of the dissertation, “I approach each of Beckett’s fictions and attempt to pin down significant stylistic questions, i.e. questions of style whose answers lead us closer to an understanding of the works as artistic wholes” (18). Coetzee’s argument is that Beckett’s intuition about the potential of different languages to express the same content demonstrates that form and content are divisible. And yet Coetzee does not equate form and style. Form is the name Coetzee gives to all elements of a work that give it an artistic unity, that make it an “artistic whole.” Style is those places in the text where some aspect of the language is foregrounded, or in which an author has made a “free” choice between alternatives. *Style is language choice not made out of consideration for the unity of the work, but due to the unavoidable presence of free stylistic choices not beholden to any pattern (to any formal unity).*

So, Coetzee’s theory of literary form is 1) that the form of a literary work is that which allows a reader to bring it into an artistic whole and 2) that because form and content are divisible, certain formal unities may be the result of the interrelations of

themes and allusions (what is normally called content, but which Coetzee calls form when it constitutes an artistic whole). It is here that Coetzee's thinking is most clearly organized around what I have been calling *poetics of execution*. Coetzee's conception of literary style is that – through a combination of the craft of the writer, the dictates of language itself, and the reader's efforts to discern and to some extent make for themselves a unity out of the work – a literary work is made whole, brought into unity; it becomes complete and therefore properly executed. In his study of Ford, Coetzee tried to use the dictates of structuralism and mathematics to create a formal unity; however, as I demonstrated in the previous chapter, Coetzee's project failed because such a formal unity excluded both Ford's conception of his craft and Ford's distinct ethical attitude. In his work on Beckett, it is the thematic/allegorical system discernible in the style that the reader must comprehend as a unity. As I show below, Coetzee-as-reader discerns the unifying formal principal underlying what is an otherwise middling story, and in so doing executes as reader what Beckett had not been entirely successful executing as a writer.

To prove his stylistic theory, Coetzee first turns to “Dante and the Lobster,” a short story from *More Pricks Than Kicks*; his focus is on the well-known final sentences of the story, in which Belacqua witnesses his aunt preparing to boil a lobster alive (after seeing a notice that the killer McCabe is due to be hanged that day):

Belacqua looked at the old parchment of her face, grey in the dim kitchen. “You make a fuss” she said angrily “and upset me and then lash into it for your dinner.”

She lifted the lobster clear of the table. It had about thirty seconds to live. Well, thought Belacqua, it's a quick death, God help us all. It is not. (“Dante and the Lobster” 21)

Coetzee argues that “The impact of the final sentence clearly derives from its deviation from the pattern of narration set up in the story: a divinely omniscient authorial voice

strikes through the mixture of discreet third person narrative and indirect interior monologue” (“The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett” 21). He claims,

the final sentence is also the culmination of a thematic train. Belacqua links Cain, killer of Abel, whose face, legend holds, is marked on the moon, with McCabe, a convicted murderer due to be hanged that day...who is in turn linked with the lobster. Further, Belacqua’s position vis-à-vis his Italian teacher is that of Dante vis-à-vis Beatrice, both seeking enlightenment from women they revere. (“The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett” 21)

From this Coetzee concludes,

The explication I have just given does not rest on stylistic foundations. It takes the story as a structure of allusions and analogies held together by a common formal purpose, to express the last didactic sentence with a maximum of force. The ironies which give that sentence a pessimistic color result similarly from structure rather than style. We therefore appear to have a clear example of a work in which style is insignificant, or at most only a minor matter of ornament...It should be possible to hand over the structure of allusions and analogies to another writer, explain their formal purpose, and watch him produce another “Dante and the Lobster,” dressed in different clothes perhaps, but essentially the same. (“The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett” 23)

This is precisely the stylistic question that Coetzee sets out to test in Chapter Three of the dissertation, “Could the same structure of ideas have been realized in different words?” (“The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett” 37).

In exploring whether or not the same structure of ideas could have been realized differently in a separate story written by another writer, Coetzee first concedes that certain words have to be common to both stories: “‘Dante’ at least must be common to both versions, for Dante stands at the basis of the structure of ideas” (37). “Lobster” too is not entirely arbitrary, as the animal to be cooked must be one that can be carried around (the lobster could not be replaced by, say, a German Shepherd). Among the words that can be taken as arbitrary is the name of the condemned man, McCabe. “Somewhere between the extremes,” writes Coetzee, “lies a stratum of words which,

while not entirely free to vary like “McCabe,” can vary within a narrow range without affecting our conception of the story. The sentence ‘Nothing could be done until his mind got better and was still, which it gradually did’ (2) could be rewritten ‘He could do nothing until his mind got better and grew still, which it gradually did’” (38).

Coetzee then addresses the problem of assessing whether a choice between alternative phrases is a purely stylistic tendency (a slight stylistic variation that has no effect on meaning, structure, or form), or whether certain stylistic choices “involve the work as a whole” (38). He compares Beckett’s phrase, “Now nobody could come at him,” to an alternate phrase that Beckett could have used: “Now nobody could come in.” How can one say if Beckett’s choice contributes to the formal unity of the work? Coetzee argues that,

In the ideal case the question does not arise: the work coheres so well that every detail contributes to the whole... But in practice there is much arbitrariness in works of art, and our understanding is at best a matter of successive approximations. Is there any way in which we can escape from a vicious train of logic by which we overinterpret insignificant details, induce a false formal understanding, and so misinterpret significant details?” (“The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett” 39)

The only solution is to treat the text “as a mass in which details somehow rub off their awkward angles against one another” (“The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett” 40). That is, quantify the text. The justification for this is that small-scale stylistic features not normally under the conscious control of the author show, when quantified “what looks suspiciously like system, i.e. they act like well-behaved mathematical functions” (40). Quantifying a text may throw up stylistic patterns not discernible to the naked eye, which could help determine whether a particular kind of diction or grammar or syntax is simply a component of the author’s stylistic pattern (and therefore not part of the formal unity of

the work), or whether it deviates from the author's normal patterns, suggesting at least a modicum of deliberate choice. In the latter case, "the choice is not purely stylistic" (39). If much of what could potentially be arbitrary is in fact conscious and deliberate, then stylistic choice and variation will play a significant role in the work; a second "Dante and the Lobster" could not be realized in different words. If, however, the author's stylistic patterns are not significantly different from the patterns which inhere in literary language as a whole, or if very few patterns materialize (suggesting arbitrariness of stylistic choice), then the stylistic element of the work is happenstance, random, unconscious, and therefore insignificant to the formal unity of the work. A second "Dante in the Lobster" is then a possibility.

This logic (faulty as it may sound to the reader) is useful to Coetzee, for it gives him the opportunity to realize two of his goals simultaneously: to develop a stylistic theory of his own in relation to Beckett's early work, and to test the methodologies of quantitative stylistics. Coetzee systematically tries to apply various quantifiable measures to see if any stylistic patterns can be reliably deduced from "Dante and the Lobster." I will not subject the reader to all of the grammatical, lexical, syntactical, and semantic investigations to which Coetzee subjects his readers. However, it is worth getting some sense of his method, as it shows how Coetzee goes about poking holes in the methodologies of linguistic criticism. Coetzee, for instance, demonstrates that although measuring the proportion/distribution of nouns (the proportion of nouns that appear once, twice, thrice etc.) in the text may seem to tell us something significant about the diction of the work, it in fact does not because "the distribution [of nouns] is similar in all texts studied to date" and so "is a feature of the language as a whole rather than of the

individual writer's language" (41). Coetzee also asks if it is significant that the four most frequently occurring words in the story are "Belacqua," "lobster," "time" and "God"? No, he says, "we cannot expect a measure of distribution to also measure meaning" (44). Frequency tables cannot account for context. The word "time" may not appear as an abstraction, but in the context of a character asking what time of day it is; a story about love may not contain the word love. Noun-to-verb ratios also are put under the microscope. Coetzee demonstrates that "simple choices between nominal and verbal constructions are rare" (46), which makes drawing conclusions about an author's stylistic preference (or psychological outlook) based on such choices difficult. Coetzee also shows that, often, frequent nominalization does not produce a nominal text; a text in which nominal constructions are chosen over verbal constructions may in fact seem to readers to be highly verbal. The stylistic pattern yields effects that are contrary to the linguistic evidence. Coetzee looks at other ways of interpreting the text's linguistic data, with similarly disappointing results.

Finding quantitative stylistics a dead-end, Coetzee switches to a fairly orthodox manner of close reading. He concludes that, except for a few instances where style/language and structure are linked, style is simply a vehicle for action (which is governed by a balance of ironies). This leads Coetzee to a major conclusion:

This distinction puts us in a position to answer the question with which I began: could the same story have been written in different words? My answer is a qualified Yes. The first paragraph, insofar as style and structure are interrelated, cannot be expressed in significantly different words. The same holds for other divisions with similar interrelations. It is therefore only in divisions in which style has no structural function, i.e. to the extent that it can vary freely, that the story can be rewritten. ("The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett" 60)

To prove his point, Coetzee takes as an example the following short passage from the story, “Sounds as of conflict were borne in from the hall. Then silence. A knuckle tambourined on the door, it flew open and lo it was Mlle Glain, the French instructress, clutching her cat, her eyes out of stalks, in a state of the greatest agitation” (“Dante and the Lobster” 19). He then claims, “There is no constraint on our rewriting it as, say: The noise of a struggle reached them from the hall, followed by silence. Then there was a knock and Mlle Glain the French instructress stood in the doorway clutching her cat. She seemed agitated. Her eyes were popping” (60). It is very difficult to believe that a reader of Coetzee’s acumen could so glibly equate these two passages. Is it not important that in Beckett’s version sounds “were borne in from the hall,” a construction which suggests an invisible agent bringing sound into the room? Does the obscure but somehow affecting image of eyes being “out of stalks” not contribute to the boisterously farcical quality of the story, a quality necessary to the morbid levity that characterizes the work as a whole? Should we not care that Coetzee’s “she seemed agitated” is free-indirect discourse whereas Beckett’s “in a state of greatest agitation” is not? I find it difficult to accept that these putatively stylistic differences do not factor into the reader’s way of experiencing the work, and thus factor into the formal unity of the work.

However dubious his conclusions, it is important to consider Coetzee’s rather radical conception of literary form in relation to two interrelated debates that dominate Coetzee studies: one debate revolves around the extent to which Coetzee’s novels can be read allegorically, while the other debate centers on how the post-structural and metafictional aspects of Coetzee’s writing should be read in relation to the urgent historical and political realities of South African life. These two debates have,

historically, been indivisible, and have frequently hinged on the very nature of the interpretive act.

The reviews of Coetzee's early work were generally divided into two camps: one faction was comprised of those on the Left who, while admiring of Coetzee's skillful writing, felt that in Coetzee's novels "material factors of oppression and struggle in South Africa receive a subordinate attention" (Vaughan 126), that postmodernism "is probably destined to remain the vehicle for expressing the cultural and political dilemmas of a privileged class of white artists and intellectuals" (Rich 72), and that Coetzee irresponsibly portrays South African injustice as the result of a Western mode of consciousness rather than of political and economic imbalances (Knox-Shaw). Teresa Dovey offered the first counter-thrusts,³² arguing that (in the most general sense) Coetzee's novels function as Lacanian and post-structural allegory. "These allegories," argues Dovey, "allow Coetzee's novel[s] to take into account the materiality of language, which is something that his critics have consistently failed to do" ("Coetzee and His Critics" 24). Rather than avoiding their political responsibilities, Coetzee's engagement with post-structural theory allows him to self-reflexively call attention to the ideological implications inherent in language itself, and in the very act of criticism. At this stage, the master code against which Coetzee's work is measured is either the master code of South African history and politics, or the master code of discourse.

Much of the criticism that followed tried to reconcile the metafictional with the political, which is to say post-structural allegory with national allegory. Mike Marais, in "Languages of Power: A Story of Reading Coetzee's *Michael K*/Michael K," tried to find

³² See also Hanjo Berressem's "Foe: The Corruption of Words" for an early, sympathetic allegorical reading of Coetzee's novels.

equivalences in *Life & Times of Michael K* between several binaries that run throughout the novel: state/subject, father/child, mother/child, author/character, author/text, reader/text. Marais skillfully demonstrates that political relations (state/subject) are interwoven with discursive relations (author/text), and that as such the novel enacts quite masterfully not only the interweave of history and language but also the extent to which attempts to control history mirror attempts to control language. Marais doubles the allegorical strains by making the text both a national and a discursive allegory. He harmonizes the two principal allegories of Coetzee criticism: the strain of neo-Marxism that reads Coetzee's works principally as allegories of South Africa (or as allegories that betray the most pressing realities of South Africa), and those who read his work as allegories of discourse.

Ultimately, Marais' purpose – a purpose shared by many other later critics – is to demonstrate that these vying perceptions of Coetzee's work (the metafictional and the political, which map on to the discursive allegorical and national allegorical paradigms) are all predicated on totalizing critical hermeneutics. That is, they in each instance try to supply the "answer" to the text, to bring "closure" to the intractable meaning of the text by bringing to bear an authoritative reading strategy. Marais's argument is that *Michael K* the novel, and Michael K the character, evade any and all attempts to impose critical closure. Marais tries to make the argument that these overlapping allegories finally posit Michael K and *Michael K* as incapable of being assimilated—as that which evades decisive critical finality. Both character and novel are "full of recalcitrant features such as 'gaps,' 'indeterminacies,' ambiguities, secrets and enigmas which forestall the reader's quest for closure and thematic resolution—in this way preserving the text's silence and

mystery” (39). Marais argues that “the reading subject’s interpretative authoritarianism emerges when s/he attempts to master the deviant literary object by reducing it to a character in his/her story of reading *Michael K*... This hermeneutic procedure... forms the basis of all stories of reading” (40). *Michael K* evades various forms of mastery, and in so doing calls the reader’s attention to the extent to which the reader’s attempt to master the text is itself ideologically aligned with forms of political and historical mastery. In this sense, the text is an allegory of the pitfalls of the critical act, and the critical act becomes an allegory for history’s mode of consciousness.

I raise this critical history to make it clear that much of the debate surrounding Coetzee’s work has hinged on whether one believes that some form of totalizing critical mastery can or cannot be brought to bear on Coetzee’s writing. Sometimes this critical mastery takes the form of national allegory, sometimes post-structural allegory, and sometimes a hybrid³³ (which, in Marais’s case, merely takes the form of yet another totalizing theory). As Coetzee himself has said:

It’s perhaps a mark of all critical activity to try to swallow one kind of discourse into another kind of discourse. For example, in academic criticism, to swallow literature into a certain kind of academic discourse. And many of the unformed resistances... that people have towards the whole academic activity seem to me connected with a sense that one discourse is swallowing another, when one may not want that. (“Grubbing” 5)

Coetzee clearly resists this process of critical ingestion; in his address “The Novel Today” he speaks against a critical practice that tries to reduce the novel to something that is “checkable by history” (3). For these reasons, many have tried to argue not only

³³ For other examples of criticism that attempts to reconcile the opposing branches of Coetzee criticism that I have described, see Brian Macaskill and Jeanne Colleran’s “Reading History, Writing Heresy” and Stephen Watson’s excellent “Colonialism and the Novels of J.M. Coetzee.”

that Coetzee's work cannot be reduced to allegory in any straightforward way (as Derek Attridge argues in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*) but that Coetzee's conception of literature is characterized by an extreme disavowal of any and all instrumentalist conceptions of how literature works.

However, during the period in which he wrote his dissertation, we can see that Coetzee's conception of literature is in many respects as enchanted by the necessity and promise of critical closure and discursive allegory as his own critics have been. Coetzee's argument is predicated on the need for the critic to create, and for the text to fall into, "artistic wholes." In his reading of Beckett, Coetzee has done just what he himself has warned against: he has argued for the imperative of achieving interpretive closure; in this case, closure is achieved by turning Beckett's work into an inter-textual allegory, which is itself done at the cost of the novelist's cherished unity of form and content. Coetzee claims that Beckett's story is no more than an interrelated "structure of allusions and analogies" (23) that can be identified and decoded in a fixed and rudimentary fashion, and that those aspects of the writing that do not fit neatly into the allegory can be ignored without much loss to the story or the reader. The story is to be enjoyed, read, and understood as a presentation of allusions that are not tied to the particular way in which they are presented. Formal unity can be achieved almost entirely through structural and allegorical organization; stylistic choice is largely in the service of the allegorical unity of the work; any aspect of style that does not serve the allegory is superficial and superfluous.

With remarkably little restraint, Coetzee has done to "Dante and the Lobster" what he had earlier shown was a mistake when done with statistical measures. He treats

the text “as a mass in which details somehow rub off their awkward angles” (40). “Details” are what we generally call the formal surface of the work. Coetzee encourages reading with a “master code” (comprehending the “thematic chain” by reading the characters and ideas in relation to the relevant inter-texts), which is the cornerstone of allegory. Despite how much he putatively sides with Beckett against Bloch, Coetzee here shows that he is in no way tied to any romantic notion of the unity of form and content. With more ease than any novelist I can think of, he reduces the literary event to allegorical structure/pattern, dismisses as inconsequential the rough edges of stylistic nuance, and declares the thematic train equivalent to the formal unity that would satisfy the reader.

What to make of this? Is this a point scored for the allegorical critics of Coetzee’s work? Or is this simply an immature stage in Coetzee’s thinking, a conception of literature he finally outgrew? It does seem that Coetzee finally outgrows some of this type of thinking; I find it impossible to imagine that he would not find fault with, or see the danger in, the kind of reading he does here in his dissertation. In fact, in the “Author’s Note” to *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee acknowledges the effect revisions will have on particular articles in the book, “Style and content are not separable: it would be disingenuous for me to claim that my revisions have not touched the substance of the originals” (vii).

However, Coetzee’s reading also tells us that he is not as devoted to the anti-allegorist position as some would like to believe. He is not above accepting at certain moments (*perhaps to his detriment as a novelist*) that the literary event might almost entirely be consolidated into straightforward allegory. There is a part of Coetzee (perhaps

tied to his roots as an academic and a linguist) that is entirely unafraid of the least romantic conceptions of literature. In fact, they appeal to that part of him (the linguist part? the mathematician part?) that wonders if even literature is just language, if even language is just math. We must grant that there is a part of him that is more practical, more coldly logical in his reading and writing than we could imagine any writer to be. While he wrote his dissertation, we must acknowledge that professionally Coetzee was closer to being Bloch than Beckett. Some part of him wants to please Bloch as much as Beckett. He seems to feel that romantic pretensions to an irreducible “literary event “ are fantasies cooked up by writers like Samuel Beckett, and should, like all else, be subjected to scientific investigation.

Even if we might be able to say that Coetzee wizened up not too long after his dissertation, this aspect of his thinking is evident in his fiction at precisely those moments when his fiction seems more like a “structure of allusions and analogies held together by a common formal purpose” (“The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett” 23) than we might like to admit. Coetzee’s work frequently veers awfully close to programmatic structures of allusion in which all seems a mere game, and all positions and statements are invalidated, negated, crossed out; every position and vantage point is interrogated and falsified; everything is made into text and discourse, so that signifier supplants signified, and all is thrown into question. These games are structural, and to the extent that the reader feels that the point of the book is to draw him into a maze of endless signifiers endlessly deferred (a wild goose chase after stable footing) then his works are themselves reducible to system. That is not to say that in such instances style is insignificant, or that Coetzee does not use form to generate irreducible literary moments; it is to say that some

of his works are more (perhaps disappointingly) machine-like than others. Just because Coetzee outgrew a belief consciously does not mean that he does not unconsciously repeat old patterns.

Take *Foe* as an example. *Foe* may be the best illustration of a novel that retains moments of literary ingenuity but, as a whole, opens itself to charges that it can be reduced to allegorical machinery (I would also include *In the Heart of the Country* and *Life & Times of Michael K* in this small group). *Foe* is frequently read as post-colonial and feminist allegory;³⁴ but because of Coetzee's skillful orchestration of various narrative strategies, its allegorical engagement with history is at every moment also an allegorical treatment of the discourses of history. Behind every "master code" of history and politics there is the all encompassing "master code" of language and discourse itself. And this master code – encompassing all the ways in which a text can self-consciously and systematically treat the unreliability and instability of signification – leads nowhere, to an aporia, to "a network of deferments of meaning, of allusions to (and substitutions for) an unattainable referent" (Head, *J.M. Coetzee* 21). Of all Coetzee's novels, *Foe* resembles the self-cancelling art of Beckett most of all.

But is this a fair or unfairly reductive account of *Foe*? Is *Foe* an allegory (perhaps a series of interdependent allegories), or is it an event in Attridge's sense? Are allegorical readings in fact damaging to the novel, or is the novel unperturbed by the prospect of inviting allegorical readings? Certainly, there are those who would balk at the suggestion that *Foe* is straightforwardly allegorical. There are those who would argue – perhaps

³⁴ See Grabe's "Postmodernist Narrative Strategies in *Foe*"; Dovey's "The Intersection of Postmodern, Postcolonial and Feminist Discourse"; and Macleod's "Do We of Necessity Become Puppets in a Story?" or *Narrating the World*."

rightly – that Friday’s silence is a form of resistance to various forms of mastery (both the mastery of history and the mastery of those who try to author him or read his silence for their own purposes); they would claim that the final scene of the novel envisions a form of engagement with the “truth” of Friday that evades the ideological pitfalls the novel trades in. As Brian Macaskill and Jeanne Colleran argue:

Resisting all that threatens to steal his (and Friday’s) text, Coetzee in the final section of the novel undermines, even as he participates within, a deconstructionist analytics of presence within textual representation. Confirming his characters as the discursive texts they have been all along—their “skin, dry as paper, is stretched tight over their bones” (153)—Coetzee nevertheless insists on their substantial presence as corporeal signs in his text, “the home of Friday” (157). The anonymous speaker of this final section, the ‘I’ who on Coetzee’s behalf seeks entry into the silent house, gains access through ‘a hole’ in the sunken wreck; the reader gains access through the interstices between the four parts of the novel, those gaps between what has been represented and the structural means of its representation. This hole and these gaps, together with the figural representation of the mute Friday, ultimately constitute the unrepresentable presence of the text’s historical moment and suggest—again—one last resonance for the identity of the novel’s titular foe: silence. (454)

Just as Marais does with *Michael K*/Michael K, Macaskill and Colleran argue that *Foe*/Friday has at its core something that evades critical mastery. However, again just like Marais, Macaskill and Colleran supply a reading that, in disavowing allegory, offers its own system of closure. The unique event of *Foe* (or *Michael K*) is neatly incorporated into a totalizing critical procedure.

Ultimately, whether one treats *Foe* as a literary event or as a work that is little more than its clever machinery will depend on whether one believes that (and this is my estimation) in *Foe* structure outweighs true formal originality, and on whether one thinks that too much overt structuring takes away from the formal brilliance of the work (which I do). My feeling is that, even if there are aspects of *Foe* that foreground its “event-ness” and that brilliantly and beautifully skirt being pinned down by allegory, it has gone very

far toward the allegorical end of the spectrum. To read *Foe* fairly, we must at least acknowledge that on the stylistic continuum from Bloch to Beckett, it is nearer to Bloch.³⁵ Though one could possibly take any passage from the novel and read it as an event, this does not make the novel successful as a literary event. Even if Friday does evade in some respects the critical procedures we tend to use to master him, the novel clearly, willfully invites the sort of allegorical reading it engenders; the pockets of resistance to totalizing critical procedures are outweighed by the novel's post-structural framework. Coetzee may have flown too close to the sun of allegory (and postmodern theory) in so much as the novel seems not only to be destined to be, but in fact deserves to be, read against various master codes. I admire *Foe*, but I admire it primarily for its brilliant manipulation of discursive and postcolonial allegory, and only secondarily for certain evocative moments that stand on their own as being significant in non-allegorical ways.

I do not say this to judge *Foe*, but to make the point *that a work of literature can be an event (can be read as event; can have the properties of an event) and still be a part of a novel whose donne is too unmistakably mechanical and allegorical to be ignored or excused*. The event of *Foe* is finally secondary to the sophisticated architecture of the allegory of the novel—which is principally an allegory of discourse itself (with feminist, postcolonial, and literary historical discourses intermittently foregrounded but ultimately

³⁵ Though, to be fair, Beckett, in disavowing Style in favor of the unity of form and content, was himself drawn toward the mechanized, computational, Bloch-like features of language in the later stages of his career; in this sense, though Coetzee places Bloch and Beckett on opposite sides of the spectrum of style, Beckett's anti-style is comparable in particular ways to Bloch's anti-style.

subsumed under the wider net of a postmodern attitude toward the nature of language).³⁶ In this sense, Coetzee's adamancy in interviews that his novels cannot be collapsed into simple allegorical interpretation³⁷ only encourages a different, but no less finite, allegorical reading: that his novels are allegories of the indeterminate nature of meaning in narrative, and thus allegories of the reader's insatiable but misguided search for a master narrative.

This leads to a paradox, to an allegory that negates itself—to what Coetzee, in his essay on Gerrit Achterberg, describes rather ambivalently as “A certain elegance of poetic closure [which] is always obtainable from the maneuver in which a poem ends by swallowing its own tail—denying, denouncing, or erasing itself” (*DP* 86). Coetzee sometimes cannot resist the allure of the cleverness of machinery, even as some part of him is aware of its dangers. It is the same with Bloch and quantitative stylistics; Coetzee sees its fallacies, but he simply cannot give up on its utopia. No matter how well a sentence is written, it may never be as perfectly lovely as mathematical proof.

I realize that one might object that my judgment of *Foe* is a matter of personal taste. Can one say that a novel predicated principally on a machinery of structure is any less interesting than a novel that is more pledged to formal texture (if we allow, for the moment, such a simplistic binary)? How would Coetzee answer this question? Certainly, we are familiar with Coetzee's statements *against* rigid allegorical interpretation, and

³⁶ Among Coetzee scholars, my position on *Foe* is perhaps closest to Lewis Macleod's in “Do We of Necessity Become Puppets in a Story?” or Narrating the World: On Speech, Silence, and Discourse in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*.”

³⁷ Tony Morphet: “Would you accept the implication that your work contradicts the idea of a ‘master narrative’?” Coetzee: Your questions again and again drive me into a position I do not want to occupy...By accepting your implication, I would produce a master narrative for a set of texts that claim to deny all master narratives” (Morphet in *Triquarterly*).

against simple historical reductionism; I will not repeat them for we can take for granted that some part of him is entirely in league with the irreducible event of literature. But there is also ample evidence that Coetzee is, at certain moments, at ease with reducing literature to language, literature to system. His reading of “Dante and the Lobster” is only one piece of evidence. He has also said in an interview with Jean Sévry,

Much of my academic training was in Linguistics. And in many ways I am more interested in the linguistic than 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. (Coetzee, “An Interview with J.M. Coetzee” 1)

David Attwell has taken this to mean that Coetzee “admits to being a linguist before being a writer” (*J.M. Coetzee* 10). Above all, the fact that Coetzee enthusiastically wrote/created computer poetry suggests that a novel written through coding is no less interesting, no less a novel, than one penned by hand or tapped out on a typewriter. Computer poetry is literature as algorithm; Coetzee has never said anything that would suggest that having an algorithm underlying a novel is any less appropriate to literature than having a structure of allusions underlie a work. As much as Coetzee pays lip service to the event of literature, he also pays lip service to the machine of literature.

So, if we accept for the moment the premise that Coetzee is as enamored by the machine as he is by the event, and if we then accept *Foe* as more of a machine than an event, and if we then accept that this machine is built to be self-cancelling, then how do we read *Foe*? How does one read a text that seems to cancel itself out? And, much more interestingly, *how should one feel about a novel whose project is self-cancellation, a novel that is predicated on the sense of having been generated by a formula, or that works like an automaton?*

I circle around to this question precisely because it naturally brings us to the next stage of Coetzee's dissertation: his reading of *Watt*, which itself (as Coetzee reads it) is self-cancelling, generated through mathematical formula, and akin to mathematics. That is, Coetzee observes in *Watt* the tendency toward self-negation and self-cancellation created through processes of doubt that I (and many others) observe in much of Coetzee's early work, not only in *Foe* but in *In the Heart of the Country*, *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life & Times of Michael K*. Dominic Head's chapter on *Foe* in his book *J.M. Coetzee* is in fact called "The Maze of Doubting," a title drawn from several professions of doubt from characters in the novel.³⁸ Such doubting recalls Coetzee's discussion of what to make of a novel like *Watt*:

It now seems clear that the hypothesis we must test is that when all is called into doubt no assertions can be made; yet the processes of doubt, the words of doubt uttered by the doubter, remain on the page. We read, so to speak, a sequence of sentences that have been scored through: they form no statement because they have been cancelled, yet we read them all the same. ("The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett" 36)

In reading much of Coetzee, we are familiar with the feeling of having sentences (or a particular position, or a certain frame of reference) "scored through," leaving us with doubt about where we stand, and above all leaving us to interrogate the "processes of doubt" that systematic doubt lays bare.

So, how (and where) does Coetzee address these issues in Beckett? Does Coetzee ever say where he stands on the question of whether or not a machine-like work of literature is commendable or somehow antithetical to literary innovation? In the

³⁸ Susan Barton: "Now I am full of doubt. Nothing is left to me but doubt. I am doubt itself. Who is speaking me? Am I a phantom too? To what order do I belong? And you: who are you?" (133). *Foe*: "In a life of writing books, I have often, believe me, been lost in the maze of doubting" (135).

dissertation, Coetzee scarcely squares off against this important question. He identifies some of the ways in which *Watt* succeeds in cancelling itself out, and other ways in which Beckett never follows through on creating the literary machine he had set out to create.³⁹

However, Coetzee gives the matter a much more thorough (though still oblique) treatment in his 1973 essay “Samuel Beckett and the Temptations of Style.” This essay is directly adapted from, and is an expansion upon, Coetzee’s dissertation. It continues the project begun in the dissertation by looking at Beckett’s later French work in much the same way he had Beckett’s English work. It looks squarely at the later works in which Beckett possessed the nerve he lacked in *Watt*. Here is how Coetzee poses and begins to address these matters in his essay:

The art of Samuel Beckett has become an art of zero, as we all know. We also know that an art of zero is impossible. A thousand words under a title and a publisher’s imprint, the very act of moving pen over paper, are affirmations of a kind. By what self-contradictory act can such affirmations be deprived of content? By what act can the sentences be, so to speak, erased as they flow from the pen? Here is one answer: “Islands, waters, azure, verdure, one glimpse and vanished, endlessly, omit.” The first four words, flagrantly *composed* though they may be, leading associatively one to the next via even the bathos of rhyme, threaten to assert themselves as illusion, as The Word in all its magical autonomy. They are erased (“omit”) and left like dead leaves against a wall. The sentence thus embodies neatly two opposing impulses that permit a fiction of net zero: the impulse toward conjuration, the impulse toward silence. A compulsive self-cancellation is the weight imposed on the flight of the sentence toward illusion; the fiction itself is the penance imposed on the pursuit of silence, rest, death. Around the helix of ever-decreasing radius described by these conditions Beckett’s art moves toward its apotheosis, the one-word text “nothing” under the title “Fiction.” (“Samuel Beckett and the Temptations of Style,” *Doubling the Point* 43)

³⁹ Coetzee claims that *Watt* is a “failure of nerve” (“The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett” 164) in that it does not conform perfectly to its ideal mathematical structure, and that *The Unnameable* and some of the very late work in the *Residua* is the French realization of what Beckett lacked the guts to pull off in *Watt*, in English.

Descriptively, this is Coetzee at his best. He matches Beckett's mode of "conjunction" and "silence" with perfect rhythmic and structural balance in his own sentences: "an art of zero" with "an art of zero is impossible"; "affirmations of a kind" rhymes "affirmations be deprived"; "imposed on the flight" doubles "imposed on the pursuit." He is, perhaps, a bit too at ease; the paradox of words that "assert themselves as illusion" needs to be explained, as does the paradox of words that "are erased" but that nonetheless are plainly not erased because they are "left like dead leaves against a wall."

Coetzee uses his impressive control of sentence structure to deftly craft the very irresolvable tension that he identifies in Beckett. However, the problem that Coetzee runs into is that describing, and even capturing, the paradox does not answer, or really even illuminate, the question that he posed: "By what self-contradictory act can such affirmations be deprived of content?" Coetzee says that they can be deprived of content simply by concluding with the word "omit." But, as his image of dead leaves belies, the words are not omitted; they remain behind. For a word or sentence to be invalidated is very different from a word or sentence being erased. We are not dealing with the actual fact of erasure, but with the rhetorical illusion of negation. A few pages on, Coetzee realizes this:

The progression from *The Unnameable* to *Lessness* is toward a formalization or stylization of autodestruction: that is, as the text becomes *nothing but* a destructive commentary upon itself by the encapsulating consciousness, it retreats into the trap of an automatism of which the invariant mechanical repetitions of *Lessness* are the most extreme example to date. Among the monotonous texts that form Beckett's *Residua*, the only remaining variable is how the autodestruction is done. ("Samuel Beckett and the Temptations of Style," *Doubling the Point* 45)

There are no paradoxes in this description. The magic of sentences that can be "erased as they flow from the pen" (43) has been replaced by the utterly prosaic matter of

cataloguing how Beckett creates the illusion of having erased what is still very much there.

At the end of this short essay, we return to the very quote from Beckett which began Coetzee's dissertation, and from which I built a great deal of what I have tried to show about Coetzee's thinking at this point in his life. Coetzee writes:

“Grammar and Style!” wrote Beckett to a friend in 1934: “they appear to me to have become just as obsolete as a Biedermeier bathing suit or the imperturbability of a gentleman. A mask.” In 1934 Beckett was composing his lapidary *Murphy*; what he means by Style here is style as consolation, style as redemption, the grace of language. He is repudiating the religion of style that we find in the Flaubert of *Madame Bovary*: “I value style first and above all, and then Truth.” The energy of Beckett's repudiation is a measure of the potency of the seductions of Style. *Watt* was the battleground for the next encounter, an encounter won by Style. *Watt* trembles on the edge of realizing Flaubert's dream of “a book about nothing, a book without external attachments,” held together by “the internal force of style.” The rhythm of A against B submerges *Watt* in its lulling plangencies: the style of the book is narcissistic reverie. (“Samuel Beckett and the Temptations of Style,” *Doubling the Point* 47)

No matter how many times I read this paragraph, Coetzee's conception of Style eludes me. He very clearly states that Beckett repudiates the religion of style embodied by Flaubert. These are the “seductions of Style” that Beckett wished to avoid, and he moved from English to French because in French the seductions were less beguiling. But Coetzee then claims that “*Watt* was the battleground for the next encounter, an encounter won by Style.” *Watt* was Beckett's last novel written in English, so the “next encounter” would presumably be in French; that encounter Beckett lost. But didn't Beckett's move to French in order to avoid Style, which he felt he could not avoid in English? Does this mean that Beckett succumbed to the temptations of Style even in French? And, if as early as 1934 Beckett repudiated style, then how is it that a book that he began writing during World War II (and completed years after the war) could be the work that would realize

Flaubert's dream of a book held together entirely by Style? Is the automatism of *Watt* Beckett's final attempt in English to realize the automatism of anti-style, or is it style at its apotheosis, and is there a difference?

Coetzee runs head-on into this paradox in the next paragraph:

Asked to explain why he turned from English to French, Beckett replied, "Because in French it is easier to write without style." The tendency of English toward chiaroscuro is notorious. At the very time in history when the French language was being modified in the direction of simplicity and analytic rigor, the connotative, metaphoric strain in English was being reinforced by the Authorized Version. Thus eventually, for example, Joseph Conrad could complain that it was impossible to use a word like "oaken" in its purest denotation, for it brought with it a swarm of metaphorical contexts, and Beckett could say that he was afraid of English "because you couldn't help writing poetry in it." The style of even Beckett's first published French work, the *Nouvelles*, is more jagged and paratactic than the style of *Watt*. While still as recognizably his own as his English prose, his French prose has freed itself from the stylization, or automatism of style, of *Watt*. ("Samuel Beckett and the Temptations of Style," *Doubling the Point* 47)

The final sentence of this passage captures the paradox Coetzee has written himself into:

"his French prose has freed itself from the stylization, or automatism of style, of *Watt*."

Stylization and automatism of style are ambiguously equated. *Watt* is either an embodiment of stylization or of automatism of style; the sentence is vague and awkwardly written because Coetzee feels that his argument has run into some trouble.

How can the Flaubertian religion of stylization (which includes within it all the Temptations of Style which Coetzee says Beckett renounced) be the same as the automatism of style (which is as far from Flaubert's style as one could imagine)? How can *Watt* both come so close to realizing Flaubert's dream of style and be an auto-destructive machine that repudiates the Flaubertian religion of style? Coetzee's difficulty is that he does not know whether automatism (the machine of literature) should be considered the apotheosis of Style or its antithesis. He likewise is not sure whether *Watt*

is an intelligent and daring flight toward the realization of a stylistic masterwork, or the disastrous dead-end within Style that Beckett ran up against (and wisely and mercifully freed himself from by turning to French). Is automatism glorious or grotesque?

In the final paragraph of the essay, Coetzee forces himself deeper into this endgame:

But there is a second and deeper impulse toward stylization that is common to all of Beckett's later work. This occurs with the stylization of the impasse of reflexive consciousness, of the movement of the mind that we can call *A therefore not-A* and that Beckett apothegmatizes in the phrase "imagination dead imagine" and elsewhere explicates as "the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express." The experience of actually reading Beckett's late fictions, his *Residua*, is an uncomfortable one because they offer us none of the daydream gratification of fiction: they call for a heroic attentiveness which they continually subvert by a stylized repetitiveness into the sleep of a machine. They offer no daydreams because their subject is strictly the annihilation of illusion by consciousness. They are miniature mechanisms for switching themselves off: illusion therefore silence, silence therefore illusion. Like a switch, they have no content, only shape. They are in fact only a shape, a style of mind. It is utterly appropriate for an artist to whom defeat constitutes a universe that he should march with eyes open into the prison of empty style. ("Samuel Beckett and the Temptations of Style," *Doubling the Point* 49)

Coetzee never gets himself unstuck from the predicament of style that his years of work on Beckett had finally led him to; he has yet to solve the riddle in his own fiction. At the end of the essay, Coetzee meekly concedes, for no good reason at all, that the later Beckett possesses a "deeper impulse toward stylization." This is not a solution, but an arbitrary dodge; he calls this "stylization" when he very well could have called it "automatism of style," or anti-style. No matter. In trying to take stock of his own feelings about Beckett's literary automatons, he again struggles, then falters into contradiction. Beckett's self-cancelling works are "uncomfortable" for the reader because they offer "none of the daydream gratification of fiction." This is a remarkable statement, for it is so

uncharacteristic of Coetzee; “daydream gratification” is sentimental, vaguely romantic language; it gestures to a psychoanalytic paradigm that Coetzee for the most part avoids. What does Coetzee mean by “daydream gratification”? We are only led to understand that it is what is disallowed by “heroic attentiveness,” and that it comes to exist in the “illusion” that Beckett’s consciousness annihilates. It seems here that Coetzee does invoke some romantic pretenses about art; fiction gratifies us by freeing us to dream. The machine lulls us to sleep, where we cannot dream. And when we are awake, we cannot dream because the machine demands “heroic attentiveness.” There is only the shape of illusion or the shape of silence, on and off, a pattern repeating itself.

The note on which Coetzee ends is ambiguous: “It is utterly appropriate for an artist to whom defeat constitutes a universe that he should march with eyes open into the prison of empty style” (49). Coetzee deftly avoids coming down anywhere on the matter of what to feel about Beckett’s machines. He says only that, given Beckett’s beliefs, it is “appropriate” that his work took the shape that it did. In this sense, on some grand scale, Beckett had executed (he had fulfilled the law of the poetics of execution). Based on the standards and terms Beckett had set for himself and his work, the *Residua* is the ideal form of an abstract aesthetic philosophy. Whether Coetzee approves or disapproves is difficult to say.

Coetzee invents one final phrase to resolve the tension between style and anti-style, between the literary machine as ideal and as anti-literature. He calls it not style or anti-style, but “empty style.” It is style and anti-style; it is style emptied of its style. Or it is style filled with emptiness. What seems most important to Coetzee is not whether he can judge Beckett—he is at this moment still utterly ambivalent. He only can say that

what is important is that Beckett marched “with eyes open” into the “prison” of style he created. To march oneself freely into a prison of one’s own making is an act of bravery—and insanity. Coetzee, for better and worse, never was either brave enough or insane enough to go to prison with, or after, Beckett. His games – even in *Foe* – always leave room for good old-fashioned literary originality and ingenuity. It is Beckett’s bravery that Coetzee admires above all. It is Beckett’s fearlessness that Coetzee can celebrate without hesitation, even if he never could come to any conclusion in his own heart about whether what Beckett did was the realization of literature’s ideal or its exact opposite.

Chapter Three

Playing the Game of the Rules: J.M. Coetzee as Literary Critic

Between 1974 and 1982, J.M. Coetzee published widely: three novels, fifteen articles and essays, nine reviews and introductions, three translations. The output is diverse: Penetrating readings of Gerrit Achterberg's "Ballad of the Gasfitter" and Franz Kafka's "The Burrow"; a sequence of three essays on the passive voice and the rhetorical uses to which the passive voice has been put by writers historically (addressing Gibbon, Newton, and Defoe at length); a short, trenchant study of character and class; a critique of theories of desire in advertising; cultural meditations on Rugby and the comic book hero Captain America; another sortie into computer criticism.

The work is eclectic verging on rambling. Ironically, this waywardness may be due to Coetzee's newfound professional security—a security toward which he seems to have felt some ambivalence. Denied permanent residence in the United States, Coetzee had by 1972 left SUNY Buffalo and returned to South Africa, where he became an assistant professor at the University of Cape Town. The position was, I presume, secure when he took it, permanent if he wished it to be permanent. I detect in his non-fiction some uneasiness with the surfeit of time and freedom that lay before him as a youngish man for whom tenure was a safe bet. Finished with the customary early-career professional hurdles of a scholar, he filled his life with projects very much of his own

making, choosing to pursue an assortment of interests rather than advance his career as a specialist. The criticism he wrote during this period does not seem to have been written with any expectation that it would culminate in a proper book. Coetzee was apparently content with turning out insightful but relatively unheralded academic journal articles, which may be an indication that he was uncertain about his identity and purpose as a critic and scholar.

Affixed to Coetzee's criticism – as prominently as a flier stapled to a telephone pole – is the work of the writers he was reading and thinking about while he wrote: Buber, Kierkegaard, Barthes, Sartre, Whorf, Girard, Benveniste, Jakobson, Ingarden, as many as a dozen others. He carries on a vociferous dialogue with their ideas (which combine linguistic poetics, metaphysics, and turn-of-the-century Continental mysticism), testing their theories by putting them to use, and by seeing what sort of investigations they withstand. These authors are not so much influences as they are foils and sparring-partners; their theories are frequently the heroes of the essays he wrote, and they are tested like heroes.

Because of how systematically Coetzee applies and assesses an array of theories, his criticism in certain ways came to resemble a laboratory. Literary study, in Coetzee's hands, became a research area in which discrete methodologies are empirically tested on a particular work or set of works. Theories are put through trials; success becomes a matter of how well a theory can explain a text or solve a problem that a text raises. Can Rene Girard's theory of imitative desire "be applied to the reading of advertisements" ("Triangular Structures of Desire," *Doubling the Point* 127)? Does Benjamin Whorf predict "Newton's English and Latin" ("Isaac Newton," *Doubling the Point* 184) writing

on gravitational attraction? Is it possible to use Gustave Guillaume's verb system to solve the issue of time and narration in Kafka's "The Burrow" ("Time, Tense, and Aspect")? Can one demystify Captain America with procedures similar to those that Roland Barthes uses in *Mythologies* to explain red wine ("Captain America in American Mythology")? "Though [in literary criticism] one may not be able to design tests that would satisfy the scientific experimenter," writes Coetzee in his essay on Isaac Newton, "one can ask and answer questions that at the very least conform to the standards of demonstration accepted in literary criticism" ("Isaac Newton," in *Doubling the Point* 184). Literary critical "standards" should take as their model the higher standards of scientific and statistical significance, even without the least hope of matching them. (The echo here is of Northrop Frye, "It may also be a scientific element in criticism which distinguishes it from literary parasitism on the one hand, and the superimposed critical attitude on the other" (*Anatomy* 7)). Coetzee was very much a child of the times, and structuralism's scientific aspirations seeped into the questions about literature, language, and fiction writing that he posed to himself. In previous chapters, I have referred to these questions as the *problems of literature*, which are the questions about literary form around which Coetzee's thinking revolves at any particular moment.

Though his work in this period is not restricted to the literary, its concern is with literature and literary questions. Much like his earliest criticism, the criticism of these years is preoccupied with the nature and rules of language (with "the ontology of fictional discourse" [*Doubling the Point* 1]) and with how critical or theoretical understandings of language have/can figure into the practice of writing. The writer's knowledge of, and relationship to, literary form continues to dictate the nature of Coetzee's academic

projects, in no small part because what he learned while writing *Dusklands*, *In the Heart of the Country*, and *Waiting for the Barbarians* was fodder for his criticism, and vice versa. This is not to say that the function of the criticism is to illuminate the fiction; this would be to misconstrue how the fiction asks to be, and needs to be, read. Both the criticism and the fiction is important in that it gives one an opportunity to watch Coetzee write as he thinks; one only gets the whole of his mind from the whole of his writing.

Coetzee's thinking about language and literature is organized during this period by a few principal beliefs, interests, and philosophical positions (I outline these below so as to provide an intellectual background for the more focused readings of individual works to which I proceed): from the early 1970s forward, Coetzee becomes increasingly interested in the "field of language" (*Doubling the Point* 70), what can and cannot be expressed in the field of language, the limitations and rules that govern the field of language.⁴⁰ This way of conceiving of language emerges naturally from structuralism's textualized reality (positing an enclosed but vast field of symbols—language drawing the limit of reality) and from Chomsky's universal grammar and deep structure (a set of rules that underlie all language and thought—grammar drawing the limit of epistemology). Metaphorically, as Coetzee seems to imagine it, the "field of language" is an enclosed but infinite language-ether in which there is finite freedom to move and work, and finite material with which to work (language is finite, its grammar and permutations determine its expressive range); furthermore, the metaphor of a language field can take on a

⁴⁰ In his essay on Achterberg, in addressing the question of what *I* and *You* signify in the poem, Coetzee writes, "Answers to questions like these, on which critical debate has centered, depend on our establishing significations for the *I* and *You* of the poem. Here, however I want to begin by asking not *what I* and *You* signify but *how* they signify in the field of language and in the field of the poem; and then to proceed to the central symbolism of the poem, the symbolism of gas and the hole" (*Doubling the Point* 70).

different affect and become a playhouse of language,⁴¹ or a field for games,⁴² or a language prison;⁴³ the metaphorical expression changes depending on the moment at which Coetzee is writing, but its deep structure is always *a field*.

Naturally, simultaneously, Coetzee becomes more aware of his position as a *writer* within the “field of language.” He becomes conscious of how a writer works within a rule-bounded language whose grammar and history may predispose him to think

⁴¹ Speaking of the tendency of the field of language to become (for the writer) a self-enclosed web of signs, Coetzee writes, “A historicizing consciousness or, as you put it, the distancing effect of reflexivity, or even textualization—in the present these are all ways of tracing the same phenomenon: an awareness, as you put pen to paper, that you are setting in train a certain play of signifiers with their own ghostly history of past interplay.... Did Defoe have this kind of awareness? Did Hardy? One likes to think that they didn’t, that they had, so to speak, an easier time of it. ... Hence the pathos—in a humdrum sense of the word—of our position: like children shut in the playroom, the room of textual play, looking out wistfully through the bars at the enticing world of the grownups, one that we have been instructed to think of as the mere phantasmal world of realism but that we stubbornly can’t help thinking of as the real” (62-63). Here, Coetzee employs both the metaphor of play, and the metaphor of the prison.

⁴² Coetzee discusses games and play at length in “Four Notes on Rugby.” Play (in relation to both fiction and non-fiction writing) appears several places, with several different connotations, in his work and interviews during this period: “We must at least entertain the possibility that some of the writing I do is play, relief, diversion, of no great import outside its own disciplinary field. Except perhaps that it may be a telling fact about me that I spend some of my time (too much of my time?) in occupations that take me away from the great world and its concerns” (*Doubling the Point* 142); “Demystification: yes, Barthes is certainly at work, not least as a cultural critic who *plays* with ideas (there are ideas in Barthes, almost too many ideas, but nothing I would call theory). I see no conflict between play and demystification, which is after all a procedure of taking apart things—myths, tropes, rhetorical figures—to show how they work” (*Doubling the Point* 105); “Henel recognizes from the start the particular hermeneutic problems posed by a text in which so elementary a linguistic category as tense, not easily reduced to other terms, becomes the object of the writer’s play” (*Doubling the Point* 220).

⁴³ Coetzee’s sense of the “field of language” as, at its worst, acting a like prison appears before 1974 in his work on Beckett’s literary automatons: “Here, consciousness of self can be only consciousness of consciousness. Fiction is the subject of fiction. Therefore, fictions are closed systems, prisons” (*Doubling the Point* 38). “It is utterly appropriate for an artist to whom defeat constitutes a universe that he should march with eyes open into the prison of empty style” (*Doubling the Point* 49).

and organize reality in particular ways⁴⁴ (here, Coetzee's ideas are drawn from the Von Humboldt-Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and from Richard Ohmann's work on epistemic choice).⁴⁵ Coetzee's interest extends to how grammar and syntax (and an entire history of classical rhetoric) shape the "the repertoire of what you can think and feel" in a given language ("An Interview," *Modernism/Modernity* 849). By this he means how a "sentence shape [is] receptive to certain kinds of meaning and unreceptive to others" (848), making "specific ranges of thought and feelings easier and other ranges more difficult" (849).

The question that Coetzee poses to himself is: What can a writer (whether novelist or critic) do to write his way out from under the rules of language, which it is said trace the boundary of the effable (and even the thinkable)? How have writers (how can I?) violate or challenge or rewrite or play within the rules of the "field of language," and have writers found (might I find?) forms in which to write what the grammar of language seems to make inexpressible? Coetzee's interest is in the possibility (and, of course,

⁴⁴ Edward Sapir presents this theory (called the language relativity principal) very well: "Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group... We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation" (69). In an interview with Coetzee, David Atwell glosses it as the hypothesis that "the structures of a particular language have epistemological and even metaphysical consequences" (*Doubling the Point* 143).

⁴⁵ See Richard Ohmann, "Prolegomena to the Analysis of Prose Style"; Roger Fowler, "Style and the Concept of Deep Structure"; Wilhelm von Humboldt, "On the Differentiation of the Structure of Human Language"; Benjamin L. Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality*; Edward Sapir, "The Status of Linguistics as a Science."

impossibility) of writing outside the grammar of the language in which one writes, or at least of rewriting the rules so as to gesture toward forms of expression, or semantic/metaphysical domains, that seem to be precluded by the very syntax in which one thinks and writes. Writers, Coetzee says, “are pushing at the limits of language, and if one hopes to follow them one has to push at the limits of the linguistic disciplines” (*Doubling the Point* 197). In his study of Achterberg’s ballad, the limits of language are tested through pronouns, in Kafka’s “Burrow” through verb tense; in Newton’s *Principia* the metaphorical nature of language is tested against the ideal of a transparent scientific language for describing the physical world. Behind all three essays is Whorf’s linguistic relativity principle, which states that linguistic structure determines (to varying degrees) the way in which a language community organizes and perceives reality. Linguistics—circumscribing the limits of what can be thought/spoken and determining how the continuum of reality is perceived and experienced—is the most elemental method of investigation; it is as genetic as reality and thought.

This is also the period in which Coetzee begins to think of himself as a critic, to write as one aware of criticism as *a genre with its own horizon of possibilities*; and, as would be expected, this comes about in concert with a healthy skepticism about the discourse of literary criticism. Coetzee’s previous projects as a critic were blank academic hurdles executed with a neutral voice. There is nothing out of the ordinary about either the speaking voice or the manner of critique in his work on Ford Madox Ford or Beckett; his methodologies are certainly unique, but he was hardly interested in what

could or could not be done in, and with, the genre of criticism.⁴⁶ So, from 1974 to 1982, Coetzee develops a relationship with criticism, tests its limits, and decides (it appears) what energy he could apply to it. The nature of this relationship is one of the central concerns of this chapter.

Though Coetzee has become a rather prolific critic and reviewer, his attitude toward criticism has been consistently ambivalent. He is at times rather dismissive: “But what is criticism, what can it ever be, but either a betrayal (the usual case) or an overpowering (the rarer case) of its object? How often is there an equal marriage?” (*Doubling the Point* 60-61). More commonly, he sees no point in disguising his preference for what he feels to be the freedom that fiction writing affords him:

I feel a greater freedom to follow where my thinking takes me when I am writing fiction than when I am writing criticism... The *feel* of writing fiction is one of freedom, of irresponsibility, or better, of responsibility toward something that has not yet emerged, that leads somewhere at the end of the road. When I write criticism, on the other hand, I am always aware of a responsibility toward a goal that has been set for me not only by the argument, not only by the whole philosophical tradition into which I am implicitly inserting myself, but also by the rather tight discourse of criticism itself. (*Doubling the Point* 246)

Criticism is a “tight discourse”; it posits a goal (but what goal?) that Coetzee does not find in the novel.

⁴⁶ There is an important difference between the ways in which, for instance, Coetzee’s use of computer programs to study Beckett’s *Lessness* is creative, and the ways in which much of his later criticism is creative. Though his work on *Lessness* is out of the ordinary, it is not self-consciously trying to play with the conventions of criticism explicitly for the purpose of seeing what new forms criticism could take; its goal is explanation and elucidation, not novelty. In fact, it is indicative of the mind-set Coetzee was in during his work on Beckett that he never seems to consider what new forms of critical play might be opened up through the use of computers in criticism. A certain level of critical artistry is largely missing from the criticism he wrote before 1974. See Coetzee’s “Samuel Beckett’s *Lessness*: An Exercise in Decomposition.”

This notion that the novel is superior to criticism appears elsewhere. Asked to comment on the role of linguistic criticism on *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Coetzee says,

I must confess I don't see an immediate connection between *Barbarians* and the linguistic work I was doing in 1979. We must at least entertain the possibility that some of the writing I do is play, relief, diversion, of no great import outside its own disciplinary field. Except perhaps that it may be a telling fact about me that I spend some of my time (too much of my time?) in occupations that take me away from the great world and its concerns. (*Doubling the Point* 142)

Here, criticism is play of a frivolous sort—it is meaningful only to those absorbed in its world—its “disciplinary field.” Interestingly, Coetzee seems to group writing novels in with the “great world and its concerns.” Criticism is presented as self-interested, self-serving, and hermetic in a way that a good novel is not. Academic criticism of the kind Coetzee produced in the 1960s and 1970s is at worst sophistry, at best active rest from more important writing.

Still, what Coetzee says in 1992 in *Doubling the Point* may reflect what he felt about criticism at that time, not what he had always felt. There is evidence that, in 1980, just at the tail end of perhaps his most productive period as a critic, he was very much enthralled by criticism, and felt that it had a lot to teach fiction writers. In Bloemfontein, at the 1980 SAVAL conference, Coetzee delivered a paper, “*Die Skrywer en die Teorie*” (“The Writer and Theory”),⁴⁷ in which he argues against what he feels is the prevailing attitude toward criticism, which is that it is “*n wesenlike steriele en verbeeldingslose bedrywigheid*” (“in essence a sterile and unimaginative industry” [155]), and that literature to some extent proves its value and its mettle by resisting critical interpretation. Ideally, Coetzee says, “*Letterkundige teks en kritiese teks parallel en mede-afhanklik sou*

⁴⁷ In the following, I rely on Carrol Clarkson’s translations of Coetzee’s address as they appear in her book *Countervoices* (50-51).

bestaan, saam met ander tekste van die letterkunde, die filosofie ens” (“Literary and critical texts would have a parallel and mutually dependent existence, alongside other texts in literature and philosophy, etc” [158]). Coetzee goes so far as to say that “*die beste kritiek vir my meer inhou as die letterkunde. Dit is miskien ‘n skande, maar ek lees liever Girard oor Sofokles or Barthes oor Balzac as romans*” (“The best criticism holds more for me than literature does. It is perhaps scandalous, but I prefer reading Girard on Sophocles, or Barthes on Balzac, than novels” [160]). Coetzee’s paper suggests that, at that time, criticism was useful to him as a novelist (as Carrol Clarkson points out in *Countervoices* [50-51]), and that his later turn away from creative criticism may reflect a growing frustration with a genre that he found he could not transform.

That Coetzee likely found the prospect of becoming a genuinely inspired critic daunting is born out in other statements he has made about criticism—statements that stand out as bitter and defensive when compared to the affection he showed for criticism in 1980:

If I were a truly creative critic I would work toward liberating the discourse [of criticism]—making it less monological, for instance. But the candid truth is I don’t have enough of an investment in criticism to try. Where I do my liberating, my playing with possibilities is in my fiction. To put it another way: I am concerned to write the kind of novel—to work in the kind of novel form—in which one is not unduly handicapped (compared with the philosopher) when one plays (or works) with ideas. (*Doubling the Point* 246)

It seems risible for Coetzee to suggest that he is an orthodox, merely proficient critic because he has no “investment in criticism.” If he is not invested in criticism, why publish forty-seven essays in two volumes, *Stranger Shores* and *Inner Workings*? Why write *Giving Offense* and *White Writing*? Why produce so many academic or semi-academic articles in so many different disciplines? Why speak of criticism’s importance

to fiction writing, and to himself personally, at the SAVAL conference? It is hard to believe that so much work is mere professional duty. If Coetzee failed to become a “creative critic,” it is not because he did not “try” (as he claims). He did try. If he failed, it is not for lack of trying. As I demonstrate in this chapter, it is disingenuous of Coetzee to suggest that he never played with the possibilities of criticism, and that he never experimented with ways in which criticism’s unduly “tight” discourse might be liberated. If Coetzee’s relationship with criticism is indeed strained, the more interesting question is the very question Coetzee poses about Jorge Luis Borges in a review of the Argentine’s work: “What do the operations of fiction offer this scholar-writer that enables him to take ideas into reaches where the discursive essay, as a mode of writing, fails him?” (*Stranger Shores* 145).

That some part of Coetzee thrills at writing criticism is apparent from what he has to say about Kafka:

What engaged me then and engages me still in Kafka is an intensity, a pressure of writing that, as I have said, pushes at the limits of language and specifically of German. No one who has really followed Kafka through his struggles with the time system of German can fail to be convinced that he has an intuition of an alternative time, a time cutting through the quotidian, on which it is as foolish to try to elaborate in English as in German. But Kafka at least hints that it is possible, for snatches, however brief, to think outside one’s own language, perhaps to report back on what it is like to think outside language itself. . . . What is interesting is the liberating possibility Kafka opens up. In a more general sense, I work on a writer like Kafka because he opens for me, or opens me to, moments of analytic intensity. . . . Is this a comment about reading, about the intensities of the reading process? Not really. Rather, it is a comment about writing, the kind of writing-in-the-tracks one does in criticism. For my experience is that it is not reading that takes me into the last twist of the burrow, but writing. No intensity of reading that I can imagine would succeed in guiding me through Kafka’s verb-labyrinth: to do that I would once again have to take up the pen and, step by step, write my way after him. Which is another way of saying that while, as I read it, I can understand what I wrote in the essay on Kafka, I couldn’t reproduce it today without rewriting it. (*Doubling the Point* 198-199)

Here we see the crux of the matter. Coetzee does not lack enthusiasm for criticism; he thrills at chasing after Kafka, and acknowledges that the thinking done in criticism cannot be reproduced outside the moment of writing, therefore granting criticism the immediacy of fiction. The writer can learn about the rules of the novel by studying how critics transgress the “rules of criticism.”⁴⁸ What Coetzee lacks enthusiasm for is writing that is not really writing *in the writer’s sense of the word*.

What is the writer’s sense of the word “writing”? For Coetzee, “there is a true sense in which writing is dialogic: a matter of awakening the countervoices in oneself and embarking upon speech” (*Doubling the Point* 65). This dialogism has a linguistic correlate: the middle voice. Coetzee discusses the middle voice in “A Note on Writing”: “To write (active) is to carry out the action without reference to the self, perhaps, though not necessarily, on behalf of someone else. To write (middle) is to carry out the action (or better, to do-writing) with reference to the self” (*Doubling the Point* 94). Certain kinds of writing are merely instrumental (active); in these cases the writer writes a text, and what is written takes the direct object. In other cases, “countervoices” gesture back toward the writing subject, in which case the writing takes the middle voice. These are metaphors for writing, and it is best to be cautious about using them to decode Coetzee’s work,⁴⁹ but the

⁴⁸ “I have the greatest admiration for Barthes as someone who has experienced what I regard as the fundamental movements in modern criticism in a very intense and very intelligent way, and really has much to say to practicing writers” (Coetzee and Watson: ‘Speaking: J.M. Coetzee’ 24).

⁴⁹ In “Charting J.M. Coetzee’s Middle Voice,” Brian Macaskill seems to turn the middle voice into a nebulous middle ground between active and passive voice. The presumption is that, when writing is not quite active or passive, it falls under the umbrella of the middle. This sacrifices the *specificity* of the middle voice—both as a linguistic trace within Indo-European languages, and as a way of thinking of the practice writing. The middle voice is only one among a variety of metaphors Coetzee has used to try capture some aspect of his understanding and experience as a writer, and I believe its meaning

sentiment makes one thing clear: Criticism is not, in itself, secondary to fiction. Rather, for Coetzee, criticism less frequently achieves the status of real writing (writing of the middle voice) than does novel writing. Critical writing that feels like fiction writing is on the same pedestal as fiction. Writing of the middle voice is the great equalizer. Criticism can be writing of the middle voice, and therefore writing “in a true sense.” This raises the question of why Coetzee failed to reinvent the rules of criticism in the same way as he reinvents the rules of the novel.

This is a pressing question, made more interesting by the fact that Coetzee seems to have sworn off creative criticism. He has written more than a hundred essays, reviews and book chapters, but he has never crafted an identity for himself as a critic. His stance is consistently neutral in his reviews. It would be generous to say that, over the past twenty-five years, he has been a highly competent, exceptionally erudite but fairly unassuming critic; he does his homework, but rarely attempts to liberate the discourse of criticism. In fact, if he has developed a unique style, it is the style of unliberated criticism. He is proudly workmanlike. He does not go in for sweeping proclamations, and does not very often use book reviews as a platform for his own aesthetic (or indeed political) philosophy. I find it revealing that so many of the twenty six essays in *Stranger Shores* begin with some variation of the following deep structure: In X year Y writer was born or published Z work. “In October of 1944...Thomas Stearns Eliot, aged fifty-six, gave his presidential address to the Virgil Society in London” (1); “In 1986 Joseph Brodsky published *Less Than One*, a book of essays” (127); “Thomas Pringle was born in

needs to be more narrowly and adroitly applied. Homi Bhaba’s notion of a “third space” in *The Location of Culture* is a perfect parallel: it has become a vague and meaningless place of overlap, invoked to death in the worst kind of theoretical literary criticism.

1789 into a family of Scottish farmer” (203); “Daphne Rooke was born in 1914 in the then Transvaal province of South Africa “ (208); “In an address given in 1975, Nadine Gordimer spoke about the pressures and demands upon South African writers...” (219); “Alan Paton made his reputation with *Cry, the Beloved Country* published in 1948...” (261). These are not necessarily bad openings; many critics mistake grand pronouncements for insights. But it does suggest that Coetzee has settled into a formula. It may even be that the formula constitutes something of a statement: I do not pretend to be anything more than a diligent book reviewer; the role of the book reviewer is to organize the salient facts so that the reviewer’s mild judgments become clear; the critic (if a reviewer can be called that) should be as neutral as possible. Though both *White Writing* and *Giving Offense* (more traditional academic scholarship) make substantial contributions to their fields, they do not seem to me groundbreaking in either scholarship or style; they do not liberate the discourse of criticism. As I demonstrate later, this is not the whole story; Coetzee’s literary and cultural criticism during the 1970s and early 1980s contain moments of exceptional creativity and play. However, I believe it is fair to say that, on the whole, his loudest statement about criticism is his general reserve.

The central questions become: How does Coetzee write about, or attempt to think through, the position of the writer as one who is both subject to the conditions that hold sway within the field of language, and one who determines and works within some subset of those conditions in anything he writes? What metaphors and images for language and writing seem to appeal to Coetzee at this time, and what is their appeal? How does Coetzee, in essays that are embedded in, and concerned with, the circumscribed ether of language, try to subvert or thwart or contradict conventional wisdom about how language

works, and how writers must work? Is Coetzee ever a “creative critic,” and if so, in what ways does he liberate the discourse of criticism?

My thinking on these questions begins with “Four Notes on Rugby,” published in 1978. As a whole, it is not an entirely satisfying piece. It falls into a no man’s land between broad cultural commentary and scholarly demystification; it alienates the sports fan and is not ingenious enough for a piece that is staked on cleverly exposing what lies beneath appearances. However, Coetzee’s thoughts on games and game-playing are highly suggestive:

If one watches children playing together, one can, in their more highly developed forms of play, distinguish two phases: a phase in which the rules are worked out, and a phase in which the game is played. In the first phase the children, so to speak, define a space in which the fantasy of the game can flourish. In the second the game is played until it fills that space and becomes boring. Then there is a return to the first phase, and the rules are modified; or else the game ends. Often the alternations between phases is rapid. Sometimes players go literally out of phase: some are playing the game while others are playing the game of the rules (mistakenly called “arguing about the game”). This is the moment of conflict.

We tend to think of the first phase as merely preliminary. But it is in fact the phase of greater creativity. It can be compared to problem-definition, as opposed to problem-solving. The two phases have, of course, a dialectical relation.

If the aim of phase two, the game itself, is to allow a display of excellence (as measured perhaps by winning), then what is the aim of phase one, the game of the rules? There can be only one answer: to create a good game. (*Doubling the Point* 124-125)

Speaking to David Attwell about this piece, Coetzee comments on the obvious parallels with writing,

What still interests me in the piece is the distinction I draw between game-construction, as a form of intellectual/physical play, and game-playing itself...Game-construction, which we associate with yet-to-be-socialized children, seems to me an essentially higher activity than socialized play, as typified by sport...If the arts constitute a higher activity than physical culture, it is surely for the reason that they continue to vary the forms and rules of the games they play. Art as polymorphous play, then, playing at inventing rules with which it plays at constraining itself. (*Doubling the Point* 104)

In certain fairly obvious ways, writing from within a “field of language” is analogous to the concept of a player playing a game; the writer/player’s freedom to write/play is possible only within the boundaries and rules of the language/game. This conception of writing is in many respects modeled on Wittgenstein’s concept of language games (see Wittgenstein 1953), in which “each of the various categories of utterance can be defined in terms of rules specifying their properties and the uses to which they can be put” (Woodward, *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*); local games are legitimated and developed both by a collective agreement to follow the rules of the game, and by a continued effort to adjust the rules to incorporate new demands. In what may be a gesture to Lyotard’s definition of the postmodern as both “incredulity toward meta-narratives” (*Postmodern* xxiv) and the proliferation of language games, Coetzee begins to set down his thoughts on the language game in which fiction writers play—going so far as to suggest how he himself, and his precursors, have understood, played, and reinvented the language game of fiction writing.

Still, for the analogy between writing and game playing to be accurate, a further sub-distinction must be made between playing the game and playing the game of the rules. That is, writing (active voice) may be merely to play the game without taking part in the phase of the game in which the rules are devised and adjusted. A writer who is not self-reflective about the rules of the game (that does not try to take part in writing and rewriting the rules so as to keep the game from getting boring, and to keep the codes of the game from solidifying) only plays the game, and thereby suffers two fates: the first is that he must play the others’ game, not his own, for it is the others who devise the rules; the second is that he is banished from game-playing, and so finds himself playing not

games, but sports: “We can define a sport as a game played according to a well-defined code of rules. By definition, then, a player of a sport is excluded from playing the game of the rules” (“Four Notes,” *Doubling the Point* 125).

At one level, then, writing goes on in the dialectic between playing the game and playing the game of the rules. A healthy dialectic yields a good game—a game that goes on endlessly remaking itself as it is played. The dialectic ceases when the game is appropriated by authorities for an ideological purpose (as it was with Rugby): to play the codes of sport (or to reproduce the preferred artistic codes of a demonstrative government) is “therefore reenacting a profoundly important moment of culture: the moment at which the Oedipal compromise is made, the moment at which the knee is bent to government” (*Doubling the Point* 125).

This, however, bifurcates the concept of play by implicitly positing a series of dichotomies within play. Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois, two of the most important cultural historians of play, have explored and struggled with these dichotomies: play is “a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious,’ but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly” (Huizinga 13); a game “consists of the need to find...[a] response which is free within the limits set by the rules” (Caillois 8); play is make-believe but competitive; it is joyous but the rules surrounding it are painstakingly constructed; play permeates all aspects of civilization but is not unique to humans.⁵⁰ Drawing hard lines between the player, the playing, the game, and the rules of the game creates semantic confusion, making it difficult to say just what is or is not

⁵⁰ As Huizinga writes, “Play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing” (*Homo Ludens* 1).

play, and how to classify it. Coetzee tellingly vacillates in his own essay: he calls Rugby both a game and a sport.

Still, to divide play into two distinct phases of the game – thereby dividing art into a game of inventing rules and a game of playing the game under the constraints of these rules – may be to misrepresent the essential nature of play. In literature, play, rather than creating a dialectic with two discretely visible phases, undoes the dialectic of the phases of the game: literature is a space in which there is no distinction between playing the game and playing the rules of the game. Literature embodies the rules and codes by which it is simultaneously experienced and interpreted. *True play in literature is the event in which play exists without the distinction between phases of the game.* Of course the two phases can be made into discernible themes, which the writing can present as distinct from one another—but the experience of reading literature can never be an activity separate from understanding how literature is doing what it is doing. True play loses track of where it is in the dialectic; the two phases are subsumed into a single game, a single event within language. If the phases of the game are evident, the game has not achieved a state of artistic play; where it is obvious that an author is in a phase in which he is playing the rules of the game, something has been lost. Likewise, writing that is unconscious of itself as something happening *in language* (a language with codes and conventions) is itself amiss. When the game is played indivisibly with the playing of the rules of the game, then we have a literary event. Coetzee's greatest work (such as *Michael K* and *Disgrace*) gives intimations of the two separate phases of playing, but intimates them in language in which the phases have been united.

For Coetzee, play is one way of imagining the writer at work: the writer shuttles back and forth between playing the game of language and interrogating and refashioning the rules of the game; sometimes the writer may even imagine that it is possible to play the game of language outside of language, at the frontier of the writable. Coetzee has claimed that he does not play as a literary critic, that the dialogism of writing (its dialectic of play, its “countervoices,” its middle voice) has never been fruitfully explored by him as a critic. He has said that it has remained for him “monological” (*Doubling the Point* 246). However, as I suggested earlier, and as I demonstrate below, Coetzee’s criticism during this period is in many ways characterized by play—it plays the game of the rules in such a way as to push at the boundaries of language; in this sense it frequently *performs* the very act of “pushing at the limits of language” at the same time as it studies the ways that other writers have tested the limits of language in their own work. At his best, Coetzee achieves true play in criticism: criticism in which the playing of the game and the playing of the game of the rules are a single event.

To see where and how play happens in his criticism (and to see how he becomes a “creative critic”), I now turn to Coetzee’s essay “Achterberg’s ‘Ballade van de gasfitter’: The Mystery of I and You,” published in *PMLA* in 1977. Achterberg (1905-1962) is among the most important early twentieth century Dutch poets, and the “Ballad of the Gasfitter” is his most famous work. The poem, a sequence of fourteen sonnets, reprises (and perhaps perfects) the theme for which Achterberg’s oeuvre is known: the possibility of being reunited with the beloved or an elusive other. Coetzee translated the Ballad himself for the article, and works off of his own translation. He later retranslated it for his small collection of Dutch poetry, *Landscape with Rowers*.

The narrative of the poem is essentially the search of an *I* (a gasfitter, a poet) trying to reach *You* (the Beloved? God? a Hole?). The gasfitter's job is to seal holes through which gas leaks from the subterranean world into the world of the living. In Dutch the word for gasfitter is *dichter*, which has connotations both with sealing and with poetic craftsmanship. Over the course of the poem, *I*, disguised as a gasfitter, comes face-to-face with *You*, loses *You*, searches a building for *You*, is ejected; in the end the gasfitter is confined to an old age home, still consumed with finding *You*. The poem recounts the failure to recreate the elemental *I-Thou* in the field of language, and tracks the transformation of *I* into an old man, which is to say into a *he/it*.

The central problem that scholars have confronted time and again, and which Coetzee attempts to solve, is “the problem of finding stable identifications for the personages” (*Doubling the Point* 69) in Achterberg's poem. “Does the poem present us with a single firm identity plus masks of that identity, or is the notion of identity it embodies more complex and fluid?” (*Doubling the Point* 70). Coetzee responds, “Answers to questions like these, on which critical debate has centered, depend on establishing significations for the *I* and *You* of the poem. Here, however, I want to begin by asking not *what I* and *You* signify but *how* they signify in the field of language and in the field of the poem” (*Doubling the Point* 70). Coetzee's line of thinking is drawn from the work of Emile Benveniste and Roman Jakobson. For Benveniste, *I* and *You* are “a set of ‘empty’ signs...which are ‘filled’ as the speaker adopts them” (*Problems in General Linguistics* 254). For Jakobson they are “shifters” (*Shifters* 2). For both men, *I* does not refer to an objective reality, but is a “moment of discourse” (Benveniste 252). Thus, “the form of *I* has no linguistic existence except in the act of speaking in which it is uttered”

(Benveniste 218). The identity of *I* happens at the moment of locution. Moreover, “*I* posits another person, the one who, being, as he is, completely exterior to ‘me,’ becomes my echo to whom I say *you* and who says *you* to me. This polarity of persons is the fundamental condition in language” (*Problems* 225). As Buber says, one cannot say *I* without also saying *You* (*I and Thou* 2).

For Coetzee, the “emptiness” of pronouns is important because it determines linguistically the organization of discourse between *I*, *you*, and *s/he*. Here is Coetzee’s description of how discourse must be imagined:

We can picture the pronouns *I-you-s/he* in ordinary discourse as occupying the apexes of a triangle. *I* stands at the origin of the utterance, the here and now, *you* at its destination, *s/he* at some point outside the axis of utterance. It is only when the axis of the utterance swings toward *s/he* that *s/he* becomes *you*, and only when *s/he* takes over the origin of utterance that *s/he* becomes *I*. (“Achterberg’s Ballade,” *Doubling the Point* 70)

The expectation then, of course, becomes *that these rules will be followed in the essay itself*. In fact, one would think that they must be followed—they are, after all, the rules of discourse. Coetzee reinforces this point, “In discourse about discourse (for example, in critical discourse like this), the axis of utterance passes from *I*, the author, through a phantom *you* who are my reader, while every *I*, *you*, and *s/he* of my object discourse (here Achterberg’s poem) becomes a *s/he*, following the rules of reported speech” (*Doubling the Point* 70).

Coetzee makes two points here. One, he links his own critical discourse to the set of rules he is presenting by explicitly pointing out that he means “in critical discourse like this.” Two, he demonstrates that *I* is not a blank container. In Coetzee’s words, *I* “can also be a freedom, a pure potentiality, a readiness for the embodying word” (*Doubling the Point* 72). *I* is not merely empty; it is open, and carries within it intimations of a primal *I-*

Thou, a state in which subjectivity can gain embodiment through the Word. This is the desired paradox: putting a subjectivity (an unsignified pre-linguistic *being*) into words without having its pre-signified subjective primal force compromised. Can subjectivity say *I* without becoming reified, without being turned into a name, a fixed sign, a *he/she/it* on the axis of utterance? Moreover, can *I* (carrying in it its undimmed subjectivity) be brought into relationship with *You* to make up the primal Word.

As critic, Coetzee's job is to explore how *I* and *You* may be "filled variously as the axis of utterance...and the point of consciousness that is the *I* moves through the poem" (*Doubling the Point* 71); he suggests that the "notion of identity it [the poem] embodies is a suspended one, that *I* and *You* exist and have their relations in ways still prior to the ways of true names, with their firm significations, or true identities, and that the poem therefore works at, and sometimes absurdly beyond, the borders of language" (*Doubling the Point* 75). Coetzee, in search of the identifies for *I* and *You*, must discover their identities *before they were reified in pronouns*. He must ask whether one can say *I* without being turned into the sign *I*.

Though what Coetzee has to say about Achterberg's poem is compelling in its own right, it is *how* Coetzee structures and presents his reading that makes it truly creative. Take the first sonnet of Achterberg's poem:

You must have made your entries from the rear.
I glance into the houses from the street:
in windowfronts, between the curtains, out
of nothing You appear and reappear.

I pass, You vanish necessarily
But I'm proved right by the next windowpane.
One Jansen lives there with his family—
As if You could escape me in this name.

It will not help. A door remains a door,
 each with its step, its mailbox, and its bell.
 The apple-hawker lures You with his call.
 A master-key is easy to procure.
 Indeed I can quite freely step inside
 As (at your service) gasfitter by trade. (*Doubling the Point* 75)

Early in the essay, when describing the rules of discourse governing language and pronouns, Coetzee makes a claim about how he will read this sonnet:

“In sonnet 1 of the ‘Ballade,’ Achterberg...writes, ‘I glance into the houses... You appear.’ In my commentary I write: ‘He glances into the houses and the *You* appears,’”
 “the *You*” here being a kind of *he* or *she* or even *it*’ (*Doubling the Point* 71). Remarkably, Coetzee never in fact writes any such thing in his commentary. He breaks his promise!

Instead, his criticism (not only in this instance, but throughout the entire essay) takes an unusual form. Here is how Coetzee actually reads the first sonnet:

Commentary. There is I and there is You (whom I see, as in a tracking shot, in every window): there is between us a bar (the housefronts); and there is my conviction (my delusion?) that if I can get past names (for example, “Jansen”) I can reach You. Certain that a name disguises You, I adopt a disguise myself, that of gasfitter, which allows me to cross the bar. (Similar disguises I might adopt are those of postman, broker’s runner, plumber: see sonnet 13). (*Doubling the Point* 76).

My point here is that Coetzee has designed his reading so that it violates or pushes at the rules of discourse that he had laid out: he fundamentally challenges Benveniste’s notion of empty signs and the triangular theory of discourse. Recall that “In discourse about discourse...the axis of utterance passes from *I*, the author, through a phantom *you* who are my reader, while every *I*, *you*, and *s/he* of my object discourse (here Achterberg’s poem) becomes a *s/he*, following the rules of reported speech...” (*Doubling the Point* 71). In his commentary, however, Coetzee creates a “discourse about discourse” that does *not* follow the “rules of reported speech.” He manages to create an origin of utterance (an

I) that speaks about an *I* of an object discourse without turning that *I* into a *you* or *s/he*. Coetzee rewrites the rules of speech.

This is to say that Coetzee performs a double move: he attempts to say what *I* and *You* mean at each moment of speaking in the poem (to even gesture at moments where several identifications are simultaneously possible) while, in his own commentary, creating a new *I* and *You* which are themselves empty signs, presumably governed by the same rules of discourse as Achterberg's poem. In fact, the *I* and *You* of Coetzee's criticism are more than empty signs to be filled by various identifiable speakers; they raise some uncertainty as to whether a pronoun can be inhabited by a speaking consciousness in a way not allowed for by the accepted theories of pronouns.

For who/what is the speaking *I* in Coetzee's criticism? Is it true that *I* is in fact filled, given a name? Or is some vague trace of subjectivity made to inhabit it? The questions I ask are: What names can be given to *I* and *You* in Coetzee's commentary? Is it possible to give a name or an identity to the subjectivity that inhabits these empty signs? I do not see that names can be given to the pronouns. One might argue that the *I* is the gasfitter of Achterberg's poem. But of course that is unsatisfactory as an answer: the gasfitter of the poem has no internal dialogue of the sort we get in this commentary. Alternately, the *I* is Coetzee, who merely takes on the guise of the gasfitter so as to represent him through free-indirect discourse; in this sense Coetzee is dressed up as the gasfitter.

Here, though, several problems arise: 1) the *I* of the poem is itself dressed up as the gasfitter, so Coetzee could not dress up as the gasfitter, but would have to dress up as the *I* dressed up as a gasfitter; 2) even if we suspend our disbelief and accept for the

moment that Coetzee can enter into the commentary in any straightforward, unproblematic fashion, in inhabiting the *I* his perspective is contained and ineluctably colored both by the *I* of Achterberg's poem, and by the fact that as translator, Coetzee has already entered into the *I* of the poem from the other side. In a way that may be impossible to pinpoint, Coetzee has vaguely "entered into" the subjectivity of the *I* in so much, as translator, he has recreated in English the very structure and signification that could invest the *I* with an identity. If the identity of any pronoun depends upon its moment of utterance, and if translation reconfigures the system in which any pronoun is uttered, then in a translation the identity of the *I* is dispersed throughout the text; to some degree it is orchestrated by the translator (though limited by the constraints that the source text places on the translated text). At the end of his essay, Coetzee addresses the issue of translation, "Is the present essay a study of Achterberg's Dutch poem or of my English version? The question is a misleading one, for my translation itself is part of the work of criticism" (*Doubling the Point* 88). This, of course, raises the question of whether Coetzee has "solved" the problem of Achterberg's poem as a critic, or as a translator. Is the insight of his work fundamentally one of translation or of interpretation? It seems impossible to say, which lends the work an added dimension of play.

Ultimately, the subjectivity that inhabits the empty signs in Coetzee's criticism does not seem to square with any firm identity—to say that it is the gasfitter, or Coetzee, or Coetzee puppeting the gasfitter does not seem to describe the *I* of the commentary. For example, in the phrase, "There is I," *I* cannot be Coetzee because Coetzee is speaking about the *I*; that, or he is an *I* speaking about itself. It seems to me finally impossible to give a name to the *I* of the commentary, though there is clearly a subjectivity (a

consciousness, an identity) that has a presence in the pronoun. Coetzee, as author, enters the text as a trace, as a contributing consciousness that can never quite be identified. He leaves the writer “inside the writing,” not as a personage that can be named but as the agent of the action.

In this sense, the essay performs the middle voice. Instead of taking the middle voice as a vague metaphorical territory in which good writing takes place (as too many critics of Coetzee have done), Coetzee writes so that the metaphor is embedded in the very linguistic categories that are intrinsic to the history of the middle voice, which lingers as a “phantom presence” (*Doubling the Point* 94) in the English language. This is certainly not to say that Coetzee in fact writes in the middle voice in the essay—verb tense is only one of many linguistic maneuvers through which Coetzee manages to disperse himself in the text while permitting Achterberg’s gasfitter to speak, as it were, for himself. It is to say that the Achterberg essay performs the middle voice in a way that goes beyond mere metaphor by making the feeling of writing in the middle voice indivisible from specific linguistic properties and rhetorical techniques.

Elsewhere, the identities of empty pronouns in Coetzee’s commentary become even more difficult to pin down: “Nailed up in his coffin-cabin, a structure as closed (*gedicht*) as a sonnet (*gedicht*), I embark on my do-or-die mission to find You in a dimension (the vertical) outside the competence of gasfitters” (*Doubling the Point* 82). The *I* of the commentary (Coetzee the author? The critic? The translator? The gasfitter? Achterberg summoned up by Coetzee?) speaks of “his coffin-cabin.” But should it not be “my coffin-cabin”? *I* is speaking about himself, but uses the third-person pronoun, which again violates the rules of discourse. Coetzee has created a critical discourse in which

language has been made to express that which its rules seem to forbid. In some ways, this heterogenous use of pronouns smacks of 1930s defamiliarization—experimentation with heavy-handed foregrounding of poetic language.

Quite cleverly, in destabilizing the identities of the pronouns in his own criticism, Coetzee performs a second double move (the first being to “solve” Achterberg’s poem in a critical discourse that replicates the poem): in bringing Achterberg’s poem to a close by finally solving the problem of how to interpret the pronouns in the poem, he creates a text in which the same problem is once again posed. That is to say, by suspending any sure signification within his commentary while ostensibly providing the answers to how the pronouns take on meaning within the poem, Coetzee’s running commentary represents another set of open signs in need of decoding—and these pronouns, being that they are highly unstable, raise (once again) the question of whether any sure identities can be found for them. Ultimately, Coetzee’s criticism does not promise the same kind of critical closure that it supplies for Achterberg’s poem—in that sense Coetzee bests Achterberg at his own game. If the Ballad enacts an *I* beyond names “in a quest for You beyond names,” then Coetzee in fact supplies the *I-You* beyond names—for what name could one give to the *I* of Coetzee’s criticism? It has subjectivity, but no name to speak of. It contacts the primal *You* in language, achieving what the poem showed to be impossible. This is a quite brilliant maneuver, for it reenacts the poem, and in so doing suggests that *the poem can only be closed through a discourse that is itself open*. With the left hand the poem is closed, with the right hand it is opened. In this sense, the criticism sets off a train of interpretation that will go on indefinitely. Coetzee posits one way of pushing at the

borders of language at the moment in his career when he is studying how other writers (Achterberg, Newton, Kafka) have tried to do much the same thing.

At the end of the essay, Coetzee comments at length on a contrivance he calls the “poetics of failure”:

A certain elegance of poetic closure is always obtainable from the maneuver in which a poem ends by swallowing its own tail—denying, denouncing, or erasing itself. . . . The poem that incorporates a denunciation of itself. . . . paradoxically acquires the ontological self-sufficiency, and therefore extends the ontological challenge, of the self-consuming artifact: Can language reach outside itself?” (*Doubling the Point* 86)

Coetzee goes on to say that,

the poetics behind ‘Ballad of the Gasfitter’ is the poetics of failure. The *I* fails in his goetic-poetic attempt (disguised as an attempt to restore the *I-You*) to constitute the *You* out of nothing. Having failed, this *I* is split off and discarded by a “real” *I* (in fact only the second in a theoretically infinite progression) who asserts his mere survival—that is to say, the mere existence of the ‘Ballad’—as the opposite of failure. (*Doubling the Point* 87)

Coetzee argues that any work can be made to swallow its own tail, and thereby bring itself to an end. It is interesting that Coetzee seems to find this kind of end unsatisfactory—a sort of ripcord that a poet can pull when she has written herself into a corner. As I describe in the previous chapter, Coetzee’s work on Beckett climaxes in a profession of profound ambivalence toward Beckett’s literary automaton, which are works of “poetic closure.” It seems that, by working through criticism creatively, by exploring play, and by looking through the various ways in which writers have carved out some freedom for themselves within the field of language, Coetzee has moved away from the positivism that characterized his earlier thinking. Whereas with Beckett the “poetics of failure” constituted a kind of poetics of execution, now, mere closure is disappointing and disconcerting. A higher form of unity is required to bring about execution; this higher

unity seems to reconcile the writer's freedom (his play) and the tendency for language to fall into overriding patterns.

Coetzee's criticism is in some sense a solution to the problem of creating such a unity. Through Coetzee's criticism, the elegance of poetic closure is in one sense disallowed; however, in another sense, the search of the *I* for the *You* is made to continue within the commentary, leaving the elegance of poetic closure to the critic of Coetzee's criticism. There is a game being played: The *I* in Achterberg's poem searches for *You*, and does so through *dichten* (poetry, craftsmanship), through patching up the hole/whole; in parallel to this, the *I-critic* tries to reach the *You* of the poem through *dichten* (criticism), bringing the game of the empty *I* to an end by patching up the whole through which stable significations escape. The *I-critic* succeeds—his polymorphous *I* gains victory over the play of signification, and his poetics of failure is the name he gives to his victory. However, at the same time, the *I-critic* has recreated Achterberg's ballad, with the same characters reenacting the same chase. The game is not over; the hole is open. A higher execution is achieved through endless oscillation between openness and closure: a light switch flipped on and off.

In many ways, this brings us back to the organizing principals that I have been using in this dissertation to describe Coetzee's thinking about literature: the poetics of executions and the problems of literature. Together, these terms are meant to characterize Coetzee's overriding sense that literature presents itself as problems that the writer (whether novelist or critic) must set out to solve, and the solutions require that the writer execute—that he bring the work into unity according to the criteria he lays out. In the Achterberg essay, the problem posed is, specifically, how to label the pronouns in the

poems; but the larger problem is how a critic can play the game of the rules (label the pronouns, solve the poem) and rewrite the rules of criticism so that the criticism falls into a higher unity. Coetzee executes as a critic by both solving Achterberg's local problem and by creating in his own criticism another game, one that is executed in that it sets off an endless train of critical responses, each one executing on the former.

My point here is that play is not disturbance—it is not a breaking down of patterns, or the end of unity. Writing is not possible without a sense of arriving at the finished project, without some sense of having executed; this conception is the organizing principal around which Coetzee so frequently organizes his thinking about literature and language. Here Coetzee demonstrates criticism performing a double execution: solving the object text, while creating a work whose internal logic provides a unified meta-commentary on the object text.

Now, let us return to the concept of play. If we take play to mean simply experimentation and whimsy, then the Achterberg essay is indeed a species of critical play. It is cleverly unorthodox, ironic and parodic, and certainly would fit under the umbrella of postmodernist play. But the piece is play in other senses. Play, as Coetzee defines it, is a dialectic between playing the game and playing the game of the rules. The Achterberg essay performs such a double maneuver in several respects: it plays the game of criticism (explicate the text) while playing the game of the rules (reflect upon and rework the rules of criticism/discourse); it plays the game of poetical failure (create a text that undoes itself) while playing the game of the rules of poetical failure (erect substantive criticism out of the “absence” that is the poetically failed work); it plays the game of translation (render the text in a target language) and the game of the rules of

translation (posit that the translation necessarily supplants the original text). The essay is a form of the bifurcated play that Coetzee describes.

But in literature (and in truly creative criticism) true play, as I have said, is not dialectical. In literature, the two phases of the game become one: that is the hallmark of the event of literature, and it seems that it can likewise be the hallmark of creative criticism. For in looking at Coetzee's commentary there is no way of separating out the phases of the game, the two sides of the dialectic. In every commentary, Coetzee both plays the game (solves the problem the text poses) and plays the rules of the game (reopens a new set of problems). They are done in the same breath: through the way Coetzee has created a critical *I* that precedes any naming. The *I* is always both playing the game and playing the rules—they overlap. Coetzee's criticism operates at the edge of language, the purpose being seemingly not to do away with rules but to *continue to be able to play even as the rules exert their pressure on his work, his thinking, his ideology*. It is not a simple rewriting of the rules, but a cunning assertion of the province of the player, of the ability of the player to participate in sports and play his games.

Much the same kind of playing is at work in other of Coetzee's essays, for example in "Captain America in American Mythology." Coetzee has been glib about his work in popular culture, "My work in this area barely deserves the name of work. Indeed, since one of its arguments is that play is too readily slighted in comparison with work, I would positively prefer to think of at least some of it as play. The essay on Captain America, certainly, is a *jeu d'esprit*" ("Captain America" in *Doubling the Point* 103). The essay is indeed a bit of cleverness. However, Coetzee's use of the word "play" in his description of the piece suggest that it is also play in the sense described in "Four Notes

on Rugby.” It is, at one level, a demystification of Captain America in the mode of American transcendentalism. However, it is also a parody of demystification itself. It is a demystification of demystification. It is so adept at reducing Captain America to a series of neat conceits that it makes a mockery of suspiciousness itself. It is *both* an earnest and quite insightful deconstruction of American comics and an ironic romp through forms of criticism that pride themselves on being so adept at demystification. It creates an outrageous comic pastiche of popular critical paradigms. “Captain America is the image of the stable ego,” writes Coetzee,

Buckling his belt, he embraces his own hips; closing the symbolic lock of the buckle, he calls attention to his sex and proclaims his chastity. Masked, he puts himself outside and above family and law: as a Protestant hero he will now heed only the authority of an inner voice. He is no longer a unit on the labor market but an autonomous Guardian of the Republic. (“Captain America” in *Doubling the Point* 108)

These sentences travel from Freud and Marcuse, to Calvinist fate, to Marx and Nietzsche. Coetzee cannot be entirely serious, and says as much when, as critic/author, he equates himself implicitly with “the plight of Steve Englehart, author and ironist” of Captain America comics: “On the one hand he [Englehart] is not up to the task of inventing an epic language adequate to the heroic iconography... On the other hand, Marvel Comics will not permit him to send up the subject on the lines of the Batman TV series. Therefore, he soldiers on, slipping in enough parody to signal that he is hip” (“Captain America,” in *Doubling the Point* 114). Coetzee, too, creates the “plastic imagery” of a certain common mode of criticism, thus, like Englehart, winking at the reader.

The double move (execution) is in tact: play the game (brilliantly deconstruct the text) and play the game of the rules (reflect and play upon the mode of discourse within which you are working). They are done at one and the same time, as true play is done. In

fact, in this essay Coetzee has found a way of counteracting a part of his criticism he dislikes, “A healthy level of suspiciousness is not a bad thing. But some of my criticism...is soured, I think, by a certain relentless suspiciousness of appearances.” (106). These words were spoken nearly fifteen years after the Captain America essay was published, but in the Captain America essay Coetzee expresses a certain suspiciousness of relentlessly suspicious criticism. The irony of the essay turns its argument into a veiled mockery of “a critical practice whose climactic gesture is always a triumphant tearing-off” (*Doubling the Point* 106). Through play, the essay undercuts and makes light of the sort of suspiciousness that is endemic to literary criticism.

Of course, there is more play in Coetzee’s criticism than space to discuss it here.⁵¹ Furthermore, it is almost certainly the case that I have yet to find all of the play in Coetzee’s criticism. But the purpose of this chapter is not only to survey Coetzee’s critical play, but also to suggest yet another way of judging Coetzee’s successes and failures as a writer (and, in turn, of looking at how Coetzee judges other writers). In Chapter One, I suggested that Coetzee’s earliest literary criticism was motivated by an urgent – but ultimately unsuccessful – attempt to develop a formal criterion for evaluating literature. This criterion sprang from Coetzee’s inchoate intuitions about what made a piece of writing work, and was likely driven by a keen desire to one day be able to use what he discovered about the underlying formal system of *The Good Soldier* in his own fiction. For Coetzee, aesthetic judgment was indivisible from literary interpretation; formal unity was intrinsic to his estimation of the success or failure of any novel. In this

⁵¹ For instance, “The Firing Line,” Coetzee’s 1967 letter to “The Daily Texan,” seems to be a macabre but quite possibly ingenious form of play—I am soon to begin a short article exploring what it might mean.

sense, his understanding of literary form was not far from the sort of judgments usually associated with book reviews, or with literary criticism written for the general public. In Coetzee's writing, explanation and judgment intersected. And, as I explained in Chapter One, the nature of that intersection suggested several ways one might try to explain and judge Coetzee's writing.

In the previous chapter, I expanded upon Coetzee's aesthetic judgments of Ford Madox Ford. I demonstrated that his readings of Beckett belied an uncertainty about how to judge Beckett's works of "poetic failure." What troubled Coetzee was not so much how to understand Beckett's work – he indeed felt that he had unearthed the organizing principle underlying several of Beckett's works – but how to judge him. Were Beckett's works of poetic closure the supreme examples of "pure literary mathematics" (as the formal criterion Coetzee developed in his Master's thesis would suggest), or were Beckett's works so self-annihilating that they forced Coetzee to revise his feelings about "literary mathematics"? Coetzee seemed baffled by his own ambivalence. Though he does, finally, seem to express a certain amount of displeasure with poems that are "self-consuming artifact[s]" (*Doubling the Point* 86), he never loses his fascination for them, nor his feeling of admiration for their workmanship. The unpleasing aspects of their "perfection" were blows to the most basic tenets of his philosophy of writing.⁵³

⁵³ It would be interesting to know what, in 1973, Coetzee thought about the argument he had made in his Master's thesis. Would *The Good Soldier* still have seemed like "pure literary mathematics" even when placed next to, say, Beckett's *Lessness*? Would, in other words, the brilliance of *The Good Soldier* depend less on its mathematics, and more on its calculated disruption of mathematics, or on the interpenetration of various patterns, or on effects which did not seem to rely on patterns (at least not on patterns that stylistics could find or make the meaning in)? Would Coetzee's ambivalence about Beckett's literary mathematics make him feel disenchanting by Ford's literary mathematics, or

In this chapter, I have so far suggested that Coetzee may evaluate writing in terms of its relationship to play. I would now like to consider whether Coetzee's conception of play could be used as another way of judging and evaluating the success of Coetzee's works (whether any given work has been "executed"). Could a criterion of play be used to evaluate and think through his work? It seems that if the automatism of Beckett's later work shook Coetzee's confidence in a positivist conception of literary excellence, then it may be that a writer's ability to play (to work creatively in relation to the mechanized aspects of literature and language) represents a higher form of unity. Coetzee lends this credence through what he calls "countervoices" (*Doubling the Point* 65), which one might interpret as a dialogic conversation between play and authority. However, as I have tried to demonstrate, mere dialogism may be a red herring—it may appear to be play, but in fact be play in its reified form. True play may transcend the dialectic of play.

Naturally, this leads one to wonder about Coetzee's fiction. What of Coetzee's fiction is true play, and what of his fiction simply impersonates play by staging a back-and-forth between playing the game and playing the game of the rules? It may be that Coetzee's work can seem most programmatic – most open to accusations that it is criticism in the guise of fiction – when it becomes stuck in the oscillation between fictional innovation and a response to the limits of fictional innovation. I would like to suggest (and nothing more) that we may find a way of discriminating between Coetzee's greater and lesser novels in the very distinction he has drawn between 1) games of unselfconscious play, 2) games in which there is movement between two discrete stages of play (the playing of the game and the playing of the game of the rules), and 3) games

would Ford's mathematics now seem even closer to what Coetzee had meant by literary mathematics in the first place?

in which both stages of the game exist, but in which the binary falls away in the pure event of the game.

Perhaps, in particular works, Coetzee sets out to achieve a certain sort of play in writing—this kind of play would, if achieved, constitute the desired execution of his project. Sometimes, as with the Achterberg essay, true creative play is achieved. In other works, the dialectic of play may be too conspicuous; the reader in this case may feel that the game is playing him (that he is not being allowed to play, but rather has been released into a maze). The playground thus becomes a prison yard. Much as with my previous heuristics, it falls to individual readers to work out whether a given novel or essay creates a liberating sort of play in which the dialectic of play is undone, or whether the work entraps the reader by staging a never ending dialectic.

The Metaphors Coetzee Writes By: On the Deep Structure of Play

It is important at this juncture to make it clear that play must not be understood as merely a descriptive term that Coetzee uses to draw an analogy between certain features of language/writing and certain features of games/play. Writing is not simply *like* play—they do not only share local resemblances. Rather, I now wish to argue that there is an underlying conceptual metaphor that fundamentally organizes Coetzee’s thinking about literature and writing: the metaphor of play. For Coetzee, the concept of “playing a game” is a cognitive way of organizing and understanding literature and language. That is, *the conceptual metaphor of play organizes his conception of language, writing, and reality, and in fact dictates to some extent how he interprets texts/theories and presents arguments*. His essays on the passive voice, and on Kafka, presuppose a metaphorical

conception of language as a game and writing as play. In this sense, Coetzee's criticism during this period – and, as I will show, much of the thinking he does in his fiction throughout his career – is founded upon Coetzee's recurring metaphorical structuring of language, writing, and play.

I am drawing here on George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's notion of conceptual metaphors, which they develop in their popular book *Metaphors We Live By*. In an article on this concept, Lakoff and Johnson argue that “our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” (“Conceptual Metaphor” 454) and that the metaphors that structure our thinking go a long way toward structuring how we conceive of and experience reality. Metaphor is not merely poetic ornament, distinct from everyday language; it is not a special case within linguistics and semantics. Metaphor is embedded in our everyday language, and is an expression of underlying cognitive patterns and associations. Take, as an example, the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR (this is a well known example from Lakoff and Johnson's work). This conceptual metaphor is reflected in how we speak of and conceive of arguments. Some examples:

Your claims are *indefensible*.
 He *attacked every weak point* in my argument.
 I *demolished* his argument.
 I've never *won* an argument with him.
 You disagree? Okay, *shoot!*
 If you use that *strategy*, *he'll wipe you out*.
 He *shot down* all of my arguments. (“Conceptual Metaphor” 454)

Lakoff and Johnson's point is 1) that metaphors are so embedded into our daily language that we do not recognize them as metaphors and 2) that metaphors determine our attitude and behavior toward argumentation. It is all but impossible in English, they claim, to

speak of argumentation without war metaphors. As a result, we conduct and understand arguments militarily. How different would arguments be if the conceptual metaphor we used for argument was ARGUMENT IS DANCE? Our very structuring of that aspect of reality would be, the argument goes, fundamentally different, less bellicose. In this sense, conceptual metaphors are the cognitive correlate to the Von Humboldt-Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (which Coetzee was interested in, and about which he wrote). For Benjamin Lee Whorf, “the least visible structures of a language, those that seem most natural to its speakers, are the structures most likely to embody the metaphysical preconceptions of the language community” (Coetzee in *Doubling the Point* 194). The grammatical and syntactical structures of a language go some way toward determining how we understand, experience, and live within a linguistic community—they shape the fundamental elements of our epistemologies, ontologies and metaphysics. Reality is permeated with the deep semantics of grammar and syntax.

Coetzee’s comments and writing reflect a particular cognitive/conceptual metaphorical structuring of language and writing. Let us test the following conceptual metaphor as it pertains to Coetzee’s thinking and his work: LANGUAGE/LITERATURE is a FIELD OF PLAY/GAMES. Implicit in this is an agent who plays (who plays games) and a set of rules (the rules of the game). The following schema seems to hold for Coetzee:

- 1) The writer is free to play, but is always limited by the rules of the game.
- 2) PLAYING a GAME is negative if the GAME is PLAYING the writer/speaker.

- 3) If PLAY/FREEDOM decreases, the GAME becomes a machine/automaton, a prison, a sport, a lavatory, a labyrinth, the law. The GAME continues to exist inside the container of the field (language).
- 4) If PLAY/FREEDOM increases, the GAME becomes a field through which the writer/speaker JOURNEYS. The writer/speaker is inside the container of the GAME and plays the game. The writer/speaker is nonetheless not entirely free; the rules of the game are what are played.

Demonstrating the truth of the first proposition is not difficult. Here are several quotes from Coetzee in which the ability to play (to write) is in tension with the rules of the game (language):

It is a curious fact that older children and adults do not invent games with the facility of young children, and indeed rarely show any desire to do so. If the arts constitute a higher activity than physical culture, it is surely for the reason that they continue to vary the forms and rules of the games they play. Art as polymorphous play, then, playing at inventing rules with which it plays at constraining itself. (Coetzee in *Doubling the Point* 104)

A historicizing consciousness or, as you put it, the distancing effect of reflexivity, or even textualization—in the present these are all ways of tracing the same phenomenon: an awareness, as you put pen to paper, that you are setting in train a certain play of signifiers with their own ghostly history of past interplay. (Coetzee in *Doubling the Point* 62-63)

The true challenge is: how not to play the game by the rules of the state, how to establish one's own authority, how to imagine torture and death on one's own terms. ("Into the Dark Chamber," *Doubling the Point* 364)

The second proposition (beware the game that plays *you*) follows from several quotes:

There is a game going on between the covers of the book, but it is not always the game you think it is. No matter what it may appear to be doing, the story is not really playing the game you call Class Conflict or the game called Male Domination or any of the other game in the games handbook. ("The Novel Today" 3-4)

The child who submits to the code and plays the game is therefore reenacting a profoundly important moment of culture: the moment at which the Oedipal compromise is made, the moment at which the knee is bent to government. (“Four Notes on Rugby,” *Doubling the Point* 125)

From *Youth*: Finally he has no respect for any version of thinking that can be embodied in a computer’s circuitry. The more he has to do with computing, the more it seems to him like chess: a tight little world defined by made-up rules, one that sucks in boys of a certain susceptible temperament and turns them half-crazy, as he is half-crazy, so that all the time they deludedly think they are playing the game, the game is in fact playing them. (149)

According to proposition three, when freedom and play wane, a slight metaphorical adjustment is made: language is still a field and a container (we write *in* language, or try to write *outside* of language), but the field/container solidifies into the metaphors of prison, labyrinth, playpen (a child’s prison), machine, or any other freedom-limiting container existing in space and time. In *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee says:

[There is] an awareness, as you put pen to paper, that you are stetting in train a certain play of signifiers with their own ghostly history of past interplay... Did Defoe have this kind of awareness? Did Hardy? One likes to think that they didn’t, that they had, so to speak, an easier time of it... Hence the pathos—in a humdrum sense of the word—of our position: like children shut in the playroom, the room of textual play, looking out wistfully through the bars at the enticing world of the grownups, one that we have been instructed to think of as the mere phantasmal world of realism but that we stubbornly can’t help thinking of as the real. (62-63)

Here a synchronic “play of signifiers” is linked to a diachronic “history of past interplay”; play spreads to infinity and encloses us in its ether, suggesting (proposition two) that language is a game that plays us. As writers, when language begins to play us, what we felt to be free play (our crib) becomes a prison/playroom, the bars of which separate inside and outside (language as container). When freedom decreases, language remains a discrete rule-bound field, but becomes associated with greater discipline. Images following this formula abound. Language becomes a net: “a fiction of net zero” (43). A

prison holding a writer-prisoner: “The prisoner can spend his time writing on the walls (*The Unnameable*) or making magic jokes about their unreality (*Murphy*). He remains imprisoned” (*Doubling the Point* 38). A machine/automaton: “they call for a heroic attentiveness which they continually subvert by a stylized repetitiveness into the sleep of a machine” (*Doubling the Point* 49). A wall/boundary: “Scholars have beaten their heads long and hard against this strange poem” (*Doubling the Point* 69). There are scores of examples. Both consciously and unconsciously, as language becomes more restrictive it is more likely to become a physical entity (net, prison, playpen, machine) inside of which the writer/speaker suffocates because play has either become impossible or has become the perverse “compelled playing” of the prescribed rules of the game—rules that have been created by the Father, Warden, Boss.⁵⁴

As freedom increases, however, the metaphors change. Language remains a field, a container, a discrete entity within which, and through which, a writer moves; inside the

⁵⁴ One must consider the possibility that images of authority are integral to Coetzee’s way of conceptually organizing his thinking because he was born, raised, and lived most of his adult life in South Africa. Living amidst a vast bureaucratic penal system of the sort one find in South Africa may have led Coetzee to conflate restrictions on expression with physical imprisonment. In “Into the Dark Chamber: The Writer and the South African State,” Coetzee considers the vast influence that the prison system has had on South African writers, and suggests with unusual freedom that *Waiting for the Barbarians* was shaped by his imaginative engagement with South African prison life. The essay details the conundrum that writers in South Africa face when addressing the relationship between language (its expressiveness, its potential to expose) and its potential to inhabit the most repugnant human attitudes and environments: “Yet there is something tawdry about *following* the state in this way, making its vile mysteries the occasion for fantasy. For the writer the deeper problem is *not* to allow himself to be impaled on the dilemma proposed by the state, namely, either to ignore its obscenities or else to produce representations of them. The true challenge is: how not to play the game by the rules of the state, how to establish one’s own authority, how to imagine torture and death on one’s own terms” (364). Here we have another instance of play, but in this case the linguistic and imaginative restrictions on play are doubled in the ever so physical South African cell block.

container are still the materials of language with which the writer writes/builds in compliance with a set of laws. However, writing now becomes movement, journey, freedom, play—even transgression of the boundaries of the container. To demonstrate what I mean, I return to Coetzee’s impassioned comments on his experience of critical writing. Earlier, I quoted this very passage so as to highlight Coetzee’s enthusiasm for, and vision of, criticism as a creative medium. I want to revisit this passage to show that Coetzee’s conception of criticism is not simply carried in the themes he addresses, but is carried in the very conceptual metaphors (of freedom, movement, and possibility) that are inlaid into the deep structure of what he writes. Notice the metaphors of movement and force in Coetzee’s description of writing about Kafka:

What engaged me then and engages me still in Kafka is *an intensity, a pressure of writing* that, as I have said, *pushes at the limits* of language and specifically of German. No one who has really *followed* Kafka through his struggles with the time system of German can fail to be convinced that he has an intuition of an alternative time, a time *cutting through* the quotidian, on which it is as foolish to try to elaborate in English as in German. But Kafka at least hints that it is possible, for snatches, however brief, to think outside one’s own language, perhaps *to report back on* what it is like to *think outside* language itself. Why should one want to think outside language? Would there be anything worth thinking there? Ignore the question: What is interesting is the *liberating possibility* Kafka opens up. In a more general sense, I work on a writer like Kafka because *he opens for me, or opens me to*, moments of analytic intensity... [This] is a comment about writing, the kind of *writing-in-the-tracks* one does in criticism. For my experience is that it is not reading that *takes me into* the last twist of the burrow, but writing. No intensity of reading that I can imagine would succeed *in guiding me through* Kafka’s verb-labyrinth: to do that I would once again have to take up the pen and, *step by step*, write my way *after him*. (198-199)

Writing becomes free motion within a physical container, which is here a labyrinth-burrow. Rather than a prison or a machine, the labyrinth-burrow is a field of play that imposes some restrictions on the writer (imposes a medium with rules) but within which a writer is capable of exploration, renovation, and burrowing; he can create his own

burrow holes, or he can follow the twists in the burrows of other authors. Writing is the *guide* through which a critic navigates another author's burrow.

Writing is also presented as a liberator; writing is what evades particular handicaps, what allows one to exit the realm of predetermination and enter into the realm of uncertainty and possibility:

If I were a truly creative critic I would work toward liberating the discourse—making it less monological, for instance. But the candid truth is I don't have enough of an investment in criticism to try. Where I do my liberating, my playing with possibilities, is in my fiction. To put in another way: I am concerned to write the kind of novel—to work in the kind of novel form—in which one is not unduly handicapped (compared with the philosopher) when one plays (or works) with ideas. (246)

The metaphors multiply according to the same rules: language is a rule-bound prison, creativity and play (working with the material of ideas left for us within the container of language) are the means by which one can liberate oneself, can earn greater latitude on the field of play, can become healthy (not “handicapped”). Liberation is not instantaneous, but is a journey, the writing journey: “There is a true sense in which writing is dialogic: a matter of awakening the countervoices in oneself and embarking upon speech with them.” Writing is a journey on which we embark. In his Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech, writing is a “path” (*Doubling the Point* 98); in South Africa we must write our “way out of a situation” (98) in which art has no traction. Art/language, a container holding the materials in which the writer builds, is a bucket much too small: “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” (“Jerusalem Prize,” *Doubling the Point* 99).

In a discussion of play and Coetzee's development as a critic it is important to discuss the three essays that Coetzee wrote on the passive voice, and the one essay he wrote on verb tenses in Kafka's "The Burrow." They are substantial works, but do not on their face seem to be works of play in any of the senses Coetzee has given to the word. All four essays are fastidiously researched and their arguments are presented with rigor; they do not seem like respites from writing novels; they do not appear to oscillate between playing the game and playing the rules of the game; they do not "liberate" the discourse of criticism in the ways that some of his other essays do; in none of them does Coetzee conspicuously present language as a prison or a machine (though the basic notion of language as a field for games is still very much present). Does Coetzee put away childish games in four of his most substantial critical essays?

No, for in fact all four essays are presented as studies of writer's at work/play in the field/game of language. That is to say that in order for Coetzee to study how Defoe, James, Gibbon, Newton, and Kafka write he must place them in the position of agents within the metaphor that organizes his thinking during this period (and very frequently outside of this period): LANGUAGE/LITERATURE is a FIELD OF PLAY/GAMES. Another way of presenting this idea is by looking at the change in Coetzee's thinking from his work on Beckett to his work on agentless passive sentences. In his dissertation, Coetzee is skeptical about the possibility of relating particular properties of language to meaning. In "Linguistics and Literature," he says, "one may finally have to accept the position that a scientific stylistics is unattainable, that the step from stylistic description to stylistic interpretation always takes one beyond the limits of linguistics into criticism" (45). Coetzee rejects a positivistic, objective mapping of linguistic properties onto literary

affects. But his work on the passive voice during this period in many respects contradicts such a finding. His writing is, in fact, interested in taking the leap from linguistics to criticism—for Coetzee, this is nearly the definition of rhetoric.

What allows Coetzee to shift paradigms? One part of the story is certainly that Coetzee is interested in taking seriously the discipline of classical rhetoric on its own terms—his purpose is not to debunk rhetoric, but to see how accurately it can account for how language patterns map onto rhetorical effects. Another, perhaps more significant, part of the story is that rhetoric is the art and practice of persuasion; its origins, at least in part, are as a manual for practicing orators. Its deep structure is as a civic art with a range of codes and conventions within which a speaker can work and flourish. Rhetoric is pragmatic; it speaks to practicing writers working within the shared materials of a given language. It is predicated on intentionality, and therefore metaphorically posits an agent working within a field of language using the tools of the trade. In this sense rhetoric projects the structure of ideas and associations through which Coetzee cognitively conceives of literature. It also offers explanations that satisfy him as both a scholar and a novelist.

Coetzee's shift away from positivism toward rhetoric and Whorfianism represents a shift in his thinking toward play within the field of language, and toward the uses to which writers have put play in an effort to wrest themselves from the grip of language. Beneath what is ostensibly a fairly rigorous investigation of grammatical and syntactical forms is an attempt to diversify our understanding of the materials writers have had at their disposal when playing within, and against, the game of language. For example, in "Isaac Newton and the Ideal of a Transparent Scientific Language," Coetzee

demonstrates that Newton, in trying to describe gravitational attraction in the absence of any understanding of the forces acting upon bodies, was forced to struggle right down to the level of syntax: he used the agentless passive to describe interactions without positing agency. Newton is the writer/player *par excellence*. He must play the game: create a transparent scientific language for describing the motions of the physical world as they are described by abstract mathematical formulae; he must try to create language that does not mediate between language and its percipients. However, he also must play the game of the rules: he must push at the boundaries of language to invent/discover metaphors and syntactical structures that can semantically describe the universe as mathematics describes it; he must do this even if mathematics describes a world for which there may be no transparent language. Newton achieves true play when his metaphors and syntax become fundamentally constitutive of the theories as we now understand them (we no longer struggle with the metaphysics of *attraction* because the metaphor has become so deeply embedded in our conception of the natural world).

Similarly, though Coetzee's reading of "The Burrow" is fundamentally anti-biographical, it nonetheless is predicated on the conceptual metaphor of language as a finite field of play (a labyrinthine burrow) in which a writer plays (through which the creature burrows and reigns as master, but over which he finally only has a precarious control). Though he does not allegorize the story so as to equate Kafka with the mole, Coetzee casts Kafka in the agentive position: "Henel recognizes from the start the particular hermeneutic problems posed by a text in which so elementary a linguistic category as tense, not easily reduced to other terms, becomes the object of the writer's play" (*Doubling the Point* 220). Kafka can only be trying to write outside of the confines

of his own language if he is cast in the agentive position within a language that has an inside and an outside.

The irony is that in studies of the agentless passive the conceptual metaphor governing Coetzee's thinking necessarily posits an agent. Though Coetzee does some very interesting work in supplying a new framework of tense and time to make sense of "The Burrow", he nonetheless replicates Kafka's scenario of a creature in a burrow in his own conceptual understanding of language. In this sense, he cannot fundamentally upend the metaphysics of "The Burrow." Despite his best efforts not to turn "The Burrow" into a metaphor for Kafka's life or into a metaphor of Kafka-as-writer, he nonetheless forces Kafka's work back into the cognitive paradigms through which he thinks and works. And these structures practically necessitate that the author be posited as agent. The result is that Coetzee's underlying conceptual metaphors betray him—they compel him to metaphorize "The Burrow" in the way he had consciously wished to avoid. This is one of the weaknesses of the essay. For a more daring project would examine "The Burrow" outside of its own governing conceptual metaphor. I suspect that a greater awareness of conceptual metaphors would have improved these essays. Frequently, what is explained in terms of linguistic properties could have been traced to cognitive linguistic processes. In this sense when play takes the form of conceptual metaphor it can sometimes become banal. That is, it can return Coetzee to the second proposition: beware the game that plays you. When this happens, the player (in this case Coetzee) unconsciously repeats patterns that are preordained by the prevailing conceptual metaphors that govern his thinking.

Overall, despite some ambivalence about the genre of criticism, Coetzee does indeed play in his criticism: he is jubilantly unorthodox and ironic; he plays within the

two phases of game-play; he frequently manages to dissolve the dialectic of game-play and achieve true creative criticism; he conceptually organizes his thinking along the lines of play and games at every level; he structures his most orthodox essays so that the authors he examines are presented as agents of play working to transform the container of language from a prison/labyrinth into a medium of invention and adventure. This period of Coetzee's thinking about criticism is permeated with disciplined but invariably passionate investigations of the writer playing within language.

The natural question on which to end is: does play have a role in Coetzee's fiction? Does Coetzee's conceptual understanding of play in relation to writing organize how he presents and thinks about writing and literature in his novels? There are, of course, obvious ways in which Coetzee's novels are "playful" in the traditional sense. A work like *Diary of a Bad Year*, with its bisected and trisected pages, with its superimposition of fiction and non-fiction, covers the gamut of play (both the form of play that I have described and the various forms of play so often associated with postmodernism)⁵⁵: it is daringly unconventional, plays the game of the rules, highlights the physicality of the book form (metaphorically the book becomes the language container). Eugene Dawn's works of mythography in *Dusklands* could also be read from the play/game paradigm that I have described (play is mentioned several times in

⁵⁵ Of course, the gamut of postmodern play is too vast to describe here; its general features of parody, doubling, irony, and satire are, understood broadly, too well known to need mentioning. However, for an overview of postmodern fiction and play, see Brian Edwards's *Theories of Play and Postmodern Fiction*. I also find Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnival particularly useful to Coetzee's work; see *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and *Rabelais and His World*.

Dusklands⁵⁶); the numbered paragraphs and narrative strategy of *In the Heart of the Country* project the deep structure of Coetzee's thinking as well. Coetzee discusses play and games directly in *Youth*.

However, I would like to go beyond surface examples of play in Coetzee's fiction. Rather, I want to look at moments in which the conceptual metaphor of play is so fundamental to Coetzee's thinking that it embeds itself into metaphors and images that do not, on the surface, have anything to do with the writer or with the nature of literary form.

In the most controversial of her lectures, Elizabeth Costello likens the fate of animals to the fate of millions killed in the Nazi extermination camps. She argues that our language reflects our attitude toward the lives of animals; and, often, it reflects our attitude toward animals in ways of which we are unaware. She says:

“‘They went like sheep to the slaughter.’ ‘They died like animals.’ ‘The Nazi butchers killed them.’ Denunciation of the camps reverberates so fully with the language of the stockyard and slaughterhouse that it is barely necessary for me to prepare the ground for the comparison. The crime of the Third Reich, says the voice of accusation, was to treat people like animals. (64-65)

Surely, Coetzee is drawing upon Lakoff's notion of conceptual metaphors, and perhaps is gesturing broadly toward Whorfian linguistic relativity. Our language carries in it metaphors that reflect our vision of the world. Costello makes it clear that she has available to her the language of the philosophical protectors and philosophical accusers of animals; she could “fall back on that language” (67), and she indeed does. The point seems to be: arguments that condemn animals may be superficially based on reason and sophistry, but its images and metaphors may reveal a less than reasonable aversion to

⁵⁶ Examples: “The novelettish reading of my plight amuses me. I might even one day play out the role of ruined and reconstructed boy...” (10); “Giving myself orders is a trick I often play on my habit of obedience” (36); “Perhaps I was not born to be a writer. Meanwhile Martin plays quietly on the floor beside me” (37).

granting animals the same rights and privileges as human beings. This is language as the return of the repressed.

But, if Elizabeth Costello's aspersions are true, and if they are based largely on *our* "chosen metaphors" (65), then we must also look at *her* language, at the imagery and conceptual metaphors that organize *her* discussion. Much of her lecture is devoted to Kafka's Red Peter, specifically to arguing that Red Peter is not a "made-up figure" but is modeled upon Sultan, one of the apes upon whom Wolfgang Kohler experimented on the island of Tenerife.⁵⁷ Costello's point is, first, that in coming to realize that Red Peter is based on a real animal the horror of Kafka's short story becomes that much greater, and, second, that Kafka *as a writer* is capable of generating in his story, and feeling within himself, an empathy of which Kohler was incapable. Kafka is the writer of his short story, and Kohler is the author of his experiment, but Kohler is an author in a lesser, more depraved, less decent sense.

Why is it that Kohler is the lesser author? What is it about Kohler's relationship to Sultan that differentiates it from Kafka's relationship to Red Peter? The answer is in Costello's description of Kohler's experiments:

"Sultan is alone in his pen. He is hungry: the food that used to arrive regularly has unaccountably ceased coming.

"The man who used to feed him and has now stopped feeding him stretches a wire over the pen three meters above ground level, and hangs a bunch of bananas from it. Into the pen he drags three wooden crates. Then he disappears, closing the gate behind him, though he is still somewhere in the vicinity, since one can smell him.

"Sultan knows: Now one is supposed to think. That is what the bananas up there are about. The bananas are there to make one think, to spur one to the limits of one's thinking. But what must one think? One thinks: Why is he starving me? One thinks: What have I done? Why has he stopped liking me? One thinks: Why

⁵⁷ Red Peter appears in Kafka's short story "A Report to an Academy" (1917); Sultan is discussed in Kohler's *The Mentality of Apes* (1925).

does he not want these crates any more? But none of these is the right thought. Even a more complicated thought – for instance: What is wrong with him, what misconception does he have of me, that leads him to believe it is easier for me to reach a banana hanging from a wire than to pick up a banana from the floor? – is wrong. The right thought to think is: How does one use the crates to reach the bananas?

“Sultan drags the crates under the bananas, piles them one on top of the other, climbs the tower he has built, and pulls down the bananas. He thinks: Now will he stop punishing me? (72-73)

What I would like to suggest is that this scene is, for both Costello and Coetzee, at the level of conceptual metaphor, an allegory of the writer and reader playing out a range of possibilities with the overriding metaphor: LANGUAGE/LITERATURE is a FIELD OF PLAY/GAMES. It recreates, and comments upon, the reader’s experience of entering a literary text.

For obvious reasons, let us take as a model the opening of *Elizabeth Costello*. In the opening, Coetzee reflects upon the experience of entering a text at the very moment at which the reader is undergoing that very experience. *Elizabeth Costello* opens:

There is first of all the problem of the opening, namely, how to get us from where we are, which is, as yet, nowhere, to the far bank. It is a simple bridging problem, a problem of knocking together a bridge. People solve such problems every day. They solve them, and having solved them push on. (1)

Notice the parallels between Sultan’s predicament and the reader’s predicament, between Kohler’s relationship to his experimentees and Coetzee’s relationship to his readers. Like Sultan, the reader is made to *feel* that some sort of experiment has been devised for him by an author.⁵⁸ The reader is not asked to suspend his disbelief, but has posed to him the

⁵⁸ In the archives of the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin are some reading notes that Coetzee made in preparation for the Tanner lectures at Princeton (he gives them the heading “Notes for Princeton Lectures”). Presumably responding to Donald Griffin’s *Question of Animal Awareness*, Coetzee writes: “Re Griffin’s reports on the testing of the ability of apes to use sign systems. The experiments are designed so that no extraneous factors affect the outcome. But there is always an extraneous factor: the

“problem of the opening” (the problem the text presents to the reader), which is the problem of how one is supposed to make sense of an opening such as this one. Sultan knows, and the reader (“we”) knows too: now one is supposed to think. Coetzee’s bananas are representative of the hope we have as readers of making sense of a puzzling passage; the boxes he places before us are our experiences with other books, and the language and ideas given to us in the passage. The opening poses the problem with which it immediately faces the reader: how do I knock together a bridge that will take me from here (what do I think?) to a kind of comprehension that will allow me to make sense of what is to come (*that* is what the experimenter is up to, *that* is what he wants me to do). Like Sultan, we (the readers) are made to feel that someone (Kohler, Coetzee) is testing us, but just what kind of test we are facing we can only guess at. We, perhaps like Sultan, presume that the problem we face can be solved, but of this we cannot be sure. The opening is there not to feed us bananas until we grow fat, but “to spur one to the limits of one’s thinking” (*Elizabeth Costello* 72).

Just as one would expect, Sultan’s diminished freedom is described with the images we have come to expect from Coetzee in his discussions of the field of language:

reality of the test, the presence of the tester behind it. Behind the test is an intention. What is it? The primary thought of the animal is always how to get to where he wants to be, not how to pass the test. The memory of freedom beclouds everything” (“Notes for Princeton Lectures”). We see here that for Coetzee “the presence of the tester” is palpable—it hangs over the experiment; in a different note he comments, “Voice of experimenter is voice of God.” Also, in the phrase “to get to where he wants to be” we have perhaps the earliest echoes of the second paragraph of *Elizabeth Costello*: “We have left behind the territory in which we were. We are in the far territory, where we want to be.” It is very interesting that, in Coetzee’s notes, it is the apes who want to be on the other side—that very desire is taken as more fundamental than the desire to “pass the test. In *Elizabeth Costello*, it is not apes, but readers (and, perhaps, Coetzee) who arrive in the “far territory, where we want to be.”

Although his entire history, from the time his mother was shot and he was *captured*, through to his voyage *in a cage to imprisonment* on this *island prison camp* and the *sadistic games* that are played around food here, leads him to ask questions about the justice of the universe and the place of this *penal colony* in it, a carefully plotted psychological regiment conducts him *away* from ethics and metaphysics towards the humbler reaches of practical reason. And somehow, as he inches through this *labyrinth* of constraint, manipulation, and duplicity, he must realize that on no account dare he give up, for on his shoulders rests the responsibility of representing apedom. The fate of his brothers and sisters may be determined by how well *he performs*. (74-75, italics mine)

This short passage contains practically the entire catalogue of metaphors Coetzee has used to describe the strictures of language: Sultan is captured and imprisoned in a cage, put on an island, placed in a camp, forced to play devilish games, thrown at the mercy of the penal code, released into a labyrinth without a center; he carries the weight of his very species, is entrapped in fate, and forced to “perform” for his captors to earn the salvation of his “brothers and sisters.” The baroque tapestry of metaphors recall the metaphors through which Coetzee has, for so long, understood the problems of language and literature. Sultan, having just emerged into self-consciousness and language, is as imprisoned by language and consciousness as any man or ape could be. Language offers him no freedom; instead, it provides him just enough self-awareness to be aware of the depth of his own unfreedom. Red Peter is slightly more free, and we as readers are more free than Red Peter, but our plights are projected according to the same structures in space and time.

But our fate as readers is far better than the fate of Kohler’s apes because the human being who created our experiment is a poet, and, being a poet, has “a feel for the ape’s experience” (*Elizabeth Costello* 74). Wolfgang Kohler was a “good man but not a poet” (74). The poet, because of his empathy, does not starve readers. Whereas “at every turn Sultan is driven to think the less interesting thought” (73), we as readers are led to

“the purity of speculation.” The freedom of speculation, conjecture, perhaps even play, is, at one level, the thought that the experiment would like us to think. This is a sign of the poet’s humanity: he leads us to think the more interesting thought if he can; he does not lead us only to the conclusions that will bring our torment to an end. The writer’s aspirations for his readers are higher than the scientist’s aspirations for his subjects.

As the writer is enveloped in the field of language, so does he envelop his readers. For Sultan – and for Sultan’s double Red Peter, gifted a language that prevents him from recovering his own nature – the entrance into a world of self-consciousness and language is to enter into a world shocking for how it imprisons us, feeds us without a map through its mazes, tortures us with clever games that we do not understand but that we nonetheless play. For the reader, if the novel is fair, the game will not be humiliating; it is not (to return to the conceptual metaphorical structure) a game designed to play *you*. If the author places the reader into a game, it is a game that must play out in a different spirit from Kohler’s games. The literary game ought to afford some movement, some freedom to move forward and out.

The matter of literature’s relationship to freedom is explored in quite subtle and brilliant ways in the opening of *Elizabeth Costello*: “Let us assume that, however it may have been done, it is done. Let us take it that the bridge is built and crossed, that we can put it out of our minds” (1). Here we have the return of Coetzee’s agentless passive, used to remarkable effect: “However it may have been done, it is done.” It is done, but by whom? Has the reader solved the problem? Has the writer? Has anyone? We do not know. All we are told is that “we have left behind the territory in which we were. We are in the far territory, where we want to be.” But who is this *we*? Is *we* meant to be taken as

including both the author/speaker and the reader?⁵⁹ If that is the case, then (going back to Benveniste and empty signs) the *we* is filled when it is spoken by both the writer-as-speaking subject and the readers, all banded together to make a collective crossing—a crossing made necessary by language itself, which may indeed be the deleted agent.

One possible reading is that Coetzee, in establishing a *we* in which both he and his readers are included, becomes the speaker of the empty pronoun, and thereby enters into the experiment and participates in the experiment along with his readers. The author thinks his way into his creations, quite as Elizabeth Costello claims that she can think her way into the very being of a bat, or into her heroine Molly Bloom, or into “any being with whom I share the substrate of life” (80). Coetzee and Costello can think their way into their experiment not simply through the “sympathetic imagination,” but through language and linguistics itself. Coetzee, taking what he no doubt learned from writing about empty pronouns and the agentless passive, *finds a language fit for exercising the sympathetic imagination*. The sympathetic imagination is bounded by language, and it is the work of the writer to know the language in which empathy is possible. The agentless passive and the empty pronoun become the means by which he, in the opening to *Elizabeth Costello*, constructs the sympathetic imagination.

Finally, there is a game being played in *Elizabeth Costello*, a game to mirror Coetzee’s game and Kohler’s game. Elizabeth Costello’s speech, intentionally or not, provokes in her audience a response to match Sultan’s:

⁵⁹ Much as Coetzee needed to supply firm identities for the pronouns in Achterberg’s poem, the reader of *Elizabeth Costello* must struggle within the unique system of the novel to work out how to “fill” these empty pronouns. The identity of the “we” is not firm, and the brilliance of the opening hinges on the pronouns inviting various possible interpretations.

What am I supposed to think about what you have said? What conclusions am I expected to draw? One audience member poses several questions in confusion: “What wasn’t clear to me...is what you are actually targeting? Are you saying we should close down the factory farms? Are you saying we should stop eating meat?” (81)

After some prodding, Costello answers:

“I have never been much interested in proscriptions, dietary or otherwise. Proscription, laws. I am more interested in what lies behind them. As for Kohler’s experiments, I think he wrote a wonderful book, and the book wouldn’t have been written if he hadn’t thought he was a scientist conducting experiments with chimpanzees. But the book we read isn’t the book he thought he was writing. I am reminded of something Montaigne said: We think we are playing with the cat, but how do we know that the cat isn’t playing with us? I wish I could think the animals in our laboratories are playing with us. But alas, it isn’t so.” (82)

Elizabeth Costello’s answer satisfies nobody. Perhaps, Costello should not be expected to explain herself; perhaps it is foolish to ask for clarification.⁶⁰ But Costello’s contempt for her audience, her brashness, her general unpleasantness, above all *her unwillingness to sympathize with her audience’s confusion and desire to understand what she has in mind*, mark her as someone who violates the very codes of decency and sympathy that she espouses. Costello, when she is nastiest, when her games are the least enjoyable and the least humane, turns her audience into a mass of Sultans, trying to think the right thing and made to feel ashamed of their own pitiful, myopic, beastly responses.

It may be that handling an audience’s sincere desire to know and understand, even when their instinct to know may be to misunderstand the author’s work entirely, should be part of the author’s humanity, part of his ability to enter into and participate in the

⁶⁰ In the Introduction to this dissertation, I address at some length the relationship between the literary critic’s and the novelist’s conception of literature; I also address the importance of developing new ways of putting these two paradigms (these two “language games,” if we wish to invoke Wittgenstein and Lyotard) into conversation. My hope is that this dissertation has begun to develop a framework for discussing and writing about these dual perspectives.

experiments he conducts in his writing. If this is true, it bears not only on *Elizabeth Costello*, but also on Coetzee's responsibilities as a public intellectual. David Attwell has said that the "narrative contract Coetzee creates" in the lectures and stories that make up *Elizabeth Costello* "is simply the latest in a series of efforts to give to fictionality an authority to challenge the demand for public accountability" ("Life and Times" 34). What is in tension here is, on the one hand, the compassionate conclusion that the logic of *Elizabeth Costello* seems to arrive at, and, on the other hand, the importance of not forcing the author into the position of master "decoder" of his own work. The tension is between an audience's desire to understand and an author's desire *to withhold* certain things from his readers. The question is what kind of responsibility a writer has to his readers' "demand for public accountability."

I would argue that Coetzee's fictionalization of Costello/Red Peter/Kohler logically lobbies for a sympathy toward the public's demand for accountability that neither Coetzee nor Costello has ever been able to muster. Just like Costello, Coetzee has struggled to handle his readership's desire for clarification; he has on occasion performed immaturely in interviews and at times avoided empathizing with the range of responses his work engenders. The writer who becomes a public intellectual may be ethically obligated to empathize with the plight of his readers; Elizabeth Costello is unable, but *Elizabeth Costello*, in staging this struggle, may represent an early stage in a process by which Coetzee comes to realize what the logic of his argument entails.

This obligation to sympathize deeply with the reader's inability to understand how writers think and work may be one of the few ethical imperatives that Coetzee has been unable to recognize fully, and has never quite lived up to. It is one of the most

difficult things imaginable for a writer to do because it means exiting the language game of writing and entering into the language game of criticism—this feels like a betrayal, an impossibly poor translation. This is the gulf in thought and method and approach and intuition that the writer feels separates him from his critics—it is also the gulf that much of this dissertation has been trying to address. I have tried to observe the various ways in which a critic's and a novelist's conception of literature can be put into conversation with one another. I have done this by watching *how* Coetzee thinks in his writing as a both a fiction writer and a critic/scholar, and by looking at how he – as a critic – has grappled with these very questions.

As Coetzee has grown older, and has managed (by moving from South Africa to Australia) to avoid forms of censorship no writer could stomach, his responses to the public have become more frequent and thoughtful; he has become more generous with his time. I suspect that Coetzee's newfound candor (an authorized biography is now in bookstores in South Africa), the upswing in public readings, the remarkable generosity with students (he was kind enough to meet with me personally, and read the opening to my novel), are far more than unexplainable eruptions of congeniality. They are Coetzee's way of addressing this particular problem of literature, which is the problem of the author's relationship (as both a novelist and a public figure) to his readers, his critics, his public. It may be that, over the past decade, the character of Elizabeth Costello has undergone a transformation: from Coetzee's female alter-ego to comic parody of Coetzee's bristly former self. Perhaps in his actions and conversations with his eager public, Coetzee will, over the remaining years of his remarkable career, address the

responsibilities that writers of his stature inevitably encounter. As for what this will mean for Coetzee as a novelist, a critic, a scholar, we will have to wait and see.

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