

Introduction:

J.M. Coetzee and His Doubles

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In J.M. Coetzee's most recent novel, *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), the narrator, Señor C, an internationally known writer whose *Strong Opinions* on the state of the world have been solicited for publication, broaches the problem of novelistic authority. Related etymologically to the figure of the "author", authority presents a paradox: whether one wishes to demonstrate one's own or attribute it to another, authority as a particular kind of integrity tends to disintegrate. The author's authority is perhaps nothing more than "a bagful of rhetorical tricks", a species of imposture, as Barthes and Foucault, and Diderot and Sterne before them, had suggested (Coetzee 2007: 149). That possibility notwithstanding, if the author perseveres in his search for an authoritative voice, he discovers that it can be "attained only by opening the poet-self to some higher force, by ceasing to be oneself and beginning to speak vatically" (Coetzee 2007: 151). The price of authority, in other words, is self-nullification: in view of this difficulty, the narrator cites Kierkegaard's admonition – "*Learn to speak without authority*" – and, having in so doing made an authority of the gainsayer of authority, is caught in the kind of absurdity exemplified by the Liar Paradox in which an assertion and its disclaimer coincide (Coetzee 2007: 151). The intention of the present volume is to ask how the phenomenon of doubling in Coetzee's fiction responds to this crisis of authority, as the entire cast of his narrators and characters – and, by implication, also the author – experience it, politically, existentially, and ethically.

The work of two writers predominates in scholarship on J.M. Coetzee. With *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*, Derek Attridge (2004) made a powerful case for reading Coetzee's fiction as an exploration of the literary. Reacting against a critical tradition that has read Coetzee for coded pronouncements about life in South Africa during and after apartheid, Attridge's book, inspired by Levinas, Blanchot and Derrida, emphasises the alterity and singularity of the literary work. By concentrating on the *ethics of reading*, Attridge's book opens an illuminating

dialogue with David Attwell, whose *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (Attwell 1993) had been the standard monograph on Coetzee's fiction. Reading Coetzee in the context of South African currents in literature and politics of the 1970s and 1980s, Attwell argued that his novels be regarded as "situational metafiction" (Attwell 1993: 20). What is at stake between these two scholars is the nature of literature's political inscription. Whereas Attwell writes in a South African tradition of criticism absorbed with how literary works engage with the representation of history, and thus with contending discourses and ideologies, Attridge's interest lies in how a literary work compels its reader to engage with processes of meaning-making that are singular to it. For Attridge, literary works head off the ready assimilation of the good to some form of political militancy, which has over the years been the tendency of a number of Coetzee's critics, not least Nadine Gordimer (1984) in her infamous review of *Life & Times of Michael K*. Scholars who follow in the footsteps of Attwell and Attridge have, like them, to reflect on the basic nature of literature and on how it is political or ethical. They must, in so doing, also come to terms with what it is to be an author.

Neither Attridge nor Attwell, however, nor yet any other critic analysing aspects of Coetzee's work and career – as public intellectual, as a rewriter of the South African pastoral novel, for example – has fully taken stock of the increasingly assertive persona of the author in J.M. Coetzee's fiction, especially since *Elizabeth Costello*, whose eponymous Melbourne writer appears to have anticipated Coetzee's own emigration to Australia in 2002. It was with a view to understanding this development, which has since been newly elaborated in *Diary of a Bad Year*, that we invited scholars to reflect on the subject of J.M. Coetzee and his doubles – which have, if one looks back, proliferated ever since Eugene Dawn's boss, Coetzee, and Jacobus Coetzee made their appearance in *Dusklands*, Coetzee's first published work of fiction.¹ Señor C in *Diary of a Bad Year*, although closest to Coetzee himself in the details of his life and authorship, is only the latest in a line of author doubles: Elizabeth Costello in the novel of that name and in *Slow Man*, Daniel Defoe in *Foe* and in Coetzee's Nobel lecture, Fyodor Dostoevsky in *The Master of Petersburg*, and, of course, the literary scholars Elizabeth Curren in *Age of Iron* and David Lurie in *Disgrace*. We asked speakers to reflect on the following questions: Are J.M. Coetzee's most recent novels a key to his oeuvre as a whole? Can a consideration of the at times uncanny doubling of author figures in Coetzee's work shed light on the literary, ethical, and political questions raised by all of his works, both fictional and critical?

1. The conference "J.M. Coetzee and His Doubles", held at New York University on 27-28 April 2007, was generously sponsored by NYU's Department of Comparative Literature, Africa House, Program in Africana Studies, and Humanities Council.

The contributors to this issue address these questions in different ways. First, by concentrating on Coetzee's practice as a writer of metafiction – of which his play with the persona of the author is part – they uncover the formal complexities generated by the works, especially in the more recent novels, and their generation of ontological indeterminacy: In which world are we? That of the characters, or that of the author? Or might we be, impossibly, in both worlds at once? Essays by Zoë Wicomb, Michael Valdez Moses, Mark Sanders, and Nancy Ruttenburg explore the ethical and political stakes of this ontological indeterminacy. As a novelist, Zoë Wicomb is attuned to the trials of an author faced with a character who does little to generate forward movement in her story, as Elizabeth Costello is with Paul Rayment in *Slow Man*. Drawing astute parallels with the fiction of Italo Calvino and the sculpture of Rachel Whiteread, Wicomb extracts from *Slow Man* a series of lessons in writing and reading. Michael Valdez Moses analyses the multi-generic and protean formal properties of *Elizabeth Costello* in order to illustrate how Coetzee's experiments with literary form constitute a distinctive intervention in contemporary political, philosophical, and aesthetic debates. Mark Sanders explores the complexities of mimesis in Coetzee, discovering in the authorial doubling of Coetzee and Defoe a further doubling of mimesis without an original – which lies at the heart of what, in Coetzee's Nobel lecture, Robinson Crusoe calls “the writing business”. Nancy Ruttenburg examines the ways in which Coetzee's novels stage the usurpation by literary character of the reader's ontological priority, and considers the ethical and existential consequences for readers of a character's “incarnation” through the act of reading.

Second, a cluster of contributions place in a different light Coetzee's relation to South Africa and Africa, and the letters and languages of the country and continent more generally. Shedding light on something that troubles many of Coetzee's readers, David Attwell traces the “idea of Africa” through a number of Coetzee's works, finding that they stage an authorial subject face to face with an awesome, unfathomable, inarticulate Africa. This, Attwell argues, places Coetzee in a tradition of European representations of Africa going back to the Adamastor of Luís Vaz de Camões's *Os Lusíadas*, a figure repeatedly and well-nigh obsessively elaborated in South African letters by Roy Campbell and others, and thus constituting an aesthetic reflex with considerable political implications. Opening an important new area for critical reflection, Rita Barnard dissects the shifting valence in Coetzee's writings of Afrikaans, the language of Coetzee's family, though not of his boyhood home.

Third, a group of essays addresses the question of doubling in a more fundamental way by analysing how Coetzee's fiction and critical writing stage the doubling that is signification itself. In an essay deriving originally from her response to Attwell and Barnard, Carrol Clarkson explores the pragmatics of naming, as well as parallels between Coetzee and Holocaust writer Jean Améry in their preoccupation with the inarticulate cries of the

body in pain that signal the limit of the name. In a survey of Coetzee's oeuvre, Shaun Irlam analyses what he terms "semiophany" – the advent into language and into meaning – which, valuably adding to Attridge's reading of the *arrivant* in *Age of Iron* and *The Master of Petersburg* (Attridge 2004: 91-137), he relates to the figure of the angel that appears in various guises throughout Coetzee's oeuvre. Of this quasi-messianic advent, the doubling of the author figure is only a specific case.

At the conclusion of *Diary of a Bad Year*, Coetzee's narrator returns to the possibility of novelistic authority. He cites Tolstoy and Dostoevsky as having uniquely set "before us with such indisputable certainty the standards toward which any serious novelist must toil". If novelist-authorities exist, then surely the great Russian writers are models by whose "example one becomes a better artist", and the narrator ends with this Melvillean proclamation: "They annihilate one's impurer pretensions; they clear one's eyesight; they fortify one's arm" (Coetzee 2007: 227). But these Russian models do not finally retain their authority untarnished (any more than the narrator has the last word of the *Diary*). Instead, it dissipates in the final, insubstantial musings of Anya, the narrator's erstwhile secretary who calls him Señor C behind his back (shorthand for Senior Citizen), and whose far less weighty thoughts and speech – both as he imagines them and as she seemingly represents them – are juxtaposed with his on every page in three stacked panels of text. Thus we hear the Russian model differently but simultaneously invoked in Anya's closing allusion to having modelled "nightwear" on www.sunseasleep.com.au, as well as in her suggestion, as she imagines herself serving as Señor C's last caretaker and the custodian of his posthumous reputation, that he has a weakness for a pornographic publication entitled *Russian Dolls* (Coetzee 2007: 223, 226). But if the mechanical doubleness of crosscut thoughts shreds its authority on every page, and in so doing threatens to undermine the concept or dream of literary authority altogether, the doubling of characters across novels seems to hold out the possibility of some partial restoration.

Consider, for example, the ways in which Anya plays Dostoevsky's novice Alyosha Karamazov to Señor C's anguished intellectual Ivan (Anya's jealous boyfriend facetiously dubs the older man "Juan"). Anya – or more accurately, Señor C's initial sight of her "angelic" bottom as she "waggles" it before him clad in a brief, tomato-red shift – causes the older man "a metaphysical ache", though she has no real intention or desire to win him over (Coetzee 2007: 7, 8). When, later in the novel, she comes to apologise to him for the boorish behaviour of her unapologetic boyfriend, she provides the occasion for Señor C to observe that, if only "as a matter of semantics", one cannot apologise for an unrepentant other (Coetzee 2007: 169). (Anya responds to this reasoning with a shrug; she merely came to apologise.) At the end of the novel, having maintained a correspondence with Señor C after her removal from Sydney to her mother's house in

Queensland, she imagines bestowing on him what in the final analysis he has deserved: “a kiss on the brow, a proper kiss, just to remind him of what he is leaving behind” as he dies (Coetzee 2007: 227). The closing kiss and the opening wobble both serve to remind the narrator of what he can’t have, of everything that eludes him. In all these ways, although it seems unlikely, Anya prepares for, by contextualising, the narrator’s closing paean to “Mother Russia” in general and to Dostoevsky in particular as literary authority. At the end of the *Diary*, Señor C finds himself “sobbing uncontrollably” on rereading that section of *The Brothers Karamazov* in which Ivan confesses to Alyosha his enduring resistance to “all higher harmony” despite his belief in God, to which he also confesses (Coetzee 2007: 223; Dostoevsky [1880]1991: 245). Ivan insists on returning his ticket to paradise on the grounds that, as far as his “Euclidean” mind can determine, no one has the right to forgive (or in Señor C’s version, atone for) another’s evil: all substitutions – all doubles – are illegitimate (Dostoevsky [1880]1991: 245). As Dostoevsky himself had established in his early novella *The Double*, the structure of doubling, as vicariousness, is inherently sacrificial.

In response, Alyosha silently kisses Ivan, just as Jesus had kissed the Grand Inquisitor in Ivan’s poem of that name: “That is the whole answer” (Dostoevsky [1880]1991: 262). And in response to that gesture, “‘Literary theft!’ Ivan cried, suddenly going into some kind of rapture. ‘You stole that from my poem!’” (Dostoevsky [1880]1991: 263). Literary doubleness – the tragedy and rapture, and tawdriness too, of Coetzee’s doubles – remains unconcluded and is perhaps never to be. Vicariousness – a particular kind of constraint which describes both the structure of the novel and the way we think of one another – prevails. Literature remains unconverted to the truth of the Word, though at its best it hovers on the verge of the highest harmony, where, at least so Señor C insists, the voices of characters and readers “really” do converge (Coetzee 2007: 226).

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