The Writing Business: "He and His Man", Coetzee and Defoe

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Summary

This article explores the complexities of mimesis in J.M. Coetzee's Nobel lecture, "He and His Man", discovering in the authorial doubling of Coetzee and Defoe, and of Defoe and Robinson Crusoe, a further doubling of mimesis without an original – which lies at the heart of what, in Coetzee's lecture, Robinson Crusoe calls "the writing business".

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel verken die ingewikkeldheid van mimesis in J.M. Coetzee se Nobelpryslesing "He and His Man" en onthul in die verdubbeling as skrywers van Coetzee en Defoe, en van Defoe en Robinson Crusoe, nog 'n verdubbeling – dié van 'n mimesis sonder iets wat nageboots word. Hierdie mimesis is die kern van dít wat in Coetzee se lesing deur Robinson Crusoe "die skryfbesigheid" ("the writing business") genoem word.

"You came to me. You –"
"*I* came to *you*? *You* came to *me*!"
(*Slow Man*, Coetzee 2005: 85)

At the end of a preface to a recent edition of *Robinson Crusoe*, J.M. Coetzee appeals Hippolyte Taine's verdict on Defoe that "[h]is imagination was that of a man of business, not of an artist" (Coetzee 2001: 22). Taine's man is a man of business. He has his man, or so he thinks. The very words Taine uses, unfortunately for him, allow Defoe to elude him. He has not measured his words well enough; and in that his man would also have been his better. Coetzee's man is a "business man", which is not to say, or not quite to say, a "man of business", or at least not to say what Taine wishes to say. His man is not his man. (The ambiguity of these pronouns – one subject, two or

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more? – will be a constant in all that takes place in the texts before us: a conversation among doubles, which is what we have in view,[1] is that possible?) There is a remainder. Coetzee says that what Taine says is true enough – *but*. Two *buts* Coetzee enters. Objections not to the content of Taine's verdict, as much as to his restriction of the scope of a term to a single, negative, sense; and thus, of course, also to its content. Coetzee says yes to "business" in order to say that there is more to it – *mais*, *magis* – and thus more to his man: "He is indeed, as Taine says, a businessman; *but* a businessman trading in words and ideas, with a businessman's clear sense of what each word or idea weighs, how much it is worth. As a thinker he may not be original, *but* his mind is acute and curious about life in all its aspects" (Coetzee 2001: 22; my italics).

Coetzee's affirmations make room for economy, for an economy. One may indeed write for money, as Defoe did for a great number of years. And one's writing may reveal an eye for commerce, trade, and speculation. All of Defoe's works evidence such an eye. There is, however, as Coetzee insists, another sense in which writing may be a business. Words and ideas, as much as material goods, may be weighed and valued. One may measure ill or well. In making room for economy, for an economy of words and ideas, Coetzee also makes room for Defoe – as the one weighing and measuring; as the one who eludes Taine's verdict, Taine's investment – now *he* is the speculator "man of business" – of a word with an eye to a definite return – the return, in effect, of his man. What happens when the speculator is disappointed – or when, as he may not realise at once, he receives somewhat more than he bargained for?

The word "business" gathers economic and other senses when it resurfaces in "He and His Man", J.M. Coetzee's 2003 Nobel lecture. In this fiction of just a few pages – one dare not call the work short, for it leaves out nothing – a character, who from certain signs we take to be Robinson Crusoe, receives reports from a character to whom he refers as "his man". This "man" is not "my man Friday", as the epigraph to Coetzee's lecture could lead us to expect, but, as it would appear from episodes in his man's reports that are also found in *A Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain* and *A Journal of the Plague Year*, none other than Daniel Defoe – although for Robinson he is "this nameless fellow" (Coetzee 2004: 19). His man, we discover, is manufactured in Crusoe's imagination. Alone in Bristol, "[i]n the evening by candlelight he will take out his papers and sharpen his quills and write a page or two of his man" (Coetzee 2004: 7). Character has exchanged places with author. The pathos of this displacement – and thus of Coetzee's lecture

1. This essay was first presented as a paper at "J.M. Coetzee and His Doubles", a conference held at New York University on 27-28 April 2007. It was subsequently presented before the University of Cape Town Coetzee Collective on 20 May 2008, an opportunity for thought-provoking conversation owed to the kind invitation of Carrol Clarkson.

– lies in the fact that Robinson Crusoe writes out of solitude. He does so not simply in order to relieve that solitude – which his late wife and parrot did not, though Friday might have (Coetzee 2004: 6). Rather, in a strange tension that threatens to undo the figures both of character and author when it must preserve them intact, he writes in order to find companionship *in* solitude – or, perhaps better put, solitude *in* companionship.

This is where the words "busy" and "business" begin to accumulate meanings and shades of meaning not traceable etymologically much farther back than the Dutch (which is also the Afrikaans) *besig*. "Busy" and "business" are, perhaps because of their independence from older roots, words which, at their most idiomatic, collect heterogeneous elements, blurring limits among classical distinctions – among, say, *energeia*, *oikonomia* – and, as I shall show, in a sense not confined to the business of writing alone, *mimesis*.

Thus when Coetzee's text opens with its epigraph from *Robinson Crusoe*, it is from a passage in which the business that Crusoe makes his business is the business of making Friday speak: "But to return to my new companion. I was greatly delighted with him, and made it my business to teach him everything that was proper to make him useful, handy, and helpful; but especially to make him speak, and understand me when I spoke; and he was the aptest scholar there ever was" (Coetzee 2004: 1). Another *but*, and here a "but especially", signalling a capacity in addition to and in excess of "his man" being "useful, handy, and helpful". In Defoe's novel, the paragraph continues with Crusoe declaring that Friday pleased him so much that "could I but have been safe from more Savages, I cared not, if I was never to remove from the place while I lived" (Defoe [1719]1975: 164). Without Friday, who is killed in Defoe's sequel by "savages" off Brazil – a "loss of my old servant, the companion of all my sorrows and solitudes" (Defoe [1719]1905: 179) – Crusoe makes it his business, one might say makes it his business *again*, to invent "his man" in order to ensure a companion in isolation – and, as we learn from Coetzee, to sustain a certain isolation in companionship. But why is *Defoe* "his man?" What motivates the reversal of character and author?

A great deal – as any student of Defoe might tell us. The character of Robinson Crusoe has, if we take the books at their word, always been the author of his adventures – which were published, from the outset, as "written by himself". As Coetzee's preface to *Robinson Crusoe* informs us, the first volume of Crusoe's "pretended history" in 1719 was rapidly followed by *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, and then, in 1720, by *Serious Reflections during the Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe: With His Vision of the Angelic World*.

In his "*Serious Reflections*", Coetzee notes:

> [T]he author of the earlier volumes finds it necessary to defend himself against charges that his life story is made up, that it is simply a romance, that

> he is not even a real person. "I Robinson Crusoe", he writes in his preface, "do affirm that the story, though allegorical, is also historical .... Further, that there is a man alive, and well known too, the actions of whose life are the just subject of these three volumes, and to whom all or most part of the story most directly alludes ... and to this I set my name."
>
> (Coetzee 2001: 17-18)

Coetzee considers two possible meanings of the signature "Robinson Crusoe", both of which have had their precedent in Defoe scholarship. The first is that, "beyond ... the … autobiographical charade", for readers of Defoe's time "Crusoe is Everyman, that every man is an island, and every life, seen in an allegorical light, a life of isolation under the scrutiny of God" (Coetzee 2001: 18). The second meaning, "personal and even confessional", has Crusoe merge with Defoe. Solitude is the condition they share: in London, on the island (Coetzee 2001: 18).[2] Coetzee favours the second interpretation, only to drop the train of thought it sets afoot, and, like Elizabeth Costello when she is called upon to lecture (Coetzee 2003: 1-34), to discourse for much of the rest of the preface on the emergence of fictional realism.

"He and His Man" is where Coetzee takes up the train of thought again. There he honours Robinson Crusoe's claim in *Serious Reflections* that "there is a man alive ... the actions of whose life are the just subject of the ... three volumes". If, for Edgar Allan Poe, who lauds the artifice that renders Defoe the author invisible, "Defoe has none of their thoughts – Robinson all" (quoted in Coetzee 2001: 18), and, like the boy Coetzee (see Attridge 2004: 199), one might easily imagine Crusoe as being what he claimed to be – the author of his history – one might as easily imagine him to be the author of Defoe (which in some sense he is, since who or what would Defoe be to us without Robinson Crusoe?). And this is what Coetzee does. In *Serious Reflections* Robinson Crusoe describes his "island life" as an allegory for, and thus necessarily the *history* of, his solitude. To this we add the suspicion, entertained by Coetzee and others, that Crusoe's life is also an allegory of Defoe's. Having done so, we make out a reason why in "He and His Man", Crusoe writes pages of a solitary and unfortunate writer of reports, whose productions we know to be those of Defoe, and whose solitude and misfortune are, in a reversal of the *Serious Reflections*, "a figure of the shipwreck and the island where he, poor Robin, was secluded from the world for twenty-six years, till he almost went mad" (Coetzee 2004: 9). It is Robinson Crusoe's plea to be "a man alive" – which is another way of interpreting the claim of the *Serious Reflections* that "there is a man alive" – that motivates displacement of author by character. This displacement, of course, always threatens to be undone by making character into allegory of

2. The relevant passage in *Serious Reflections* is not in the preface but in the first chapter, "Of Solitude" (Defoe [1720]1905: 6).

author – which is apparent as much in the idea that Robinson Crusoe (island) is a figure for Robinson Crusoe (solitude), or Robinson Crusoe (island) is a figure for Defoe (solitude), as in the staging in "He and His Man" of "Defoe" (solitude) as a figure for Robinson Crusoe (island). If this is how things work, then are we simply within a closed circuit in which allegory functions as a stable and constant current, and, depending on how the switch is flipped, alternately charges the poles "Robinson Crusoe" and "Daniel Defoe", so that one lights up and then the other? That would make of "He and His Man" a child's plaything, when I believe, it is, as was the mystic writing pad for Freud, a toy and not a toy. Or more than a toy, once you begin to learn how to play with it, or learn how it plays with you.

More. More to it. More to his man. "A man of business, he thinks to himself. Let him be a man of business" (Coetzee 2004: 8). Thus, in "He and His Man", is Robinson Crusoe led to imagine "his man". Whose words are these? Those of Hyppolite Taine, of course. – Of course not. – Then of one of his doubles? Will the character or "voice" that the writer writes writing to him obey the rules of the allegory, or of allegory? Of course. And of course not. For even if an allegory is thought to be a faithful mirror of the self in the other – a double – and this is the sense of allegory on which Crusoe relies, believing that he knows the rule of conversion that makes other an image of self, and can thus calculate in a closed economy, there is also the sense in which the alterity of the *all-egory* is unceasing – that there is always another word *to be* said. As Elizabeth Chandos, for whom the mirror is shattered, writes: "*[a]lways it is not what I say but something else*" (Coetzee 2003: 228).[3]

I would like to think of this other word not as a word that *is* said, or *will have been* said, but one that is *withheld.* So the image of a mirroring mise en scène is not quite right. Rather, may one not speak of a suspension of the rule of conversion of one thing into another or allegation of various things into a third, of an unknown that renders the calculation incomplete, or an anomaly that makes the current of allegoresis come and go? His man is a man of business but his business is something other than the making of money – as Crusoe has with his book (Coetzee 2004: 6). What allows Robinson Crusoe to re-enter in "He and His Man" would also allow "his man" to come in, despite his author's tendency to find in his productions only an allegory of his own travails. (At the risk of ambiguity, in the interests of economy I allow the pronouns to do double duty.) If this is also an allegory, or *all-egory*, then it is not one in which the other assumes full presence in speech. "His man" enters in silence, holding his silence, in secret.

3. The passage in which this sentence appears is central to Gareth Cornwell's astute reading of allegory and catachresis in "He and His Man" (Cornwell 2007: esp. 109-111).

As much is apparent when Crusoe wonders, in a striking parenthesis, about a "poor afflicted man", and another who reminds him of his own desolation, who appear in his man's reports (here drawn by Coetzee from *A Journal of the Plague Year* (Defoe [1722]1966: 175-176, 124)). "But of what else does he secretly sing, he wonders to himself, this poor afflicted man of whom he reads, besides his desolation? What is he calling, across the waters and across the years, out of his private fire?" (Coetzee 2004: 12). Another man, this man with a secret that he keeps. And yet another, Robinson also this time – if I am justified in my construal of the "he" in the second of his questions – with a fire that remains private, privy probably not even to himself.

The alternation of author and double that is not, or not quite, a double is, viewed one way, the miracle of literary creation – the miracle of mimesis without original. The idea that mimesis takes place without a mimed original emerges with force in Jacques Derrida's explication of a text by Mallarmé in "The Double Session", in the course of which he analyses some of Plato's texts on mimesis. There Derrida relates mimesis to memory, observing that in Plato's *Philebus*, writing and painting, by their common structure, "both partake of *mneme* and *mimesis*, of *mneme* precisely by dint of participating in *mimesis*. Within the movement of *mimeisthai*, the relation of the mime to the mimed, of the reproducer to the reproduced, is always a relation to a *past present*". When "Socrates wonders whether it would be out of the question to think that *grammata* and *zographemata* might have a relation to the future", Derrida continues, "[t]he difficulty lies in conceiving that what is imitated could be still to come with respect to what imitates, that the image can precede the model, that the double can come before the simple" (Derrida [1972]1981: 190).

To Derrida's meditations on mimesis and its originary doubling, we can add that the act of writing produces not only the speaking of the other – allegory as other's speech – but also a silence in that speaking: a secret. But because it is produced in a mimesis without original, this secret cannot, in all rigour, be opposed to a speaking or disclosure of something (especially not something that could be found to be either true or false). Its status is not clear. It doubles and it does not double. That is why I am using the word "miracle" – or why the word came to me.

Robinson Crusoe, in "He and His Man", is witness to this miracle. It is to him the miracle of "the writing business" (Coetzee 2004: 18). As Derek Attridge rightly points out, Coetzee's lecture explores "the strange process of fictional writing: the self-division it necessitates, the uncertain origins of the words that one finds oneself writing, the haunting illusion ... that there is an unbridgeable distance between the person who lives in the world and the person, or impersonal force, that produces the words" (Attridge 2004: 200). The miracle occurs to Crusoe by several signs. One of them is that "his man"

writes "as well as or better than his master", uses phrases that he would not, and displays knowledge that he does not possess:

> Even at his best, his island parrot, the better loved of the two, spoke no word he was not taught to speak by his master. How then has it come about that this man of his, who is a kind of parrot and not much loved, writes as well as or better than his master? For he wields an able pen, this man of his, no doubt of that. *Like charging Death himself on his pale horse*. His own skill, learned in the counting house, was in making tallies and accounts, not in turning phrases. *Death himself on his pale horse*: those are words he would not think of. Only when he yields himself up to this man of his do such words come.
>
> And decoy ducks, or duckoys: What did he, Robinson, know of decoy ducks? Nothing at all, until this man of his began sending in reports.
>
> (Coetzee 2004: 15)

I shall come to the duckoys and decoy ducks. Again – and here, once more, his man's phrase is from *A Journal of the Plague Year* (Defoe [1722]1966: 245), where Defoe's narrator *is* a merchant – there is more to his man than his being a "man of business". And more than business, if business be confined to money-making, to the "writing business". "His man" is the better man, a better man than his master when it comes to the writing business. But how is that – if he is the creature of his master? If he is, in a sense, none other than his master? Or slave to his master? (see Coetzee 2004: 18).

Are these not the questions that have been asked about Friday as "his man" for some time? They were staged with full force in *Foe*, where Friday, apparently tongueless, is "by art" to be "give[n] a voice" (Coetzee 1987: 118), so that his account of the island may supplement the one fashioned by Crusoe and Susan Barton, the "female castaway". Friday holds his silence. That his silence keeps a secret is strongly suggested when he rubs out with his hand what he has written on a slate (Coetzee 1987: 147). So many pages of critical analysis have been driven by the wish to have "Friday" – let him be a metonymy for a multitude – "talk back". The wish willy-nilly reproduces the act of "giv[ing] voice" – of, as in Defoe's novel, and in the epigraph to Coetzee's lecture, "mak[ing] him speak". Perhaps the secret that Friday keeps in *Foe*, so well explored by Spivak (1991) in "Theory in the Margin", suggests an alternate paradigm. In this paradigm of the "secret", because a mimesis without original is acknowledged, the possibility of a counterdiscourse is generalised rather than restricted to one or a few voices. The implications would be profound for commentators on South African or Latin American testimony, for example, who deplore the "appropriation" of a given witness's story by a writer or even a truth commission. There would, on the one hand, always be an unappropriated remainder (poor translation and editorial selectivity would be only two examples of how this law of citation operates in the narrow sense). On the other hand, can one not also

say that the very possibility of having a story that one can call one's "own" – even if that is held to be different from the one "appropriated" – will have depended on this mimetic relay, this repetition that is, strictly speaking, or at least in its conditions of possibility, a repetition without an original?

If the writing business can be a money-maker – and those who accuse writers of appropriating the stories of others are often quick to accuse them of trying to make a fast buck – it is also a *business* implicated in an economy of a more general sort, in which the return may be withheld (from Taine) or defy tally (by Robinson Crusoe in "He and His Man"). In each case, the business produces a secret. Robinson Crusoe and "his man" remain strangers, co-workers in the rigging of vessels sailing in opposite directions (Coetzee 2004: 19). Coetzee's tale ends with this image of mutual toil, "close enough to hail ... too *busy* even to wave" (Coetzee 2004: 19; my italics). The miracle of writing – the unappropriable secret produced through mimesis without mimed original – is returned to the sphere of labour. "Business" as busi-ness: *energeia*. But there is another "business" going on, that has been going on, and going on all along. If we are left at the end of the lecture in wonder at "the strange process of fictional writing" (Attridge 2004: 200), then this ought not to make us forget the beginning of Coetzee's tale – where secrecy is allied with guile.

I allude to his man's report of the duckoys of the Lincolnshire fens with which the tale opens. Coetzee draws nearly verbatim from Defoe's *Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain*. In Defoe's remarkable description, the trained decoy ducks "entice and then betray their Fellow-Ducks" (Defoe [1724-1726]1968: 2: 497) with fictions – or "Representations, made in their own Duck Language" – of the bounty of England, attracting them across the sea from Holland and Germany with their tales. They "fail not to let them know, in a form of language which they make them understand, that in England ... ducks have seashores full of nourishing food, tides that flow freely up the creeks; they have lakes, springs, open ponds and sheltered ponds; also lands full of corn left behind by the gleaners; and no frost or snow, or very light" (Coetzee 2004: 2, cf. Defoe [1724-1726]1968: 2: 497). At the duckoy, the pond so arranged by the "decoy-men" as to entrap the foreign waterfowl, the decoy ducks' accomplice is a dog "who [being] perfectly taught his Business, rushes from behind the Reeds, and jumps into the Water, swimming directly after the Ducks, and (terribly to them) Barking as he swims" (Defoe [1724-1726]1968: 2: 499; cf. Coetzee 2004: 3). Feigning immediate threat, the dog's business is the business of driving birds into the nets of the "Decoy-man". To double business bound. Business is the business of subterfuge, and also of the butchery and dressing for sale of game birds for the London table. The decoy ducks who purvey their fictions are, in Defoe's text, described as "Traytors" (Defoe [1724-1726] 1968: 2: 499). This is a striking opening for the Nobel lecture in literature: fiction as deception and betrayal, genocidal betrayal, the beguiling in droves of fellow

living creatures with a view, judging from Defoe's figures, to highly profitable commercial slaughter. "[C]lubbed on the spot and plucked and sold by the hundred and by the thousand" is Coetzee's adaptation (Coetzee 2004: 4; cf. Defoe [1724-1726]1968: 2: 496-497). Before us is a precursor to the factory farming against which Elizabeth Costello (Coetzee 2003: 59-90) – and lately, in propria persona, J.M. Coetzee (2007) – rails. Another economy, another business. "Business", however, is a word that Coetzee elides when he introduces the "perfectly trained" "decoy dog" (Coetzee 2004: 3). Perhaps this is because it is a placeholder for too much – *energeia*, *oikonomia*, *mimesis* – with no closing of the circle in sight. The decoy duck or decoy-man's dog has its secret – which is not *its* secret, if it is "trained". Its representation of bounty and threat is, in a profound way, an example of mimesis without mimed original.

J.M. Coetzee has justly been celebrated by Derek Attridge, Michael Marais and others for figuring an ethics that commends an openness, a hospitality, to the other, to the event, and thus an ethics of reading resistant to allegory. But, as Attridge keeps suggesting (2004: 200, 203), perhaps this leaves out of account something else for which Coetzee ought to be celebrated – namely, his insistence that the writer also has the capacity to deceive, and to be deceived. Not to lie, simply, or to be lied to, although those are certainly possibilities – but to be inhabited, "possessed", by something that, when it speaks and speaks otherwise, speaks in order to mislead or seduce. The writer's daemon vies with the "demonic",[4] as is dramatised in the lesson on "The Problem of Evil" in *Elizabeth Costello* (Coetzee 2003: 156-182) and in *The Master of Petersburg* – where Dostoevsky, the master writer, realises that he is "far from being a master" (Coetzee 1994: 141).[5] *But*: *Mais* – *magis* – *magister*. The man is more than his man. The man is, as in the tale by Dostoevsky that gave us the notion of the "double", master of his master. A mimetic rivalry without end and without origin.[6]

If the writer is – and Coetzee critics inspired by Levinas and Derrida are surely correct – a figure of responsibility because of his or her unconditional hospitality to the other, there is, however, also a real sense in which the writer's doubles are responsible to nobody. Not even to him or to her, perhaps least of all to him or to her. They are in a radical sense irreducible to an allegory of any kind. They are also absolutely heterogeneous to responsibility. They expose a radical dissymmetry in any ethics of writing and reading. Commenting on the "authorisation to say everything" granted

4. See also Coetzee 1996: 232.

5. For more on demonic doubling in *The Master of Petersburg*, see Watson 1994.

6. See *Giving Offense* (Coetzee 1996: 90-93) for Coetzee's use of Girard's notion of mimetic rivalry and mimetic violence.

by literature as an institution, Derrida writes that "this authorisation ... paradoxically constitutes the author qua author as not responsible [*non responsable*] before anyone, even before himself for what is said and done, for example, by the persons or characters of his works, and thus for what he is supposed to have written himself" (Derrida 1993: 66).[7] This "right to absolute non-response" is also a right to the secret (Derrida 1993: 66-67). A crucial question, of course, is whether literature as an authorising institution *produces* this dissymmetry, or whether, being a historically determinate way of managing (or "experiencing") aporias of mimesis, it merely *reveals* or *repeats* it (insofar as such a repetition is not itself "originary", a trace structure, partaking of mimesis without mimed original).

It is tempting to want to distil all of this into a fable about literature, democracy, and the meaning of censorship. Once one has done that, however, what remains? What remains is the pathos – and it signals another path of thought. When all is said and done, is the epigraph to "He and His Man" not a reminder that the radical non-responsibility and duplicities of mimesis might just stem from aloneness, the need for companionship in isolation, the desire for solitude in companionship? Indeed the decoy ducks, as Defoe represents them, treacherously promise their "foreign Guests" a boon companionship and promised land: "and that if they will please but to go with them into *England*, they shall share with them in all these good Things" (Defoe [1724-1726]1968: 2: 498,497). And even Derrida himself, as he enters into the ethico-political implications of secrecy and non-responsibility, contemplates having to withdraw to an island, and considers the sort of books he would want to take with him (Derrida 1993: 64). Is the impossible need (for companionship in isolation) and desire (for isolation in companionship) perhaps what drives everything – not only the hunger for the story, but everything else that follows in all its equivocality – ethically, politically, we so easily say, but what are ethics and politics? – everything that follows from the non-responsibility of the secret, and of mimesis without original? The equivocality condensed in "his man" – Crusoe's companion, but, as it was in the English of Defoe's time, also his servant, and, we learn from Coetzee, also the demon, the servant who can in turn become one's master – implies a violence that, as much as it may have no identifiable source, is surely irreducible. Is it perhaps for this business, a business that is everything and nothing, nothing and everything, that J.M. Coetzee received his prize? If it is, Coetzee's report before the Swedish Academy, which at once pursues this business and renders an account of it, registers at once his indisputable deserving and the profound irony of the honour.

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7. Derrida's comment converges with an avowal made by Coetzee in *Doubling the Point*: "The *feel* of writing fiction is one of freedom, of irresponsibility, or better, of responsibility toward something that has not yet emerged, that lies somewhere at the end of the road" (Coetzee 1992: 246).

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