

# Double Entendre: Listening for Angels

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## Summary

This article is an interpretation of the figure of the double across several of J.M. Coetzee's works. It argues that the double serves principally as a metaphor for meaning and investigates the way in which Coetzee's works position themselves on the threshold of meaning, exploring how literary characters enter into, or remain excluded from, a world of discourse and representation. The peculiar and paradoxical narrative space Coetzee creates is one peopled by lives without stories, one where "life" and "story" or "meaning" seem to be mutually exclusive categories. Coetzee explores how lives ostensibly outside meaning become storied. This advent of meaning, or passage into meaning, I suggest, is also a metonymy for the passage of extradiscursive and extraliterary characters into history, into literature and into truth. By positioning his characters at the boundaries of meaning, and interrogating the "conditions of messengerhood", Coetzee is able to express his ambivalence about the success or even the possibility of such passages.

## Opsomming

Hierdie artikel verskaf 'n interpretasie van die figuur van die dubbelganger in verskeie werke deur J.M. Coetzee. Dit word betoog dat die dubbelganger hoofsaaklik 'n soort beeldspraak vir betekenis is. Ek kyk hoe die werke van Coetzee 'n plek inneem op die drempel van betekenis, en hoe letterkundige karakters ingesluit word in of miskien selfs uitgesluit word van 'n wêreld van diskoers en voorstelling. Die snaakse en paradoksale verhaalruimte wat Coetzee skep word 'n ruimte bevolk deur lewens sonder storie, 'n ruimte waar "lewe" en "verhaal" of juis "betekenis" as onveroenigbare toestande beskou word. Coetzee ondersoek presies hoe die wat oënskynlik buite betekenis woon, wel betekenis word. Hierdie aankoms van, of deurvaart na, betekenis dien ook as metonimie vir die deurvaart van ekstradiskoersiewe en buiteliterêre karakters na geskiedenis, literatuur en waarheid. Deur die plasing van sy karakters op die grense van betekenis en deur die ondersoek na die "omstandighede van boodskapperij" kan Coetzee sy ambivalensie uitspreek oor die vervulling of selfs die moontlikheid van sulke vaarte.

Nah ist/ Und schwer zu fassen der Gott. Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst/ Das Rettende auch.

(Close God is, yet hard to grasp/

But where danger dwells/ The redemptive blossoms, too)

(Friedrich Hölderlin, "Patmos")

[W]e are not made for revelation, I want to cry out ...

revelation that sears the eye like staring into the sun.

(Coetzee 2003: 229)

Every angel is terrible, Rilke cautions. This seems particularly true of the annunciations and enunciations of the double in J.M. Coetzee's work. Although Coetzee says, "I am not a herald of community or anything else", the rumour and rustle of angels seems to be everywhere (Coetzee 1992: 341). Coetzee's interrogations of doubling, and specifically of redoubling a world of referents/reference within an order of signification, have repercussions that echo everywhere among Coetzee and his doubles, and condition interpretations of the relationship between Coetzee and his doubles. This essay proposes an interpretation of the double itself as a metaphor for meaning. Coetzee's work has always played a lively *fort-da* game with the figure of the double, as well as the idioms of epiphany and revelation through which the double is evoked. His work both summons and disowns it, doubling and doubting. While doubt and double share a common etymology – doubt is what Coetzee literally calls "double thought" in his essay on confession – I pair them only to suggest that doubt is the foe of doubling, at odds with doubling and always threatening to undermine it (Coetzee 1992: 282 et passim). A career to double business bound also turns out to be a career bound to doubtful business as Elizabeth Costello intimates in the short story "As a Woman Grows Older": "[T]he life I have followed looks misconceived from beginning to end, and not in a particularly interesting way either. If one truly wants to be a better person, it now seems to me, there must be less roundabout ways of getting there than by darkening thousands of pages with prose" (Coetzee 2004a).

This essay, then, explores the advent or (be)coming-of-meaning as well as its vicissitudes in Coetzee's works, works that thematically double the very process that any "speech act" is about, namely, expressing meaning. But to speak of meaning as coming or becoming also raises the issue of advent: the arrival of the double and the states of anticipation that attend arrival. In Coetzee's work, the (be)coming of meaning, or coming-to-meaning is a process that draws on the idiom and imagery of the messianic, the epiphanic, the revelatory, yet deferring its revelations, declining its authority and brooding instead on the "conditions of messengerhood" (Coetzee 1992: 340). Mike Nicol (1995) dubbed South Africa the "waiting country" on the eve of the 1994 elections; it is no surprise then that Coetzee should have

become the poet of expectation for a nation and a generation that waited so anxiously to see what the future would bring and how it would be delivered from its colonial and racist past.

Coetzee's work persistently thinks the question of meaning through the figure of the double and thinks the double in the idiom of the angel; I shall follow this link between doubling and annunciation. The idiom of epiphany frames both the process of being doubled in the passage from silence to speech as well as any "negative illumination" arising from the failure of meaning (Coetzee 1992: 367). What, then, has doubling to do with soteriology and with the messianic in Coetzee's work? I want to reconstruct the pathway from the question of the double, through writing and representation to annunciation and soteriology, or what might prove to be negative soteriology.

We might start with Coetzee's famous comment about writing and *autre*biography, with its echo of Rimbaud's motto, "*je est un autre*", suggesting that writing/doubling the self is always a form of self-estrangement (Coetzee 1992: 394). In the same interview, Coetzee teasingly remarked, "All autobiography is storytelling, all writing is autobiography"; a comment that, if taken at face value, invites us to approach all of Coetzee's texts as doublings of the author *autrement*: one could dwell on the doubling of the word *author* in the words *autre* and *iter* (Coetzee 1992: 391).<sup>1</sup> As Magda has told us in *In the Heart of the Country*, "Words alienate" (Coetzee [1977]1982: 26). The second quotation we should explore comes from Magda's broodings:

There was a time when I imagined that if I talked long enough it would be revealed to me what it means to be an angry spinster in the heart of nowhere. But ... I find none of that heady expansion into the as-if that marks the beginning of a true double life. Aching to form the words that will translate me into the land of myth and hero, here I am still my dowdy self in a dull summer heat that will not transcend itself .... Is it merely a vision of a second existence passionate enough to carry me from the mundane of being into the doubleness of signification? I am a miserable black virgin, and my story is my story even if it is a dull black blind stupid miserable story, ignorant of its meaning.

(Coetzee [1977]1982: 4)

Doubling ushers us specifically towards "the doubleness of signification" ..., to "the land of myth and hero"; to self-transcendence, or rather, to the salvaging and salvation of the self as Story, Meaning, History, Literature; to the translation, or transfiguration, of the narrating subject – through the intersection of the mundane and the messianic – into memory and historical

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1. In "Signature Event Context" Derrida speculated on the possibility that "*iter*" is etymologically related to the Sanskrit *itara*, meaning other (Derrida: 1982: 315).

being, into immortality, and finally, into Truth. Yet all this promise is pointedly kept from Magda; her insight yields no vision, just an interminable iteration of “the dull black blind stupid miserable story, ignorant of its meaning”. The overarching irony is that, while Magda imagines herself to stand outside history, ignorant of its meaning – in her phrase, a “castaway of history” (Coetzee [1977]1982: 135) – we as readers encountering this fictive being in a signifying text read her as nothing but a cluster of meaning. In a structure resembling the Moebius strip, the text stages an inside and outside of textuality that remains inside the text.

What this passage from *In the Heart of the Country* reveals is the peculiar narrative space that Coetzee’s novels stake out: characters within the told tale imagine that they stand beyond story, barred from the realm of signification, “the land of myth and hero”. This evinces a broad range of responses. Magda is found grubbing about for a “true story” and “pure meaning,” yearning to enter the kingdom of meaning and history (Coetzee [1977]1982: 122, 126). Michael K flirts with meaning: he claims, “[T]he truth is that I have been a gardener”, and then he immediately qualifies it to the point of erasure. Instead, the narrative indicates his resignation, even desire to dwell beyond the purview of history as “the obscurest of the obscure” (Coetzee 1983: 181, 142). Finally, in a new twist on this theme, Paul Rayment in *Slow Man* steadfastly aspires to remain among the “castaways of history”, in the margins, passed over: “I am not an amenable subject,” he says. “I am not a hero, Mrs Costello” (Coetzee 2005: 89, 117). In his repudiation of doubling, he has “draped a cloth over the mirror in the bathroom” (Coetzee 2005: 163). He strives throughout to elude the prosthesis of signification that would see him doubled/mirrored and given literary substance in Costello’s novel, the one we’re reading. Again, of course, the irony is that he is already captured by the representational medium he resists as a character shunning representation.

Although Coetzee’s protagonists have obviously been doubled into history and into meaning from the reader’s perspective, doubling does not yield signification at the level of the character. Coetzee’s characters are typically marked by their blindness, by their inability to read their own stories, fathom their own meanings. And if Magda’s story is “miserable” because its meaning is “inapparent” to her, if misery describes a state opposite to meaning, this state of misery is carried through to its apotheosis in *Youth*, which is likewise a history of yearning, expectation and dreams deferred, the antithesis of achieved doubling; the narrator comments that “in misery he is still top of the class .... Misery is his element” (Coetzee 2002: 65).

Doubling, for Coetzee, thus signifies the always dubious and risky passage from an autistic but potentially replete, mundane “being” – the undoubled state of grace possessed by stones and animals, existing in a rapture of eternal presence – to language, signification and a state of alienation and fragmentation in the defiles of the signifier; Costello speaks of the “arduous

descent from the silence of the beasts to the gabble of reason” (Coetzee 2003: 71). As Coetzee observes in one section of his reading of Breytenbach, titled “The Mirror Phase” (with a nod towards Lacan), writing surface and mirror surface both become agents of this doubling/alienating movement (Coetzee 1996: 229). Doubling the self achieves a grasp of the self as a conceptual whole, but only at the price of self-estrangement in an image outside oneself. Thus, irreducibly, becoming self paradoxically means becoming other, recovering oneself in a state of “alienated majesty” (Emerson 1983: 259), with all the pomp and circumstance of finally meaning something. The divergence, and even polarisation, of being and meaning, self and double, life and story is succinctly stated by Susan Barton in *Foe*: “[A]ll my life grows to be story and there is nothing of my own left to me” (Coetzee 1987: 133). Story is parasitic upon life and given the prominence of the idiom of parasite in Michael K, this may be one way of understanding and deciphering Michael K’s progressively dwindling stature, the slow leakage of his substance into semantics as “life” is eclipsed by “story”.

The drama of becoming storied, being retrieved from the silence of the subaltern state to come-to-meaning, and to achieve historical being in turn becomes a drama around the enigma of arrival: the advent of the arrivant and the question of how meaning arrives.<sup>2</sup> That is to say, it becomes a drama of annunciation and revelation, or, more probably, annunciation thwarted, because the Word never quite arrives; the subject is kept waiting and doubting on the verge of meaning and self-affirmation, held in a bondage of bare being without ever achieving exodus into meaning.

The condition of anxious waiting to be united with one’s meaning and one’s truth that afflicts Magda and so many of Coetzee’s other protagonists along the way, is doubled in the predicament of young John in *Youth*. Near the end, John is similarly stalled at the gates of revelation, pondering the enigma of arrival, “He is killing time .... Everything he has done since he stepped ashore at Southampton has been a killing of time while he waits for his destiny to arrive. Destiny would not come to him in South Africa, he told himself; she would come (come like a bride!) only in London or Paris or perhaps Vienna” (Coetzee 2002: 165). He misses this tryst with destiny and instead finds in London the same doomed provincialism he believed he had left behind in parochial South Africa. Just as for Nietzsche, Truth is imaged as a woman by the adolescent John. Through her the narrator would take possession of, indeed become, his destiny and his truth; she is in effect the flesh of this truth to which he is destined, this truth that is his. Through the offices of this woman, as much vision and muse as flesh and blood, the meaning of the young man’s life would be disclosed. This gendered embodiment of destiny, that will be the apprentice artist’s teleological double, is already sketched in the opening pages: “Sometimes he imagines a

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2. For elaboration of this concept, drawn from Derrida’s later work, see Attridge 2004: 121.

beautiful girl in a white dress wandering into the reading room [of the university library] .... It never happens" (Coetzee 2002: 2). *Slow Man* reproduces this structure with the gender positions reversed; as Costello waits on Rayment, waits for him to reveal himself to her and become her story, she laments, "[H]ere I am, killing time, being killed by time, waiting – waiting for you" (Coetzee 2005: 203). We may recall, too, her admonition, "Become major, Paul. Live like a hero. Be a main character" (p. 229). The irony, of course, is that if Rayment is Costello's fictive creation, her "waiting" is staged, self-inflicted.

A cognate epiphanic structure for framing the arrival of meaning is revisited, and doubted, in numerous guises throughout Coetzee's work. In *White Writing*, Coetzee dwelt on the colonial uses of the pastoral and in particular the pastoral subgenre of the "farm novel" or *plaasroman*. The *plaasroman* is, for Coetzee, a seminal genre of colonial fiction through which the settler asserts the legitimacy of his occupation. And, for Coetzee, at the heart of the *plaasroman* and therefore also, in inverted form, at the heart of *In the Heart of the Country* is an enigmatic process called, in Afrikaans, *vergestaltiging*. In *White Writing*, Coetzee discusses this mystical process by which the protagonist comes to inhabit his destiny and in so doing becomes a "transindividual figure": "At all levels there is a *vergestaltiging* (a taking on of form, an emergence of truth)" (Coetzee 1988: 98). It is precisely about this claim to suture secular and sacred time that Coetzee remains so dubious. *Vergestaltiging*, however, is another name for the phenomenon whose status I'm exploring here: the coming to meaning, the emergence or standing-forth of truth, and, in the process, the redoubling of the individual as a historical being, a creature claimed at last by History, plucked from the shadows of subalternity into the light of meaning and coherence. In *Boyhood* one can recall those humble and obscure members of the Coetzee tribe who so narrowly miss being passed over by the angel of History, and whose historical being begins with the very last sentence, "And if he does not remember them, who will?" (Coetzee 1997: 166).

Coetzee's characters, like those awaiting Godot in Beckett's play, wait anxiously for meaning, purpose and coherence to come to them and, typically, endure the disappointment of their failure to arrive. Coetzee has written many chronicles of waiting. The Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* provides an early illustration that allows us to draw an analogy between history and text. Lingering among the ruins of an ancient barbarian settlement near his colonial outpost, the Magistrate is described as "waiting for spirits from the byways of history to speak to him". But, the narrative continues, "The sign did not come" (Coetzee 1981: 16). Waiting for this redemptive Word from the angels of history, it is implied, will transfigure the Magistrate's own life, revealing to him his own place in the vast, imperial and historical drama in which he is so deeply implicated. This yearning to catch the voice of history later converges with the Magistrate's

hermeneutic efforts to decipher the marks on the barbarian girl's body and the wooden tiles that his excavations have recovered. He says, "[U]ntil the marks on this girl's body have been deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her" (Coetzee 1981: 31; cf. 64, 81). In another episode, while out hunting, the Magistrate has an encounter with a waterbuck ram, and in the moment when they confront each other, the Magistrate similarly glimpses the hem of another, uncanny text enfolding them: "[F]or the duration of this frozen moment the stars are locked in a configuration in which events are not themselves, but stand for other things" (Coetzee 1981: 40).

If we turn briefly to *Age of Iron*, and the first incarnation of Coetzee's "EC" persona in the shape of Elizabeth Curren, the idiom of annunciation surfaces explicitly with the arrival of Vercueil. The novel keeps in suspense the question of whether he is some dark "angel" of death, or possibly Adamastor from Camões's *Lusiads* (for which a case can be sketched), or just an unredeemable vagrant.<sup>3</sup> His arrival coincides with Curren's discovery that she is terminally ill with cancer: "Two things, then, in the space of an hour: the news, long dreaded, and this reconnaissance, this other annunciation" (Coetzee 1990: 5). It is, of course, an inversion of the soterial figure of annunciation, messianic in structure perhaps, but portending darker seed, something closer to Yeats's slouching beast in "The Second Coming". Nevertheless, Curren cherishes the hope that Vercueil might be an emissary from elsewhere. She writes, "The suburbs, deserted by angels. When a ragged stranger comes knocking at the door he is never anything but a derelict, an alcoholic, a lost soul. Yet in our hearts, we long for these sedate homes of ours to tremble, as in the story, with angelic chanting" (Coetzee 1990: 14). The riddle of the book is precisely what sort of embrace Vercueil offers. This passage casts some light forward onto Coetzee's next novel, *The Master of Petersburg* and onto the enigmatic eighth chapter, "Ivanov", that Derek Attridge has described as "a deeply puzzling chapter, whose relationship to the plot, such as it is, is not evident" (Attridge 2004: 122). The "Ivanov" chapter witnesses a thorough generalisation of the revelation

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3. Vercueil is described by feral features that uncannily double those of Adamastor in Camões's *Lusiads*, Canto V (1950). In stanza 39, Camões describes Adamastor: "The face was heavy, with a squalid beard. Misshaped he was, but of enormous height ... the lank hair twisted hangs/ And the mouth was black and full of yellow fangs." Of Adamastor's past he says, "Captain by sea was I and thither went" (V.51). Adamastor has since been enshrined in South African literature as the "spirit of the Cape". The first description of Vercueil is "tall, thin, with a weathered skin and long, carious fangs" (Coetzee 1990: 4). Although Vercueil's origins are deliberately left vague, to the question about his past he replies, "I was at sea" (Coetzee 1990: 84). Adamastor also describes how he was cursed: "This flesh of mine was changed into hard clay/ My bones, of crags and rocks, took on the cast" (V.59). Vercueil is likewise described as "all bone and weathered skin" (Coetzee 1990: 11).

paradigm. Everything is imbued with messianic promise and with meaning, and “the least thing” above all, a predicament that drives Fyodor to conclude that he must by rights wager on every arrivant (Coetzee 1994: 82). He asks, “Betting on all the numbers – is that still gambling? Without the risk, without subjecting oneself to the voice speaking from elsewhere in the fall of the dice, what is left that is divine?” (Coetzee 1994: 84). Through this logic, Fyodor wagers on Ivanov as the vessel of his redemption and takes him in, yet at the same time mutters in disgust, “[I]f, in the present charade, Ivanov is the one playing the part of God’s angel – an angel only by virtue of being no angel at all – why should it be his role to seek out the angel?” (Coetzee 1994: 92). As I suggested previously, Coetzee’s work seems to be engaged in a persistent interrogation of the epiphanic paradigm of meaning, and entertains something of a *fort-da* relationship to it. If Fyodor dismisses it as “charade”, another farcical sketch of this paradigm further expresses Coetzee’s doubts (Coetzee 1994: 92). *Boyhood* offers us the example of Coetzee’s great-grandfather, who had attempted his own narrative of boyhood. However, his account is a melodramatic storm of stage lightnings and celestial gibberings that proves not simply unconvincing but boring, too: “He has tried to read *Ewige Genesing [Through a Dangerous Malady to Eternal Healing]*, but it is too boring. No sooner has Balthazar du Biel got under way with the story of his boyhood in Germany than he interrupts it with long reports of lights in the sky and voices speaking to him out of the heavens” (Coetzee 1997: 118).

It sounds rather like the ending of a Coetzee novel we all know! The annunciatory model on offer here is treated with disdain. Nevertheless, the young John, having shifted his focus from sky to school, reports that “each day seemed to bring new revelations of the cruelty and pain and hatred raging beneath the everyday surface of things” (Coetzee 1997: 139). The semiotics of revelation may have changed, but the fabric of the world remains no less epiphanic, imbued with negative illuminations; the mode of revelation is of the same genre.

A much later text turns to an early autobiographical episode in Plumstead that does record a suburban epiphany of sorts. In the essay, “What is a Classic?” Coetzee spoke of an encounter in 1955 with Bach’s music. In Curren’s very “suburbs, deserted by the angels”, he describes in epiphanic terms hearing Bach (Coetzee 1990: 14). Bach’s “voice” calls to the adolescent Coetzee from beyond a wall, not unlike the children’s voices in St. Augustine’s Confessions, singing “Tolle, lege”. It becomes for Coetzee exemplary of the “call” of the aesthetic, of the “classic”. In the essay, while modestly declining to claim for it the status of Eliot’s “revelation in the garden”, he nevertheless notes the family resemblance, adding that this episode was “a key event in my formation” and claiming “Eliot the provincial as a pattern and figure of myself” (Coetzee 2001: 9). It is a fleeting *vergestaltung* (*Gestalt*, form lies at the root of both terms), the moment of



vocation that drafts the young Coetzee into the transindividual fraternity of art. He generalises such aesthetic experiences with the following remark: “The experiences are perhaps not of the same order of religious experience, but they are of the same genre” (Coetzee 2001: 7). The doubling of one’s existence within an order of signs, or, “coming-to-mean”, as well as the myriad miscarriages of this process, both follow the shape of the conversion-narrative – “they are of the same genre”. One could fill out this sketchy analysis in many other places in Coetzee’s texts, but I shall conclude with some discussion of *Elizabeth Costello*.

*Elizabeth Costello* is certainly a puzzling genre bender, but it seems something of a Rosetta stone for deciphering the range of concerns mediated through the idiom of the messianic, functioning as a metaphor for *semiophany* or *vergestaltiging*. In his review, David Lodge noted that the work is “permeated by the language of religion” (Lodge 2003: 50). What emerges as a salient thread of meditation across the text’s several fables is the status of a “redemptive word” in an age of iron, an age that has lost faith in belief (Coetzee 2003: 122). It is exactly this Word whose want Elizabeth Curren felt in the climactic episode where she witnesses the crimes of the state on the Cape Flats: “To speak of this ... you would need the tongue of a god” (Coetzee 1990: 99). In similar fashion, in *Disgrace*, Lurie’s artistic impulses end with the yearning for a grace-note, with the hope that “somewhere from amidst the welter of sound there will dart up, like a bird, a single authentic note of immortal longing” (Coetzee 1999: 214).<sup>4</sup>

At the end of Chapter Three of *Elizabeth Costello*, the Appleton College president closes a faculty dinner in Costello’s honour, where the main topic of discussion has been dietary prohibitions, with a pun that connects food with intellectual fare: “Much food for thought”. He then adds, “[W]e look forward to tomorrow’s offering” (Coetzee 2003: 90). “Tomorrow’s offering”: if we carry the pun a little further, it allows us to recognise that the status of the writer as vessel for a redemptive word, a “secretary of the invisible” and vehicle for some stripe of messianism, is the focus of these essays in the widest sense (p. 199). From the annunciation whispered by Egudu into Elizabeth’s ear in Lesson Two (p. 58); to the promise of “tomorrow’s offering” just mentioned; to John’s gospel of solace in Lesson Four, “it will soon be over” (p. 115); to the final word perpetually deferred in Lesson Five (“Sister ... do not die and leave me without an answer” (p. 155); to the enigma of “congress across a gap in being” (p. 184), which is perhaps the defining riddle of the angel; finally to the glimpse through the gate in Lesson Eight and the infinite proliferation of revelation of the Postscript: these lessons all portend apocalypse.

The fate of the “redemptive word” is raised explicitly during a lecture entitled “The Humanities in Africa” where Elizabeth’s cloistered sister, Blanche, addresses “graduates-to-be in the humanities” to tell them “you

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4. My thanks to Carrol Clarkson for drawing my attention to this passage.

lost your way long ago”, adding that the initial grail of humanistic studies was “the True Word, by which they understood then ... the redemptive word” (p. 122). Although, as regards “tomorrow’s offering”, Costello freely admits, “the future in general does not much interest me”, she is nevertheless possessed by the messianic as a metaphor for meaning (p. 38). Idle speculation on the particular content of the future may well be an arid pastime, projecting no more than a current “structure of hopes and expectations” (p. 38), but the “conditions of messengerhood” through which meaning yields itself are of intense interest (Coetzee 1992: 340); as she says elsewhere, “What intrigues her is the mechanics, the practicalities of a congress across a gap in being” (p. 184).

Costello may harbour little faith in revelation as such, yet the faded structures of annunciation and epiphany haunt the text, teasing protagonist and reader with their lingering possibilities. The text posits apocalypse in a minor key: the grand, theological profile may have been abandoned, but, as “What is a Classic?” made plain, the underlying revelatory structure remains intact. Were there any doubt about this, we could cite the epigraph to the Postscript (p. 226) as well as a cognate passage in Hofmannsthal’s own text, where he writes, “A pitcher, a harrow abandoned in a field, a dog in the sun, a neglected cemetery, a cripple, a peasant’s hut – all these can become the vessel of my revelation.” The key term here is revelation (*Offenbarung*). Hofmannsthal continues, “Each of these objects and a thousand others similar ... can suddenly... assume for me a character so exalted and moving that words seem too poor to describe it.”<sup>5</sup> The miracle expressed here is how every prosaic thing seems to brim with meaning and to whisper of revelation. This is not a state without meaning, but rather one of hyper-signification. This condition, perhaps this affliction, reiterates the predicament Fyodor described and may be as much cause for despair and paralysis – “words seem too poor” – as for elation. The infinite revelation of figuration supervenes upon the signifying process like a cancer. As Lady Chandos writes, it is like a “contagion that is not that, a contagion, but is something else, always something else” (p. 229).

The “lessons” Costello teaches camp just outside the doors of epiphany, positioning protagonist and reader on the threshold of discoveries that seem at once imminent, yet deferred. Revelation or annunciation emerges as a rich and complex metaphor for the irruption of meaning: how it comes to be, how it manifests itself or is discovered, how it is withheld. Coetzee’s texts puzzle over the mystery of meaning. What are the mechanisms by which consciousness surrounds some mundane, unremarkable object or phenomenon and raises it into significance? The poetics, or dynamics, of

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5. Von Hofmannsthal 1952: 135-36. “Eine Gießkanne, eine auf dem Feld verlassene Egge, ein Hund in der Sonne, ein ärmlicher Kirchhof, ein Krüppel, ein kleines Bauernhaus, alles dies kann das Gefäß meiner Offenbarung werden” (Von Hofmannsthal 1976: 00).

semiophany, and the intimate yet occult presence of a cosmos of meaning that doubles, and illuminates mundane being with significance, is a meta-textual issue that has haunted Coetzee's protagonists from the outset where Magda was found chafing for "a vision of a second existence passionate enough to carry me from the mundane of being into the doubleness of signification". Such it appears is the meaning of doubling in Coetzee's work. These texts record both the perpetual motion towards becoming double and the failure to arrive there. After all the lurid melodrama played out by the "witch of Agterplaas", Magda laments from behind the locked iron gates of her petrified garden, still barren of revelation (evidently the Karoo is not Plumstead!), "I have been through everything now and no angel has descended with flaming law to forbid it. There are, it seems, no angels in this part of the sky, no God in this part of the world"; "This is how I spend my days. There has been no transfiguration. Whatever I long for, whatever it is, does not come" (Coetzee [1977]1982: 118, 108, 114).

Coetzee's work consistently fashions protagonists who remain unclaimed by History and appear to have no story, and then, against the odds, undertakes to tell their "history" – the tales of those standing on the outside of history, staring wistfully in. Coetzee seeks to represent those who are paradoxically, unrepresented, unrepresentable: those who fall beyond the pale of meaning, or below the threshold of historical, literary, and even narrative being. He offers us the histories of what Eric Wolf (1982) calls "people without history", the annals of the unstoried, the silences of the subaltern, the prose of the preterite. Now, of course, this is an ostensibly self-negating premise – telling the story of one whose story is defective, or who has, in effect, no story. How does one chronicle the history of silence without betraying it? It is from this predicament, this contradiction, writing up against the very limits of discursivity and narratability that Coetzee's plots draw so much of their drama, their narrative force, their elusiveness and, most of all, their sustained irony.

His are heroes who stand before the gates of the Canon, of the Pantheon, of History and of Truth, either knocking to enter, or tumbling by accident, and even indignantly, into the "cauldron of history" (Coetzee 1983: 151). And each, in their own minor progress towards consecration in the Word, as each is embraced by their discursive and teleological double – their guardian angel (or spectre), as it were – bequeaths their own "life & times", their own, spare counterhagiography, chronicles not of history's victors and insiders and saints but of history's outsiders, or in the providential idiom, chronicles not of the elect but preterite, no longer passed over by the angel of meaning.

I have dwelt at some length on the figure of the angel, the arrivant, the double as a metaphor for meaning, coherence, and closure vis-à-vis Coetzee's characters. However, by drawing links to Coetzee's autobiographical narratives and literary essays, as well as noting how this imagery applies to Coetzee's many author-surrogates, I'm proposing that this is the

framework through which not only his characters, but the author, too, worry the question of meaning.

*Elizabeth Costello* explicitly raises perhaps the most exacting project of doubling: the chameleon capabilities that enable the artistic imagination to negate itself in order to inhabit and give body to other characters, personae, forms of consciousness, and modes of being. Costello's reflections on this faculty permit her to identify animal consciousness as a new frontier of subalternity. In a 1985 book review, called "Listening to the Afrikaners", Coetzee defined Keats's "negative capability" as "the artist's ability to remain open to experience and to suspend closure of judgment" (Coetzee 1985). Coetzee's fictions have steadfastly pursued this most arduous art of doubling – one that prizes not the locutions of the self, but rather its dislocation and dislocations in order to enter "[o]ther modes of being" (Coetzee 2003: 188; italics in original); indeed, Costello recklessly asserts "there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another" (p. 80). As Hölderlin had cautioned, the redemptive word keeps company with peril. This capability of doubling that takes self-estrangement rather than self-identity as its goal steers us to its outer limit and to an ultimate menace: possession by the demonic rather than the messianic.

Beginning around the appearance of *Lives of Animals* (1999), although perhaps Dawn's fate in *Dusklands* is already a cautionary tale, Coetzee's work has expressed reservations about rescuing certain stories from oblivion – "picturing to us our darker potential" – to welcome them into the doubleness of signification (Coetzee 2003: 128). He posits the need to pass over them in silence or, where ethically necessary, to evoke them through the rhetorical figure of *preteritio*; in "The Philosophers and the Animals", Costello reminded her audience that "the horrors I omit are at the centre of this lecture" (p. 63). The dilemma of speaking that which should not be spoken, and should not be redoubled in representation, finds perhaps its fullest exploration in Lesson Six, entitled "The Problem of Evil". If the radical openness of negative capability prepares one to welcome the angel, to enunciate the annunciation and accord it hospitality, the risk arises that one never knows who one's guest might be. As Costello herself confesses, "I am open to all voices" (p. 204). One must be prepared to host not just the redemptive word but perhaps the angel of darkness. Characteristically, Lesson 6 ends with the expectation of an ending and a final word that refuses to arrive:

There ought to be a third alternative, some way of rounding off the morning and giving it shape and meaning: some confrontation, leading to some final word. There ought to be an arrangement such that she bumps into someone in the corridor ... something should pass between them, sudden as lightning, that will illuminate the landscape for her, even if afterwards it returns to its native darkness. But the corridor, it seems, is empty.

(Coetzee 2003: 182)

The gap between self and double, self and other yields one last lesson, one last iteration of the double that can perhaps be read in “He and His Man”, but also in Costello and Rayment’s poignant valediction; Crusoe muses, “If he must settle on a likeness for the pair of them, his man and he, he would write that they are like two ships sailing in contrary directions” (Coetzee 2004b: 19). If we apply the model of self-estrangement to writing itself, if, given the folds and foliations of figure that “He and His Man” offers, we add one more and read it as a parable of writing to ask the name of a writing that speaks estranged from itself, at odds with its own signs, we might come up with two terms: irony and allegory. It is often claimed that Coetzee’s writing is allegorical. Detractors have found this cause to cavil at Coetzee’s political motives; others have defended his realism. The choice seems to me a false one. His idiom need be neither simply realism nor allegory. There is another mode of writing, and another avatar of the double, that accords literal and figural equal status, without subordinating one to the other; we might provisionally call it typological realism, a mode of narration once claimed by biblical hermeneutics for the scriptures that operates in two (or more) distinct registers of signification at once. Paraphrasing a passage from Defoe’s *Journal of the Plague Year*, Crusoe comments in “He and His Man”, “And all of this – the man Robert and wife keeping communion through calls across the water, the sack left by the waterside – stands for itself certainly, but stands also as a figure of his, Robinson’s, solitude on his island” (Coetzee 2004b: 11). Similarly, Rayment muses, “might the Costello woman be writing two stories at once?” (Coetzee 2005: 118). This is the singular signifying mode of the redemptive Word: a structural and systemic double entendre, less than one and double. Pascal theorised its *modus operandi* at length in his *Pensées*. Two orders of signification, *littera* and *figura*, type and anti-type, sailing in contrary directions, neither cancelling nor sublimating the other. These meanings come, to adopt the biblical idiom that Coetzee reanimates in *Master of Petersburg*, like thieves in the night. Like a cat burglar, Coetzee is a “second story man”.

It is the “gap in being” between visible and invisible, between mortal and immortal, between human and animal, between human and human, and finally, between literal and figurative that Coetzee has scrupulously filled with his acute reflections on all the impediments to “knocking together a bridge” in order to enter the “far territory” (Coetzee 2003: 184, 1). Let us conclude by giving Coetzee the last word. In a recent discussion of Hölderlin, he wrote, without taking much care to distinguish his voice from Hölderlin’s:

The great subject of Hölderlin’s poetry is the retreat of God or the gods, and the role of the poet in the benighted or destitute times that follow their retreat .... But what can it be that the gods in their remoteness look to us to feel? We do not know; all we can do is put in words our most intense yearning for their return, and hope that, touched perchance by fire from heaven, our words

may to some extent incarnate the Word and thus transform yearning into epiphany.

(Coetzee 2006: 77)

Dare we conclude that this is the final word? The corridor, it seems, is empty.

But open for passage.

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