

Is the Writer Ethical?: The Early Novels of J.M. Coetzee up to *Age of Iron*

Marianne de Jong

Summary

The article claims that the investigation of the ethical dimension of literary writing has thus far wrongfully omitted to ask questions about the ethical intentions of the literary agent. It argues that this question can be put by asking, "Is this, i.e. the specific act of writing, an ethical act?" Drawing on some analytical philosophy of action and on Bakhtin, the article maintains that this question can be asked without reviving the intentional fallacy and without reverting to foundationalist ethics. These arguments are demonstrated by investigating the possible ethicality of acts of writing in the first six novels of J.M. Coetzee. Agential self-awareness is interpreted as the agent's awareness of his writing being an action, and various examples are quoted to show that the agent of these acts of writing takes responsibility for the fact of his action. Writing seems to respond to ethically compromising aspects of the act of literary production. The refusal to write about death as if it can be an object of literary construction in novels written during the apartheid era and States of Emergency in South Africa serves as example.

Opsomming

Volgens die artikel het die ondersoek na die etiese dimensie van literatuur tot dusver nagelaat om 'n belangrike vraag te vra, naamlik die vraag na die etiese bedoelinge van die skrywer. Hierdie vraag kan, aldus die artikel, gestel word in die vorm van die vraag, "Is dit (naamlik hierdie spesifieke literêre handeling) 'n etiese handeling?" Met behulp van die analitiese filosofie van handeling en van Bakhtin word aangevoer dat hierdie vraag gestel kan word sonder om die "intentional fallacy" te laat herleef en ook sonder om in fundamentalistiese etiek te verval. Die argument word toegelig deur 'n ondersoek na die moontlike etiese gehalte van die eerste ses romans van J.M. Coetzee. Die skrywende agent vertoon 'n sterk selfbewustheid en dit word geïnterpreteer as die agent se bewustheid van sy eie skryfwerk as handeling. Dat hierdie agent verantwoordelikheid aanvaar vir sy skryfhandeling word aangevoer na aanleiding van verskeie voorbeelde uit die romans. Dit lyk asof die skryfhandeling reageer op aspekte van die handeling of daad van literêre produksie wat eties kompromitterend is. Een voorbeeld hiervan is die weiering om oor die dood te skryf asof dit 'n objek van literêre konstruksie kan wees – 'n weiering wat, veelseggend genoeg, nagegaan kan word in romans wat gedurende die apartheidsera en noodtoestande in Suid-Afrika geskryf is.

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The ethical question, as it has been put anew to literature during the last decade or so, does not refer to the ethical as a yardstick of the aesthetical, to what is morally good as a yardstick of what is aesthetically good. It rather refers to an interest in recognising and accounting for the ethical dimension of literary texts, something that is, perhaps, not surprising seeing the so-called “political turn” in literary studies and the way in which a radical textualist perspective on literature, by being unable to account for the ethical in literature, raised the question by default. The renewed interest in literary ethicality can be traced from the edition of Yale French Studies with the title *Literature and the Ethical Question*, to the work of the philosopher Martha Nussbaum during the eighties and nineties of the previous century, and it includes J. Hillis Miller’s *The Ethics of Reading*, Tony Siebers’s *The Ethics of Criticism* and Wane Booth’s *The Company We Keep*. Two books, *Critical Ethics* and *The Ethics in Literature*, resulted from a conference on ethics and literature held in Wales during 1997. An anthology, *Renegotiating Ethics*, edited by Jane Adamson, Richard Freadman and David Parker, appeared in 1998.

The exploration of the ethics of literature has to presume that writers can be and sometimes are ethical when they write. However, the question: Is the writer ethical? has not been seriously posited. Ethical agents and their acts are presupposed without serious reflection about, and accounting for, the presupposition. The study of literary ethics would, however, be incomplete as long as the question about the ethical act and its agent is not asked. This article proposes that it can be asked and answered without falling back into foundationalism and moralism when put as the question, addressed in terms of a specific literary text: Is this an ethical action?

In the philosophical convention it is actions which can be described as ethical or unethical. The ethical is the study of practical reason. Apart from Kant’s well-known question (“what ought I to do?”), philosophical studies of action and ethics indicate that this convention still holds. Examples can be drawn upon at random. Although historically oriented, Foucault’s last two studies of the development of the discourse of ethical relations to the self refer to modes of action or behaviour. When Bakhtin proposes a “philosophy of the act”, he takes ethical action as the primary example of action in general. Levinas’s work on ethics investigates the imperative quality of ethics, that is the inescapable “ought” character (cf Foucault 1985, 1988; Bakhtin 1993).

Action naturally implies agency. In the wake of the poststructuralist critique of the subject new descriptions of agency and of the subject abound. It is, according to Descombes, possible and necessary to define the subject in terms of agency and to define agency strictly in terms of action. Sentences including action predicates always contain that to which these predicates are attributed,

i.e. persons doing things: “It is a matter of adjusting each of two grammatical categories ... on the one hand, the category of verbs that signify an action, on the other, the category of designations for individuals susceptible of being considered ... as subject of action” (Descombes 1991: 131).

The humanist subject is an abstract unable to explain action in the material world. What is needed, Descombes maintains, is that

the subject of a worldly action should be a worldly suppositum. It cannot be a transcendent ego. If certain actions performed in the world should be recognized as “properly human” actions, that is to say, as actions that are open to examination and rational critique, it is necessary that these actions, freely performed in this world, are attributed to suppositums of this world.

(Descombes 1991: 132)

Descombes argues that the classical philosophical subject, called, for example, “moral conscience” cannot answer the question concerning the “Who?” which regulates the grammar of action sentences (Descombes 1991: 130). Following Descombes’s argument, the agent should be defined in terms of the specific singular act under discussion and not in terms of the biographical person, personal character or any of the agent’s other actions, performances or personal features.

From the analytical perspective, in order to speak of the action, and, for our purposes, in order to speak of ethical action, not only agency but also intentionality has to be at hand. Donald Davidson summarises intentionality in action simply as doing something for a reason (Davidson 1980: 4-9).¹ He distinguishes between intentionality in action and intentional states of mind (pp. 87-90). An intentional state of mind is not necessarily linked to an action actually performed. Should we make use of Davidson, it would appear that the intentional fallacy could be excluded from the description of ethical literary acts. To test this, a description of literary acts as well as a description of ethical literary acts is necessary. The purpose of this article is not to develop these descriptions in detail. At this point some conclusions drawn from a longer study will be offered as a working hypothesis.² To say that written literature is taken seriously as it stands, is to state the obvious. Readers presume that the text, once published, is meant to be as it is and is not to be changed. Should one use this trivial seeming phenomenon as an indication that the text is presumed to be an intentional action, an action description of literary writing can be developed. Should we regard this action as on a par with human action in general, literary acts of writing could arguably be ethical. For descriptions of ethical actions, the philosophy of action provides sufficient guidelines. An act is ethical when it is done because the agent believes that he or she ought to do it (cf e.g. Von Kutshera 1973: 11-14; Spaemann 1994: 24-

25). The “should” or “ought”, that is the notion of an obligation or what Levinas calls a commanding address, is fundamental to the concept of an ethical action. Since, however, agents also believe that they ought to lose weight or to stop smoking, the ethical sense of obligation is commonly qualified as an obligation to take care of the fellow human being as if the interests of the other were as important as one’s own interest (cf Kant’s “Maxime” (1989: 26-33)).

The question “Is the writer ethical?”, or “Is this an ethical act?” will be put to Coetzee’s first six novels. It will be presumed that readers engage in texts in terms of an action presupposition. The text is treated as unchangeable, that is as a completed human act or as the event of such an action. That such a presupposition is indeed at work in common reading practices is strongly indicated by the way in which readers with some experience will take very unusual literary texts seriously, will labour at possible interpretations and will be prepared to adapt existing reading patterns and interpretive paradigms. Readers read as if they presupposed that the text were written in the way in which it were written intentionally, that is for a reason.

One of the advantages of an action-based description of literary ethics is that ethicality is not made dependent on the content of values. An act of writing can be deemed ethical whether the ethics it appears to observe colludes with the interpreter’s sense of the ethical or not. With this, one of the problems of a foundationalist description of ethical action is avoided.³ When a claim that a certain value is foundational to all other values is made, then I need a further value to prove this claim. The foundationalist effort to ground the ethical succumbs to infinite regress. Moreover, according to recent philosophical research, ethical action cannot be explained by the content of values. This argument is inter alia presented by Bakhtin in an earlier work which was only published recently: *Towards a Philosophy of Action*. Bakhtin states:

It is not the content of an obligation that obligates me, but my signature below it – the fact that at one time I acknowledged or undersigned the given acknowledgement. And what compelled me to sign at the moment of undersigning was not the content of the given performed act or deed. This content would not by itself, in isolation, have prompted me to perform the act or deed – to undersign – acknowledge it, but only in correlation with my decision to undertake an obligation – by performing the act of undersigning – acknowledging.

(Bakhtin1993: 38)⁴

I will here try to answer the question “Is the writer ethical?” by considering possible reasons for ways of writing in order to establish whether an “ought” way of doing was pursued, and whether this “ought” is of the ethical kind. Value contents have to be considered, since they will be the means by which

we recognise “ought” ways of doing as ethical. The premise of the theoretical framework used here is, however, that ethical values are displayed in ethical acts. The question, “Why do we act ethically?”, cannot be answered by referring to values. This article will not try to explain the capacity of human action to be ethical.⁵ If Bakhtin’s argument holds water, then the ethical in literature is not sufficiently described by referring to values which are somehow textualised, say by means of characterisation and plot, or, to put it semiotically, by means of clusters of semes. It is not sufficiently described by referring to what the text is “about”, that is, to its referential contents or values. Novels may be about the ethical without themselves being ethical actions. The question is also not sufficiently answered when literary ethics is restricted to ethical effects on readers. The proposed method has the important consequence that we will not establish the ethicality of an act by establishing whether the act conforms with set social values or norms, or with the ethical discourse of the day. We know that it is common practice for agents to oblige social norms for reasons of image-building, social approval and other “hypothetical imperatives”, to use Kant’s term (Kant 1989: 43).

In what follows, the literary act will be defined as specific ways of writing. It is purposefully not seen as a literary speech act.⁶

The recent positive appreciation of the political sensibility of Coetzee’s writing and its ethical aspect is well summarised in Attwell’s remark in *Doubling the Point*. If it is so that “the discursive-political consequences of the country’s protracted trauma militate against fictionality” (Attwell in Coetzee 1992), then

[w]hat kind of authority can the novel muster if it is to speak in terms commensurable with the times? What form of address is possible under such conditions? Coetzee’s achievement is to have found the means, within fiction, to interrogate this paralysis – indeed, not only to interrogate it but to move beyond it to a reconstructed position in which fiction begins to speak to the political in its own terms. This Coetzee manages both by drawing into his fiction the skepticism and symptomatic sensitivity of poststructuralism, and by searching for ways in which the novel might recover an ethical basis, in full appreciation of the political context.

(Attwell in Coetzee 1992: 4)

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Agential self-awareness is a feature of the first set of novels. The writing agent does not only write about writers, as he does in *The Master of Petersburg*, *Youth* or *Elizabeth Costello*, but implies himself as the writing agent of “this text” here and now. The play with the surname Coetzee in *Dusklands* is a well-known case-in-point. One could interpret this play as a distanced, technically adept play with discursive conventions, a so-called self-reflexive and post-modernist way of writing, but that does not say much about the writer’s reason for doing this. A first reason for this self-inclusion could be that the agent wishes to show that he is himself historically linked to the colonial adventurer-hunter-violator. He may be of the same kind.

The writing in *Dusklands* is a contrapuntual combination of two diverse discourses. Just before the beginning of the purported translation of the “Relaas van Jacobus Coetzee” and an “Introduction” to it, a quotation from Flaubert is inserted: “What is important is the philosophy of history” (Coetzee 1998: 53). The self-reflexive foregrounding of discourse *as* discourse serves, the reader might conclude, to demonstrate that the truths of history are a matter of discourse in the Foucauldian sense, or a matter of narrative rhetoric, to speak with Hayden White. Readers might connote Freud and the speech of the psychiatrist’s client. Dawn ends his report, written like Jacobus Coetzee’s in the first person, with the words: “In my cell in the heart of America, with my private toilet in the corner, I ponder and ponder. I have high hopes of finding whose fault I am” (Coetzee 1998: 49). *Dusklands* demonstrates what the reports on Vietnam and the colonisation of the Cape inland hide or repress, but why does the agent implicate himself? Does he wish to draw attention to the possibility that the writing of *Dusklands* is an unreliable discourse? Is the agent hinting at the possibility that he, too, may have confessional needs and self-justifying urges, like the Coetzee of the narrative, and especially like the Dawn of the report on Vietnam? Why defictionalise his own writing? Was the agent, J.M. Coetzee, merely trying to impress critical readers and make an impact on the international literary market?

Defictionalisation occurs in various ways in each one of the novels selected for discussion, and can be pinpointed as example of a specific way of writing constituting specific acts of writing from one novel to the next. For the purpose of this article defictionalisation will refer to any way in which the novel is self-reflexive or metafictional, includes or hints at the presence of the writing agent, co-textualises literary writing or in any other way draws attention to its writtenness, thereby distorting the fictional illusion.

In *In the Heart of the Country* the fictional discourse is subverted in high modernist fashion. As many commentators have pointed out, various accounts of the same events are presented without clarification. At the end of the novel

Magda, who has reported how she murdered and buried her father, is once again the dutiful daughter helping the aging patriarch. The narrative voice is that of a diary writer – a use of voice which returns in the castaway story and letters of Susan Barton and in the letter-writing of Elizabeth Curren. A reason for this choice may be, readers may conclude, that the reader is to be reminded of the written nature of what is being read, of writing as discourse but also of writing as an act with an agent, implying, in *In the Heart of the Country* more evidently than in *Dusklands*, a dubious, psychologically distressed speaker. A defictionalising play occurs when Magda connotes the literary agent her- or himself, that is, the actual agent of Magda's writing. She refers to herself as being written as she writes, playing upon the figure of Olive Schreiner, writer of *Story of an African Farm*, who is connoted throughout the novel, against the backdrop of more conventional humanist-realist English South African writers of the early twentieth century.⁷ This in turn connotes the writer of *In the Heart of the Country* continuing a certain South African literary tradition even as he manifestly overturns it and excavates that which it might have hidden. The writing agency is most strongly textualised in several sections on writing, language and on what could be interpreted as the inability of language to achieve fulfilment of meaning, of words to become truth. Speech – one manifestation of language use – produces a place or position for the subject and hence for a presumed self, but the price to be paid for this is an insurmountable gap between speech and reality, word and object, meaning (in language) and world, and especially between self and word. Even as language promises being, it also withdraws its promise. In the closing pages of the novel the sound of aeroplanes signify, in Magda's imagination, the fulfilled sign, signifier united with signified. The words belong “to a Spanish of pure meanings such as might be dreamed of by the philosophers, and that what is communicated to me via the Spanish language ... is therefore pure meaning. The words are Spanish but they are tied to pure meanings” (Coetzee 1999: 137). Ironically, the sign only achieves fulfilment when its language is foreign (Spanish). This implication is exemplified by the repetition of the use of “stones”. Magda uses the stones as signifiers, but they only signify to the extent that she forces them to do so. She collects and paints the stones, and then “[f]orming the stones into letters twelve feet high I began to spell out messages to my saviour: CINDRLA ES MI ...” (p. 144). The irony is accentuated by the fact that the meanings are now spoken in an abstract, nonexistent language, as if in this way the limitation of expression imposed by language as medium could be sidestepped. Fulfilled meaning amounts to the absence of meaning, since it is meaning as pure imagination or wish fulfilment. One of the consequences of this, suggested by the way of writing, is that meaning as truth and ideal substance is meaning which is not ordinary language use, and has no social world within which it is used and within which

its use makes sense. For Magda this dialogue is an authentic one in which the self is truly heard and answered. Yet her voice depends on the material signs (stones), on a construction of these signs (the arrangement of the stones) and on a foreign language played with or imitated to form a truly private code. As pure structure or construction, language does not establish any relation between word and meaning, this textualisation seems to show.

These excursions on the nature of language, centring around the issue of language as sign system, seem to explain the defictionalising tendency in *In the Heart of the Country* as a whole. The way in which the text is written displays a linguistic scepticism and an awareness of the artificiality or constructedness of meaning in language, as well as the role of the desire for truth or meaning fulfilment which underlies the constructing of meanings. Macaskill, drawing on articles Coetzee has written on the middle voice and on Barthes's description of a "doing-writing", comments on Magda's double status of writing and being written as follows:

The contradiction that emerges between the characterization of Magda and the intellectual qualities and qualifications of the voice in which she speaks underscores the extent to which Magda's narrative is not only Magda's narrative but also an act of "speculative linguistics" on the part of Coetzee, *scripteur*, who is inscribed within the writing and who acts as its agent. Coetzee writes Magda into being as "real" person and as paper entity, shaping her – and allowing her to shape herself – between the demands of the verisimilitude valued by historical materialism and the discursive play practised by poststructuralist theories of language.

(Macaskill 1994: 22)

Macaskill explains this writerly venture as the attempt of the agent to position himself in a median between the conflicting claims of deconstruction and historicism. He regards *In the Heart of the Country* as indicative of a struggle to establish agency, to "enter a domain of action" without being subjected either to the set structures of language or to the demand to be a supplement to historical events (Macaskill 1944: 28).

Although there are additional ways in which the concept of the middle voice can serve to describe Coetzee's writing – the actual writing agent himself is being written or positioned by his act of writing or by the very discourse he produces – Macaskill's analysis supports the notion of an agent who is engaged with writing as a practice, and who is aware of himself as agent of a certain doing. His propositions allow for a conclusion more commentators have recently made about Coetzee, namely that he seeks an agential writing position from which he can speak both legitimately and (discursively speaking) freely. Adding on to Macaskill and others, I would argue that it is the way in which language is used – "deconstructively" as Macaskill states somewhat

generalisingly – which can provide legitimacy, and that it is the quest for the latter which might help explain defictionalising acts of writing. I would aver that “deconstruction” is a means whereby the writing agent remains alert to his act, which is – for him – an act in and with language and discourse. In this he places himself beyond the “laws” of history and the ideological or political discourses which seek to interpret and format it and which demand(ed) that literature does the same. One of the reasons why Magda’s efforts are made to fail could be that she over-stretches the potential of writing/language, of the constructing of fictions. Her writing becomes a document of desire which writing cannot eventually contain and which fiction cannot construct a “home” for.⁸ Should writing have succeeded in the way Magda hoped for, the fulfilment would have been another fiction, another closed, frozen discourse.

In *Waiting for the Barbarians* the co-textualisation of writing and the foregrounding of allegory as a way of reading remind of writtleness and the act of writing and indicate the tendency to defictionalise. Writing is connoted by means of the image of the swimmer in the following lines towards the end of the book:

If the barbarians were to burst in now, I know, I would die in my bed as stupid and ignorant as a baby ... some will be caught in dugouts beneath their cellars clutching their valuables to their breasts ... some will die on the road overwhelmed by the first snows of winter. Some few may even die fighting with pitchforks. After which the barbarians will wipe their backsides on the town archives. To the last we will have learned nothing ... I lie on the bare mattress and concentrate on bringing into life the image of myself as a swimmer swimming with even, untiring strokes through the medium of time, a medium more inert than water, without ripples, pervasive, colourless, odourless, dry as paper.

(Coetzee 1981: 143)

When the magistrate contemplates the apt reading of the poplarwood sticks readers may well link his conclusion about the unreadability of the archeological finds to the way in which *Waiting for the Barbarians* is written, namely as an open-ended allegory. When the magistrate refers to allegory, it is not only allegory as literary device which is connoted, but the very way in which this novel here and now is being written. The allegorisation in this novel has been widely discussed and need not be pointed out again, except to highlight that *Waiting for the Barbarians* is an allegory which, unlike the conventional allegory, cannot be resolved in specific referential truths.⁹ If writing is an intentional act, one may say, the agent refuses such a resolution. The allegory remains unsolved. In the novel time proceeds according to a circular logic. The town returns to the state in which it was in the beginning, namely a state of “waiting for the barbarians”. Concentric circularity rather than linear progress

towards a solution is also textualised by means of space, with the seasons constituting a time which is not “the time of history”. Written from the perspective of the magistrate, the narrative voice affirms the impossibility of gaining access to the truth of history, of gaining insight. The repetitious allegorical way of writing, resisting naturalisation, can be explained as an affirmation of this impossibility and inability, not only on the side of the fictional figure, but also on the side of the agent of this specific way of writing. The fictional speaker and the connoted act of writing proceed as if caught up in a limited perspective within time. The novel’s way of writing affirms the inability to read the archeological signs of history.

Does the agent wish to demonstrate that his writing is as caught up in the “cauldron” of history and as incapable of breaking through its temporal and spatial horizon as the magistrate is? Is the reason for this way of writing an intention of the agent to give notice of his own historicity, and to announce or demonstrate it, as David Attwell has argued concerning the writer’s discursive position? (cf Attwell 1993). Not only the choice of perspective in *Waiting for the Barbarians* but the rigour with which this perspective is maintained, as the quotation above demonstrates, indicates a choice by the agent to accept as historical and cultural placement and the limitations this has for his own perspective and horizon as a writer. Can this be seen as an ethical choice, in other words is the reason for the way of writing an ethical one? Attwell has argued that admitting to a certain historical and political complicity, however unwanted, is a political act, displaying a “politics of writing” (Attwell 1993).¹⁰ I would add to this, that the co-textualisation of writing and writing as reading in *Waiting for the Barbarians* display an intention to rigorously accept the implications of discursive placement for the act of writing or for the way in which one is to write, and that a consistent avoidance of meaning closure around certain truths is a display of the role a certain ethicality plays in the writing process.

The act of writing pertaining to *Waiting for the Barbarians* can be described as a practice consistent with the problem of perspective in the most rigorous manner. It will not offer interpretations in terms of all-encompassing truths. It will not subject meaning to its own perspective. As the quoted extract might demonstrate, writing consists very much of the writing of this very perspective from within. From within this perspective, the truth of history cannot be written except by way of allegorical signs. The acceptance of historical and cultural limitations for literary writing might also explain why there is a refusal to affirm the ethical in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. What is registered, is the impotence and absence of the ethical, absent except for negative signification. The consistence of ways of writing indicates a sense of purpose, but readers can construe this also as a sense of obligation, as the response to a felt imperative. An agent who acknowledges the discursivity and historicity of his

own literary act can be ascribed to this novel. In terms of action theory, it is an agent who acknowledges the fact of his own writing being an action in a specific time and space.

A concern with ways of writing beyond purposes of effect and efficacy can be deduced from *Life & Times of Michael K*. Amongst a range of indications, the interpretive possibility of the book's second section can be drawn upon to prove this. The medical officer connotes the literary author in various ways. Trying to "detect the germ of dishonesty at the heart of the conviction" that Michael K has a special meaning, the stand-in doctor thinks: "I am dubious anyhow that one can separate the self that scrutinises from the self that hides, setting them at odds like hawk and mouse" (Coetzee 1983: 226, 227). The voice of the writer is textualised by means of a hide-and-seek game. The letter form used towards the second half of this section reminds of Magda, who is also a literary author of sorts, writing in *In the Heart of the Country*. Interrupting the distanced reportage of Michael K's effort at escape and sojourn in his burrow, and marking a return of this report to what one could call an acknowledgement of the failure of Michael's attempt to establish a life outside the camps, this section could be read as an exercise in reflexion on the way the writing of Michael K should continue. Like a disciple the officer addresses Michael K as an object of veneration. The officer's fascination with Michael K and his desire to give him a meaning and a "name", to find out his "truth", connotes, inter alia, a writer trying to make meaning writable or to fulfil the promise of signification which literary practice in language holds. Michael K escapes from the camp where the officer was acting as his caretaker, affirming that this desire for a saving, all-encompassing truth is thwarted. The meaning the officer thinks to perceive in Michael K is a metaphysical one. Developing, as it does, in the letters the officer writes to Michael, it is also clearly imaginative and fictional, and the officer's discipleship of truth is contradicted by the parody on stories and names in this section where the camp officials pester Michael K with remarks such as "Tell us the truth, tell us the whole truth, and you can go back to bed, we won't bother you any more" and "You've got a story to tell and we want to hear it Tell us what we want to know, then we will leave you alone" (Coetzee 1983: 189, 192). In the last section, which follows upon the second one, Michael K is returned to banal realities as well as to the beginning of the story, trapped in Cape Town and planning another attempt at escape.

Why this circularity and why does Michael's attempt fail? Does the writing agent believe that he cannot postulate a being like Michael K as if it could effectively live free from the camps, free from history, and free from the impunity of the discourses of politics, control and war? Does he resist such a postulate because it would amount to reducing Michael K to a poetic, fictional figuration, to a figure who is a mere "story", similar to the fictional stories

which the camp officials weave around Michael K and similar to the desire for fulfilled meaning which the medical officer experiences? The way of writing can be explained as following certain guidelines, as if they were imperatives: on the one hand pinning identities on Michael K has to be avoided, but on the other hand, the desire to produce a purely fictive or poetical unity of signifier and signified in the form of Michael K also has to be resisted. (A purely poetical meaning is what the Dutch poet Achterberg achieves, according to Coetzee's analysis of *The Ballad of the Gasfitter* (Coetzee 1993: 69–90).)

One can interpret *Foe* as a deliberate investigation of the conditions of possibility of the writing of the other by means of a reconstruction of the writing of *Robinson Crusoe*. The agent of *Foe* places himself on a par with his fictional authors, Susan Barton and Mr Foe, in various ways. He uses Defoe's impositioning name for the supposed slave, "Friday", showing that he has no privileged access to the person or being so named, and that he himself is bound to the rewriting and further writing of a certain literary tradition. The upending of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* serves to investigate the possibility of a "fair", noncolonising way of writing the other, but it fails. There has been considerable debate about the reasons for the writer's decision to textualise Friday as mute. The writer thereby prevents writing from objectifying the other, as Michael Marais argues, drawing on the ethical relations between self and other as described by Levinas (cf Marais 1997: Chapter 4). Although not Marais's explicit intention, this is an argument for writing as ethical action with the agent following an ethical "ought". The agent wilfully prevents the fictional author figures to reduce the other to a sameness, so that an economy of ethical confrontation with the face of the other and with the inescapable and irreducible ethical address is developed. This economy actually holds for the agent of *Foe*'s writing. When the question of ethics is asked of the action of the writing agent, the ethical point does not reside in a Levinasian textualisation but in the way the textualising agent of *Foe*'s writing refrains from offering a solution to the problem of colonising writing. When the implied author revisits his writing and tries to enter Friday's world, Friday does speak in his own terms, but this silences writing, signifying that for this writer, too, the truth of Friday belongs to the domain of the unwritable:

But this is not a place of words. Each syllable, as it comes out, is caught and filled with water and diffused. This is a place where bodies are their own signs. It is the home of Friday.

He turns and turns till he lies at full length, his face to my face. The skin is tight across his bones, his lips are drawn back. I pass a fingernail across his teeth, trying to find a way in.

His mouth opens. From inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. It flows up through his body and out upon me; it passes

through the cabin, through the wreck; washing the cliffs and shores of the island, it runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth. Soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face.

(Coetzee 1986: 157)

The ethical quality of the writing of Friday has been contested. Coetzee has been blamed for not granting the other a voice, thereby representing him or her as factually voiceless and strengthening the colonial deafness to the other's voice and right to voice. Against this one can argue, firstly, that Friday is given a voice, since he learns to use linguistic signs.¹¹ Friday interrupts the discourse of the authors when he starts to write by way of drawings. He subverts their alphabet, makes signs they cannot understand and refuses to follow instructions. He is given voice, but not one which can be appropriated by Western linguistic and literary discourse. Does the agent wish to demonstrate the point where a specific literary tradition is confronted by its limits, and does he purposefully reside within the boundaries of this tradition, writing from the position of Mr Foe and Barton, as he wrote from the position of the conscientious but disconnected liberal in *Waiting for the Barbarians*? Friday's silence cannot be explained solely by the decision not to speak for or on behalf of the other who has been silenced by colonising discourses. Should this have been the only reason, the writing would simply have complied with what today has become a moral norm in postcolonial literary criticism. In today's jargon the agent would merely have been politically correct. One could argue that at the time of *Foe*'s writing – it was published in 1986 – the decision not to give a voice to the other was a genuinely and originally ethical one, since the moral discourse of postcolonialism had not yet established itself at that stage. However, *Foe* provides reasons for the muting of Friday which the debate has not fully accounted for. It is writing itself which mutes, and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* is presented as a case-in-point of this. The very fact of literary production has consequences for the representation of whoever is the object of writing, as the literary debates between Mr Foe and Susan Barton spell out. There is something about literary discursivity itself which is ethically compromising. Most interpretations of *Foe* see Mr Foe as the auctorial and authoritative writer figure. However, in the course of the dialogues with Barton he begins to speak as a deconstructionist, believing that all writing is a copy of a copy of a copy. Barton's desire for the truth of her object is however, also potentially imprisoning. Barton represents the voice of the object of writing as substantial being, and, ironically, speaks for Friday, textualising the writer desiring to speak for or on behalf of the other. The fictional author figures in *Foe* are not only confronted with a moral dilemma due to Friday's muteness, but are driven to reconsider their aesthetic presuppositions to the point where Mr Foe arrives at a Derridean conclusion about meaning in literature:

We are accustomed to believe that our world was created by God speaking the word; but I ask, may it not be that he wrote it, wrote a word so long we have yet to come to the end of it? May it not be that God continually writes the world, the world and all that is in it?"

(Coetzee 1986: 143)

Postcolonial critics such as Parry claim that doctrines of the respect for human rights and open attitudes in interhuman relationships can vouchsafe a non-masterly writing practice (Parry 1996). A radically logical and consistent interpretation of the white writing position might conclude that an argument such as Parry's borders on a superficial and prescriptive political correctness, and is moralistic. The moralist tendencies of much present-day postcolonialist literary criticism constitute a denial of one of the intricate and ironic implications of critical positions, namely that they are facilitated by the very Western, theoretically and traditionally liberalist ethos which they militate against. In other words, they are speaking for or on behalf of the "other" even as they militate against this colonising and patronising, if not pertinently unjust, colonial and literary practice. They fail to account for their speaking and writing position since the moral validity of their critical views is not contested or explained. It is presented as if this validity were self-evident.

The problem of colonial and postcolonial writing is cast in terms of a problem of literary writing per se – the problem of the relationship between writer and object of writing. The reader would be justified in wondering whether *Foe* responds to the problem of naming and story-making poised in the course of the writing of *Life & Times of Michael K*. The last chapter of *Foe* could be understood as an effort to read rather than write Friday, or, in the terms of lyrical closing lines of the novel, to listen and sense the object of writing in his or her substantial truth rather than to name it and thereby posit substantial being.¹² In the final chapter a narrative voice which appears to belong to the implied author revisits his writing, relegating it, with Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, to the dust and death of history. However, this is not a "self-erasure" as it has been called, a destruction or deconstruction of writing, relegating meaning to the status of a mere trace, since the implied author also revisits his own writing of *Foe* by literally rewriting or repeating sections of it. During this imaginary underwater visit to the realm of the slaves themselves, the shipwreck, that which the colonial adventure and castaway authors forgot or negated, Friday does speak, but not in a way which narrative literary discourse can represent. It is, rather, the voice of the narrator which now is silenced or drowned out.

Read as an incisive investigation of the conditions of possibility of writing an "other", *Foe* does not display the successful avoidance of objectifying or othering "Friday", but the inability of writing to honour its object, as if writing

is doomed to posit, postulate and thereby fail the very substance it claims to bring to life. The ethical aspect of the writing of Friday rests, I would like to propose, in the fact that the agent textualises him exactly in the way in which Defoe and the colonial tradition did, namely not only as “Friday” but also as the silenced object of a colonial and literary master discourse. Instead of writing Friday from a self-critically enlightened postcolonial perspective, by way of atonement or correction, the literary silenced “Friday” of the tradition is set up as an ongoing challenge to literary writing. The writing refrains from producing a corrective truth, as if observing a belief that the truth is still being written by God. This might also explain why Friday is textualised as a sign refusing appropriation. One is reminded of the medical officer’s words to Michael K in the novel preceding *Foe*: “Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory, if you know that word. It was an allegory – speaking at the highest level – of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it” (Coetzee 1983: 228).

The agent of *Foe* is, then, not simply avoiding the moral impunity of giving Friday a narrative existence in terms of a culturally, historically and socially limited discourse. He confronts the fact that the writing of Friday cannot be avoided. Writing cannot avoid writing Friday, or, in deconstructive phraseology, the agent of *Foe* cannot NOT write Friday, and writing means of necessity to name and to objectify, since it means to make use of what Paul de Man has called “the positing power of language”: “The positing power of language is both entirely arbitrary, in having a strength that cannot be reduced to necessity, and entirely inexorable in that there is no alternative to it” (De Man 1979: 62). The writer is guilty by the mere fact of his act of writing, it seems, since he cannot avoid positing substantial being and by the same token fail it.

If this interpretation is plausible, then the problem of colonial and post-colonial writing is to be read within the context of a more encompassing problem of literary production, one with which the agent seems to occupy himself as he writes from the very first novel, *Dusklands*. I would argue that the way in which Friday is written in *Foe* is ethical because it is part of a self-confrontation of the literary agent with his own discursive power. The fictionalising ending of *Foe* could be understood as an act of affirmation of the agent’s inability to transcend the dilemma produced by the very act of writing as such. The writing would then display the acceptance of responsibility for the act of writing in terms of an insight or belief on the side of the agent. The writing does not simply oblige a moralistic impulse, produced and maintained by new literary critical discourses, in this case the discourse of postcolonialism. It encounters the “heart” of the problem of writing the other in an uncompromising way, and does so out of a free choice since the norm which seems to explain the act of writing is not a socially, politically or even morally endorsed one. It seems to arise from within the fact of the writing as

real action and practice as such. The observation of socially, discursively established norms – often close to moralism – contains its own opportune rewards.

What gives this logic of writing and the self-silencing gesture with which the novel closes their ethical weight? I would interpret it as an honouring of the unwritability of that reality which is Friday's world and realm, namely his life, fate and death as a slave and that of slavery in general. The narrative erases itself at the end of *Foe* as a gesture of respect towards the reality of the Fridays of the world. It admits to the inability of writing as a linguistic and discursive practice to bridge the gap with what Lacan calls the Real. At the moment when this realm is reached and when it seems as if the one-to-one, I-you encounter with Friday will finally come about, writing dissipates.

Other South African writers have, in various ways, tried to accept and live out their historical responsibility as white writers. Nadine Gordimer, Alan Paton, André P. Brink and other names come to mind, should one think of modern South African writing. This does not mean that their acts of writing are ethical. The ethical point in the writing of *Foe* is that the writer is prepared to become guilty by writing Friday. The guilt does not originate from a broad moral or ethical problem embedded in history and in the discursive positions history has placed literary agents. It originates in the agent's free decision to write this book. What he accepts is that he will produce another "Friday", as Defoe did. No moral nicety can absolve the agent from this "guilt". In purposefully writing failed narratives (I derive the term "failed narrative" from Carusi's use of it. See Carusi (1989: 135-136)), the agent of novels like *Foe* and *Age of Iron* establishes a writing position beyond the discourse of postcolonial guilt since the ethical compromise is sensed on the level of action and responded to on the level of a rigorously responsible writing practice.

Age of Iron ends with the fictional writer, Curren who is writing letters to her daughter, describing Vercueil's embrace in a manner which suggests that the description is a metaphor or imagined experience of death. Technically speaking, Curren could not describe her own death without breaking the novel's narrative logic.

"Is it time?" I said.

I got back into bed, into the tunnel between the cold sheets. The curtains parted; he came in beside me. For the first time I smelled nothing. He took me in his arms and held me with mighty force, so that the breath went out of me in a rush. From that embrace there was no warmth to be had.

(Coetzee 1990: 181)

The writing of *Age of Iron* ends with these words intentionally, and one, perhaps quite obvious, reason for so doing is that the death of writing itself is

textualised – not only the death or end of Curren’s letter-writing, but of novelistic writing and of white writing, since the the last-mentioned are contextualised throughout the novel, the connotations around the term “letter” contributing to this meaning. There is, however, another implication to this way of writing. Writing ends at that point when it would have written the event of death as such. Should one treat this ending as an intentional act, then the text provides various possible explanations for this ending. *Age of Iron* as a whole is a story about Curren’s effort to understand death as it happens to the black youths in their struggle for liberation and in the townships caught up in violence. While trying to come to grips with this reality, her ethical beliefs, based on what one could call the classical liberal ethics of letters or principles, are overhauled. Curren fails to establish communication and understanding between herself and this reality, but she does textualise a heroism which can be linked to the heroism of the black youths as she confronts her own death and accepts the collapse of boundaries of various kinds as this happens. Does the agent refrain from writing Curren’s death because of an impulse or belief that death as event and experience (of the one dying), as reality, cannot be relayed? Put from a different perspective: to write the experience of death of another is to imply that one knows death as reality, and the writer writing about death cannot know death as reality. The very act of writing proves that the act survives that which it is about and that to which it might seek to testify.

The gesture is not a self-demeaning one, which as it were says, “These are only words, this is only writing”. On the contrary, the novels provide ample examples of a writing exploring and exploiting the descriptive and representative potential of language and discourse. The act is more aptly understood when seen as the positive display of a decision and intention to write or not to write in this way rather than that. Given the explicit South Africanness of *Age of Iron* it might be in order to relate this specific act of writing to the political realities of the apartheid society and specifically to the State of Emergency during which *Age of Iron* was written. In this society death was manipulated, bandied about so to speak, used as a strategy and reduced to the fictions of political discourses which claimed to be able to explain history. Could this explain a writing which seems to honour the reality of death or death as actual event and experience by refraining from writing it, and by clearly questioning readily available ethical discourses of principle which claim to be able to deal with death?

Derek Attridge has proposed that Curren’s entrusting her letters to Vercueil, with the request that he mails them after her death, and with the knowledge that he is not to be trusted, can be interpreted in terms of a Derridean ethics of trust where trust means trusting the untrustworthy (Attridge 1994). *Age of Iron* would then textualise a Derridean ethics. This does not mean that the act of writing is itself ethical – at most one can grant it ethical concern. The question,

“Is the writer ethical?”, posed methodologically as the question, “Is this an ethical act (of writing)?”, would focus on the response of the writing agent to her or his textualisation of the ethical. The Derridean ethics of trust articulates an extreme ethics in which the ethical agent exposes herself to an extent which subverts the right to self-protection, generally accepted as a moral right. *Age of Iron* allows readers to link this impossible ethics to the writing agency and his writing situation, since the writer of *Age of Iron* is the one who factually delivers the letters by writing Curren writing. From an action theoretical point of view, this might compromise the writing agency ethically. Concern with the inability of white culture and letters to produce an ethical response to the culture of death at the boundaries of white establishment, is best demonstrated by not writing another book which deals with it, in other words by refusing to continue with one’s own ethically impotent white writing. Is it not so that not to write, thereby demonstrating that one identifies with the ethical failure textualised by means of Curren, would display ethical integrity in this case?

If one concedes that the very act of writing under discussion, namely the novel *Age of Iron*, allows readers to put this question to the writing agent, are there indications of a response to this ethical dilemma? I would like to suggest the following as possible indications. Firstly, the ending of the novel can be seen as writing announcing its own death, since the ending of the novel coincides with a withdrawal from the writing of Curren’s death. The writer demonstrates that he, too, is unable to respond to death and admits this by refraining from writing it as event and actual experience. Writing shows that it has arrived at a limit, and it indicates, by textual display, what this limit is. Secondly, by virtue of the play around “letter” and the binary opposition letter/speech, the agent of *Age of Iron* comes to occupy the position of ultimate custodian and mailman of Curren’s letters. Can this messenger be trusted? The writing agent takes up the position of observer, testifying to Curren’s encounters and death. The ending demonstrates practically, that is in the form of an actual writing practice, that writing can only testify to death in the sense in which testimony means that that to which one testifies, did not happen to oneself and that the witness proper is radically absent. *Age of Iron* is not only the writing of Curren writing, but also a writing of Curren dying. It is a reading of the culture of death in the townships, provoked and maintained by the state, in terms of a more intimate, personal and forgettable death, as if heroic death-in-comradeship is also to be read as singular event. The act of writing pertaining to *Age of Iron* could then be understood as an act of testimony to dying and to the dead, and as a performance of honouring in which the way of writing displays that the agent takes responsibility for the fact of his action.

I think it is a feature of this writing not to seek affirmation of any ethical value content, since that would be unethical given the discursive agential self-awareness and the humility in the face of history which permeates the writing.

If the ethics I have here ascribed to the act of writing is plausible, then it would be unethical for this writing to proclaim and support ethical truths. At the most, writing could create a space where the ethical might signify in its own terms as it does should we accept Attridge's argument.

4

For the method presented here this article does not wish to make strong claims. On the contrary, some pertinent problems can be readily pointed out. Firstly, the ethical question as put is answered by what appears to be a circular argument. That the act could be ethical has to be presumed in order to argue that it is ethical. This circularity can hardly be avoided and is typical of much literary interpretation. To establish whether literary writing is ethical, one has to allow this possibility into one's interpretive procedures. I would like to defend the apparent circularity with reference to Danto's analysis of the way in which we understand events based on human actions (Danto 1973). Danto shows that the knowledge and experience of our own and others' actions form an interpretive and representational frame by means of which we make further events intelligible. This frame comprises, *inter alia*, our knowledge about human potential and limitations, and to Danto's discussion of the procedures of understanding one could arguably add our knowledge and experience of types of action commonly termed "ethical".

Secondly, I cannot prove beyond doubt that the reason for doing, to speak with Davidson, in the cases discussed here is ethical. Other possible reasons could be quoted. We do, furthermore, not have complete access to the so-called "inner world" or psychic dynamics engaged in the performance of the act, as little as the agent her- or himself has it. Again in this adding on to Danto, I would propose that we know that we do not know this, and that we are used to evaluating certain actions against the backdrop of this knowing that we do not know (with certainty). The answers to the ethical question as put can, however, be considered critically and comparatively when they are kept within the bounds of the understanding of that action which is the text.

I have tried to interpret one or two ways of writing which recur in the first six novels by J.M. Coetzee by way of considering possible reasons for the decision to write in this way rather than another. The advantage of the theoretically oriented question about the ethics of literature is that it ends up with descriptions of actions and what they possibly display, rather than with descriptions of value contents. Values cannot, however, be excluded from the method since they contribute to our recognising ways of doing as, possibly, ethical. I hope that this preliminary investigation into the question of the ethical act has demonstrated that one does not have to start with grounding,

founding value contents to understand ethical acts of writing. Hopefully the investigation also demonstrates that starting with discursive, socially normative and/or ideologically based values – for example activist as against liberalist value sets – undermines the possibility of answering the question. I would claim that an action-based description of literary ethics colludes with other anti-foundationalist descriptions of literary ethics, from Levinas to Bakhtin.

If, as I proposed in the beginning, any study of literary ethics has to broach the question “Is the writer ethical?”, that is, “Is this an ethical act of writing?”, then the answer concerning the novels drawn upon here would be that the acts of writing display a drive to develop an ethical writing practice, a practice in which the writing responds to aspects of the writing process such as the positing power of language which threaten to ethically compromise the act of writing and its agent. As such, this practice implicitly comments on the discursive practices holding sway in the South Africa at the time of these novels’ production and publication. Instead of offering discursive meanings by means of which the reigning discourse can be challenged, thereby implicitly affirming the presiding discursive order, they offer an ethical counterpractice.

Notes

1. It is interesting to note that Coetzee, in the article “The Rhetoric of the Passive in English”, states:
I am arguing that the work of interpretation should begin after the intentionality of the rhetorical structure of the sentence has been fathomed and assessed.
(Coetzee 1992: 163)
2. This study is “The Act of Writing and Its Ethics in the Novels of J.M. Coetzee” (De Jong, Marianne; unpublished work in progress).
3. The German term for this – “Begründungsproblematik” – is worth mentioning.
4. See also, for example, Von Kutshera (1973: 66–72).
5. The work of Levinas is a current example of an effort to answer this question. There are various other attempts. For an analytical but rather rationalistic answer see Gewirth (1973).
6. The reasons for this choice require some extensive defence given the present return of the speech act, and cannot be discussed in the context of this article.
7. Amongst other commentators, Ian Glenn and Brian Macaskill have discussed this doubling of the Magda figure. See Glenn (1996: 122–123) and Macaskill (1994:

21-23).

8. In novels such as *Life & Times of Michael K* and *Foe* “home” comes to connote the written text or the novel as home.
9. Attwell argues that the purpose of the allegorical writing in *Waiting for the Barbarians* is to disseminate meaning so that the sign is not made subject to prevalent political discourse and its truth claims. This argument has been widely endorsed.
10. This admission is especially obvious in *Foe*.
11. As Annamaria Carusi points out, his silence places Friday in a position of power over Barton and Mr Foe. See Carusi (1989).
12. Michael Marais has pointed out the link between writing and reading and writing and listening in these first Coetzee novels (Marais 1997: 246).

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