

# Materiality and the Madness of Reading: J.M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* as Post- Apartheid Text\*

**Louise Bethlehem**

## Summary

Unlike the "situational metafiction" (Attwell 1993: 20) of J.M. Coetzee's earlier novels, whose imbrication in the political matrix of the late-apartheid State has become a matter of critical orthodoxy, *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* (2003) rejects a South African emplacement for its writer-protagonist and hereby seems to suspend questions relating to the positioning of this work within post-apartheid literary culture. Coetzee's privileging of the transcultural, or formal aesthetic, dimensions of the work ratifies the normative exclusion of the historical master-narrative in the name of universalism (Butler 2000). Yet, for all that it defensively forecloses the possibility of "post-apartheid South Africa" being taken as its referent, I claim, "Lesson 8: At the Gate", of *Elizabeth Costello* contains a persistent interrogation of the relations between representation and material embodiment that draws the text back – despite itself – into the semiotic matrix of South African literary culture, here to intersect the working through of these relations in extraliterary form before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The *survie/survival* of the material body before a tribunal oriented towards "confession" (Coetzee 2003: 211) presents an opportunity for the haunted and displaced analogy with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that my paper pursues.

## Opsomming

Anders as die "situasiemetafiksie" (Attwell 1993: 20) van J.M. Coetzee se vroeë romans, wat in die politieke matriks van die laatapartheidstaat ingebed was en gevolglik 'n saak van kritiese ortodoksie geword het, verwerp *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* (2003) vir sy skrywerhoofkarakter 'n Suid-Afrikaanse inplasing, en steek hy daarmee blykbaar 'n stokkie voor alle vroeë opsigte van die posisionering van die werk in 'n postapartheid literêre kultuur. Coetzee se fokus op die transkulturele of formeel-estetiese dimensies van die werk bekragtig die normatiewe uitsluiting van die historiese meestervertelling in die naam van universalisme (Butler 2000). Tog, hoewel hy defensief verhinder dat "postapartheid-Suid-Afrika" as sy verwysing gebruik word, bevat "Lesson 8: At the Gate" van *Elizabeth Costello* 'n volgehoue ondersoek na die verhoudinge tussen verteenwoordiging en materiële beliggaming, wat die teks ondanks homself terugsuig in die semiotiese matriks van die Suid-Afrikaanse literêre kultuur, waar dit die deurtasting van hierdie verhoudinge in ekstraliterêre vorm voor die Waarheids-en-Versoeningskommissie (WVK) ondervang. Die *survie/oorlewing* van die materiële liggaam voor 'n tribunaal wat op "bekentenis" ingestel is (Coetzee 2003: 211) bied 'n

geleentheid vir die misplaaste analogie met die Waarheids-en-Versoeningskommissie wat ek in my opstel ondersoek.

In the last of the eight lessons that partly constitute the work which bears her name, Elizabeth Costello stands at the gate, and standing there, is abandoned to a form of deixis which is irreducible to something like the coordinates, in time or space, of her literal positioning in a town where “the guardian of the gate never sleeps and the people in the cafés seem to have nowhere to go” (Coetzee 2003: 195). We are thoroughly in the province of metafiction, a conventional enough emplacement for a text by J.M. Coetzee as David Attwell has so productively argued (1993: 20). It is thus not surprising to see the fiction of reference to setting turning back on itself to trace instead a “supplementary” course (Derrida [1967]1974) which targets not so much the fictional world as fictionality itself. The very title of the entry, “At the Gate”, constitutes a form of fictive diversion: the distraction – or entertainment – of intertextuality. The title diverts naming one says Derrida, whose “homonymic” recital of Kafka in “Devant la loi” – a piece which like “At the Gate” deliberately intersects Kafka’s *récit* “*Vor dem Gesetz*” (“Before the Law”) – can readily be drawn into this discussion (Derrida [1982]1987: 128-149, reprinted as 1982[1992]: 181-220; Kafka [1914]1983: 3-4). “One title occasionally resonates like the citation of another”, states Derrida. “But as soon as it names something else as well, it no longer simply cites. Rather, the one title diverts the other for the benefit of a homonym. All of this could never occur without some degree of prejudice or usurpation” (Derrida [1982]1987: 128). Derrida prefaces his reading of Kafka by stressing the paradoxical singularity of intertextual citation. Its supplementary agency of naming implicitly precipitates the emergence of type of “event”, a term I use in anticipation of Derek Attridge’s deployment of it through Derrida and *for* Coetzee (cf. Attridge 2004a and the discussion below).

Drawing on these contributions, it is now possible to recast the illusion of reference presented by the title of Coetzee’s text. “At the Gate” deliberately opens its syntax to an isomorphic allusion: preposition plus article plus noun. But it simultaneously opens out onto the extended *performance* of citation which contours the intertextual coming into being of Coetzee’s text as one index of the literariness of this very text. It is thus literariness that Elizabeth names, rather than say, “Franz Kafka”, in the “*mise en scène*” (Coetzee 2003: 209) which makes hers one of the “improper” (Derrida [1982] 1987: 131) and always provisional proper names of literature:

It is the same with the Kafka business. The wall, the gate, the sentry, are straight out of Kafka. So is the demand for a confession, so is the courtroom

with the dozing bailiff and the panel of old men in their crows' robes pretending to pay attention while she thrashes about in the toils of her own words. Kafka, but only the superficialities of Kafka; Kafka reduced and flattened to a parody.

(Coetzee 2003: 209)

To put it differently, the coils of words which are attributed to Elizabeth but which originate neither with her nor wholly with her author, draw language into the familiar embrace of the "poetic function" in Roman Jakobson's typology: the turning of the message on itself which dislocates the sign into the self-reference of literariness (Jakobson 1960).<sup>1</sup>

My own prejudice, to recall Derrida, in delineating these turns lies in the staging of a kind of anticipatory defence against prematurely conceding Kafka's pre-eminence within the interpretative field of Coetzee's text, at least the field within which I would like to position myself. I seek, somewhat wilfully, to resist submission to the law of allegory, the allegory of Kafka's "Law", viewed from the perspective of a universalist construction of the literary canon, even if Kafka's written lore also encompasses "In the Penal Colony" (Kafka [1919]1983: 140) – a work whose relevance for the questions I shall be raising will become apparent soon enough. I will thus have very little to say in the argument that follows about the Kafkaesque genealogy of "Lesson 8", as it is also named, despite my awareness that such a genealogy might plausibly be charted. For all their foregrounding, I experience the allusions to Kafka in "At the Gate" as somehow recalcitrant in releasing meaning. These resistant allusions nevertheless invite recuperation as the signifiers of a self-reflexive engagement with literariness. In this respect, they are consonant with the larger interrogation of the formal demands of the literary text which is a distinctive trait of Coetzee's oeuvre as well as of the discrete "lesson" within whose parameters "Kafka" is now held in suspension.

But what of J.M. Coetzee – the other proper name which impinges on our string of citations given the "axiomatic consensus" that Derrida, in the essay on Kafka, terms authorship (Derrida [1982]1987: 130)? How might we readers position the generically anomalous sequence of texts consumed as

---

1. With respect precisely to literariness, let me emphasise that my casting of citation as a kind of productive diversion that summons us into the presence of the literary is irreducible to something like a familiar "anxiety of influence" in Harold Bloom's sense (1973), a notion which Coetzee's narrator in the Nobel Lecture *He and His Man* seems also to repudiate: "For it seems to him now that there are but a handful of stories in the world; and if the young are to be forbidden to prey upon the old then they must sit forever in silence" ([2003]2004: 16).

*Elizabeth Costello* with respect to the body of writing by Coetzee that has preceded it? More specifically, what relations does it entertain with those texts which proclaim their – and their author’s – South African descent? Literary critical historiography shows that for many of us, to have read Coetzee in the wake of David Attwell’s rigorous elucidation of the pre-1994 corpus as “situational metafiction” (Attwell 1993: 20) has meant partially to endorse Coetzee’s own claims regarding the relative autonomy of “the novel” no longer beholden, as Coetzee once notoriously put it, to “conclusions that are checkable by history (as a child’s school-work is checked by a schoolmistress)” (Coetzee 1988: 3). At the same time, some critics, Attwell included, have insisted that Coetzee’s studied self-reflexivity in the face of what might be called the “representational literalism” of apartheid-era South African literature was neither intransitive nor self-contained, a move which has allowed Coetzee’s imbrication in the political matrix of the apartheid state to be addressed (Attwell 1993; cf. also Gallagher 1991).<sup>2</sup> Unlike *In the Heart of the Country* ([1977]1978), *Waiting for the Barbarians* ([1980]1982), *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), or *Age of Iron* ([1990]1991), however, whose South African historicity is part of the history of their reception, and unlike the recognisably post-apartheid text *Disgrace* (1999), *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* (2003) seems to resist the impulse that might turn its very obliqueness back into the folds of the post-1994 state. The novel, if such it is, rejects all but a contingent South African emplacement for its writer-protagonist, so that mimesis alone surely cannot suffice in this regard. Instead, Coetzee’s privileging of the transcultural moment and, moreover, of the heightened metafictional and allegorical dimensions of the work, particularly in its eighth lesson, seems to ratify a universalism that dispenses with the longing marks of a genealogy – Coetzee’s, but equally my own – which might reveal *us* to be the expatriate subjects of the former apartheid state. What does John Coetzee’s *boyhood* matter to Elizabeth Costello, the female Australian writer protagonist who seems to reiterate her author-progenitor’s consistent refusal of forms of writing narrowed to the certain consolations of what she terms “the question of historical guilt” (Coetzee 2003: 203)?

But is this ostensible veering away from South Africa, borne through Elizabeth Costello’s peripatetic status in the world at large and displaced, moreover, in “Lesson 8”, beyond the cosmopolitanism even of *this* world, to be trusted? Drawing on Judith Butler’s claims in her essay “Restaging the Universal”, I would like to interrogate this turn as an instance of what Butler

---

2. On “representational literalism” see Damian Grant [1970]1985: 14-15. For a consideration of the realist orientation of apartheid-era literature see Bethlehem (2001).

calls “spectral universality” (Butler 2000: 23). The latter term arises in the course of Butler’s efforts to convey how the allegedly universal staging of a problematic can be made, despite itself, to divulge its specific provenance. Butler’s claim concerning the “contamination” of the universal by the “particular contexts from which it emerges and in which it travels” (pp. 39, 40) proceeds with reference to a reading of Hegel which allows her to lay bare the mechanism of contamination:

The universal can be the universal only to the extent that it remains untainted by what is particular, concrete, and individual. Thus it requires the constant and meaningless vanishing of the individual .... Without that vanishing immediacy, we might say, universality itself would vanish.

(Butler 200: 40)

It is to the vanishing mediation of South Africa in the generation of the metafictional text before us that I now orient myself.

If, according to Butler, an overdetermined spectrality inheres in the very gesture that seeks to ground the legitimising authority of the universal, how might “South Africa” be understood as its haunt? Might this spectrality perhaps reveal itself between the lines or as a catch in the voice, so to speak? The catch in the voice of yet another moribund Elizabeth perhaps, Elizabeth Curren this time, as she revisits the displacement her daughter voices: “I was born in Africa, in South Africa” (Coetzee 1990)?<sup>3</sup> Is it possible to read Coetzee’s expatriate formalism in *Elizabeth Costello*, its laboured metafictionality, as somehow “contaminated” by the traces of a repudiated content? Where does this content resist its repudiation, over and above the spectrality of the bodies, veiled or perhaps in plain view, in the Marianhill clinic of Elizabeth Costello’s sister Blanche (Coetzee 2003: 134)? There is something deeply unsettling about Elizabeth’s description of the children dying of HIV/Aids at Marianhill, but does it consist in her reckoning with a morbidity that is seen, or in her phantasmatic evocation of an unseen residue? “As for the children, perhaps Blanche has tucked the worst cases away *out of sight*, but she is surprised at how gay even a dying

---

3. For an extended comparison of Elizabeth Costello and Elizabeth Curren, see Dorothy Kuykendal’s “‘I Follow the Pen’: The (Dis)Location of Two Elizabeth C’s” (2005). Derek Attridge cautions us regarding a potential ambiguity that plays around the name of the letter-writer in *Age of Iron*. She is unnamed at first, but we eventually learn that her married name is “Curren” and that her initials are “E.C.”. However, both Coetzee himself, in the interviews in *Doubling the Point* (1999: 250, 340), and some critics – presumably following the author’s extra-textual comments – refer to her as “Elizabeth Curren” (Attridge 2004a: 94-95).

I will be revisiting the intersection of the two Elizabeths below.

child can be. It is as Blanche said in her book: with love and care and the right drugs, these innocents can be brought to the *very gate of death* without fear” (Coetzee 2003: 134; my italics). I need not belabour the reference to “the very gate of death”, but I do want to voice, at least, the question of the relation between those South African subjects who do not disclose visible evidence of their suffering and the ones that do – tucked away somehow out of Elizabeth Costello’s direct sight but lingering nevertheless in collective memory by virtue of the flagrantly corporeal displays enacted before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).<sup>4</sup> To raise such questions, in disregard for something like the manifest textual content of Coetzee’s work, is to presume to read *Elizabeth Costello* against its transcultural and universalising aspirations. It is to grapple with my own stealthy insistence that this is (also) a post-apartheid text without acceding, albeit through inversion, to a trivial essentialism mirrored in Rian Malan’s open speculation in October 2003: “Now that Coetzee has left us, is his Nobel really a triumph for the Rainbow Nation, as our newspapers claim?” (<<http://www.time.com/time/archive/preview/0,10987,493312,00.html>>).

Deflection then, not defection. For all that it defensively forecloses the possibility of “post-apartheid South Africa” been taken as its referent, let me risk the proposition that *Elizabeth Costello* contains a persistent interrogation of the relations between representation and material embodiment that draws the text back, despite itself, I will eventually claim, into the semiotic matrix of post-apartheid South African literary culture. I will substantiate this view through taking up the penultimate text of the work again.

For readers concerned with the theoretical reach of testimony, Elizabeth Costello’s positioning, in “Lesson 8”, at the threshold between life and death illuminates a *différance* (Derrida [1968]1982) internal to the “confession” she is constrained to make (Coetzee 2003: 212), particularly if we view her predicament as a narratological displacement – a form of rendering literal, a rending into plot – of the question that Coetzee addresses elsewhere: Can secular confession, devoid of a “confessor empowered to absolve” ever lead, in Coetzee’s phrase, “to that *end of the chapter* whose attainment is the goal of confession” ([1985]1992: 253)? Instead of the end of a chapter, however, we have before us a chapter that ends the supposed or reconstructed biographical sequence by prolonging it.<sup>5</sup> But what is

---

4. A fuller discussion of HIV/Aids as providing an interpretive context for *Elizabeth Costello* remains largely beyond the scope of this paper, but see Footnote 7.

5. Attridge’s discussion of the problem of terminating a *confessional* sequence refers repeatedly to the TRC, but addresses a different set of questions from those I will be unfolding (Attridge 2004a: 138-161). The ongoing

prolonged in this “afterlife” (2003: 209) is precisely not testimony whose conditions of possibility become increasingly tenuous – it is the body. The ineluctable corporeality with which the entry begins – “It is a hot afternoon. The square is packed with visitors. Few spare a glance for the white-haired woman who, suitcase in hand, descends from the bus. She wears a blue cotton frock; her neck, in the sun, is burned red and beaded with sweat” (Coetzee 2003: 193) – persists, long after the diegesis has suspended the facticity of a world reduced to the coordinates of a spectacularly failed and insistently clichéd “simulation”: “It is the same with the Kafka business .... Kafka, but only the superficialities of Kafka; Kafka reduced and flattened to a parody” (p. 209).

The body abides; Elizabeth Costello resides within it. The lesson insists on this.

For the moment, all she hears is the slow thud of the blood in her ears, just as all she feels is the soft touch of the sun on her skin. That at least she does not have to invent: this dumb, faithful body that has accompanied her every step of the way, this gentle lumbering monster that has been given to her to look after, this shadow turned to flesh that stands on two feet like a bear and laves itself continually from the inside with blood. Not only is she *in* this body, this thing which not in a thousand years could she have dreamed up, so far beyond her powers would it be, she somehow *is* this body; and all around her on the square, on this beautiful morning, these people, somehow, *are* their bodies too. (Coetzee 2003: 210)

The material body appears irreducible despite its discursive fabrication; in excess of its discursive fabrication: “That at least she does not have to invent.” Moreover, the course of Elizabeth’s reflection makes the fabricated discourse appear to partake of an irreducible reality in a manner that can be specified with respect to extratextual coordinates. In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler points out that it is possible to read invocations of the “materiality” of the body, Costello’s present appeal included, as a form of nostalgia for what Butler terms a grounding and constitutive extradiscursive principle of “necessity”. This necessity is frequently formulated as the claim that “bodies live and die; eat and sleep; feel pain, pleasure; endure illness and violence”, and that these “‘facts’ ... cannot be dismissed as mere construction”. “Surely,” says Butler temporarily inhabiting an argument she

---

chronological deformation of the biographical sequence of the character called “Elizabeth Costello” is apparent in “As a Woman Grows Older”, *New York Review of Books*, 15 January 2004, pp. 11-14, as well as in Coetzee’s most recent novel, *Slow Man* (2005).

will eventually reject, “there must be some kind of necessity that accompanies these primary and irrefutable experiences” (Butler 1993: xi).

I will return to Butler’s counterargument, phrased in terms of the vertiginous chiasmic relationship between language and the body, below. For now, let me note that the understanding that body exists, distinct from the language which signifies it, is partly produced in “At the Gate” through deliberate textual recursion – resulting less in vertigo than in the consolidation of the materiality of the living body in yet another text which is, and is not, Elizabeth’s.

There is an episode in the *Odyssey* that always sends a shiver down her back. Odysseus has descended into the kingdom of the dead to consult the seer Tiresias. Following instructions, he digs a furrow, cuts the throat of his favourite ram, lets its blood flow into the furrows. As the blood pours, the pallid dead crowd around, slavering for a taste, until to hold them off Odysseus has to draw his sword .... She believes most unquestionably in the ram, the ram dragged by its master down to this terrible place. The ram is not just an idea, the ram is alive though right now it is dying. If she believes in the ram, then does she believe in its blood too, this sacred liquid, sticky, dark, almost black, pumped out in gouts on to soil where nothing will grow? The favourite ram of the king of Ithaca, so runs the story, yet treated in the end as a mere bag of blood, to be cut open and poured from. She could do the same, here and now, turn herself into a bag, cut her veins and let herself pour on to the pavement, into the gutter. For that, finally, is all it means to be alive: to be able to die. Is this vision the sum of her faith: the vision of the ram and what happens to the ram? Will it be a good enough story for them, her hungry judges?

(Coetzee 2003: 211)

Costello’s invocation of the ram, an identification with it that amounts to a radically *literal* reading of its being (cf. Attridge 2004a: 39-40), mimes for us the metonymic transfer that we perform, as readers, when we lend our own corporeality to the text to animate the fiction of *hers*. Our imbrication in the reading process is not merely coincidental to my argument, nor is the consolidation of the material body – (“The ram is not just an idea, the ram is alive.” (Coetzee 2003: 211)) – the only process that might be observed here. Following Derek Attridge’s extremely rich work on “literature in the event”, which is closely allied to the notion of a literal reading (Attridge 2004a: 39), I suggest that we understand this passage to contour an “*event* in reading” whose unfolding, Attridge claims, delineates the very course of the ethical in literature (2004b: 654). The staging of this event is crucially bound up with the irruption-into-text of the material body.

What does it mean for Attridge to put forth a theory of “literature in the event” (the subtitle of his volume on Coetzee) that couples literariness with



the ethical? In *The Singularity of Literature*, Attridge argues that the literary work is “an act, an event of reading, never entirely separable from the act-event (or acts-events) of writing that brought it into being as a potentially readable text, never entirely insulated from the contingencies of the history into which it is projected and within which it is read” (Attridge 2004c: 59). It brings about the “singular putting into play of – while also testing and transforming – the set of codes and conventions that make up the institution of literature and the wider cultural formation of which it is part” (p. 106). Form, Attridge argues, is crucial to the “*staging* of meaning” (p. 109) that is the literary work, and is integral to the work’s capacity to exceed the mere endorsement of referentiality (p. 119). Moreover, it is precisely with respect to the formal performativity of the work that the ethical dimension of the act of reading arises:

The distinctive ethical demand made by the literary work is not to be identified with its characters or its plot, with the human intercourse and judgments it portrays .... Rather, it is to be found in what makes it literature: its staging of the fundamental processes whereby language works upon us and upon the world. The literary work demands a reading that does justice to the formal elaboration of these processes, a reading in the sense of a performance, a putting-into-action or putting-into-play that involves both active engagement and a letting-go, a hospitable embrace of the other.

(Attridge 2004c: 130)

In a slightly different formulation, Attridge stresses that “[t]he distinctiveness of the ethical in literature, and in artworks more generally, is that it occurs as an *event* in the process of reading, not a theme to be registered, a thesis to be grasped, or an imperative to be followed or ignored” (Attridge 2004b: 654).

These are important claims. They are the very preconditions, in fact, for the unfolding of my own argument. But let me qualify that the alterity to which my reading of “Lesson 8” is beholden is perhaps more situated, and in a sense more preoccupied with the conditions of its own historical overdetermination, than Attridge’s preference for a noninstrumentalist, that is to say *arrivant*, ethnicity might care to accommodate.<sup>6</sup> Shifting Attridge’s

---

6 . For Attridge’s vigilance regarding the potentially instrumentalist appropriation of literary by history or by the political, among other things, see his exhortation:

emphasis slightly, I would like to rehearse my own preoccupation with that which is derived over and above that which, or who, arrives. That which is derived: namely, the partly occluded historicity (whether inter- or extratextual) of the phenomenon we stenographically re(pro)duce as “apartheid”. Thus, in full deference to what Coetzee has Costello term the “madness of reading” (Coetzee 2003: 174), I would like to query – or is it to reinscribe? – the parameters of Attridge’s construction of literature-in-the-event by rereading the second paragraph I have quoted for residual evidence of a deferred historicity whose formal trace is evident as citation. But not only as citation. My understanding that such historicity is both staged and can be accessed here stems from my contention that at this point in the text, that Elizabeth’s nonmimetic afterlife, her *sur-vie* if you like, crosses a definitively realist recuperation/survival/*survie* of the material body, in what I want to suggest is a distinctively post-apartheid modality.<sup>7</sup> In order now to

---

To read a literary work responsibly, then, is to read it without placing over it a grid of possible uses, as historical evidence, moral lesson, path to truth, political inspiration, or personal encouragement, and without passing judgment on the work or its author .... It is to trust in the unpredictability of reading, its openness to the future.

(2004c: 129-130)

For an exposition of Derrida’s notion of the *arrivant* with respect to Coetzee, see Attridge 2004a: 119-137.

7. The word “*survie*” enables me to acknowledge a debt that has been prolonged since the issue of prolongation was first raised in this paper. I am profoundly aware of the genesis of this article in response to Adam Sitze’s radicalisation of the Althusserian notion of “*survie*” in his indispensable analysis of the relations between testimony and sovereignty in the TRC (Althusser [1969]1997; Sitze 2003: 66-77). For Althusser, as Sitze reminds us, the paradigmatic instance of “*survie*” relates to the residual persistence of Tsarism in postrevolutionary Russia. In South Africa, “*survie*” takes a different form. Noting the continuity between the apartheid and post-apartheid regimes, Sitze argues that the debt payments that accompanied the arrival of the popular sovereignty of the post-apartheid state became so large that, by the late 1990s, they all but ruled out the possibility of providing medical treatment for poor people living with HIV/AIDS. The same funds that could have been invested in the immune systems of the population living under the jurisdiction of the New South African state were instead spent paying off the acquisition of the jurisdiction itself. Biopolitical catastrophe is here the price of political sovereignty.

(Sitze 2003: 71)

stage this argument with reference to its post-apartheid derivation, allow me first to make some general comments about the indebtedness of realist signification to embodied materiality.

We have already seen Judith Butler enunciate the apparent chain of causality which, for its adherents, couples the material body to realist models of signification through a mobilisation of the “necessity” that attends “irrefutable” bodily experiences (Butler 1993: xi). Thus, in one version of such arguments, the felt presence of my body, named now as “my body”, allows me to experience an illusory plenitude of the sign; the coincidence *in me* of signifier and signified. The nonlinguistic ontology of the body is made, paradoxically, to facilitate its linguistic domination through a certain reassuring self-reflexivity. This dynamic underlies the metonymic extension, augmented by projection and identification, which binds the reader to Elizabeth, to Homer’s ram. Contrary to such claims however, it is crucial, says Butler, to counter the trope of necessity in its various forms. While conceding that there is an “outside” to discourse, Butler nevertheless calls upon us to exercise caution in apprehending it – it cannot be known except through the devices of a linguistic performativity. “Although the body depends on language to be known,” she writes in a subsequent essay,

the body also exceeds every possible linguistic effort of capture. It would be tempting to conclude that this means that the body exists outside of language, that it has an ontology separable from any linguistic one, and that we might be able to describe this separable ontology. But this is where I would hesitate, perhaps permanently, for as we begin that description of what is outside of language ... we have already contaminated, though not contained, the very body we seek to establish in its ontological purity. The body escapes its linguistic grasp, but so too does it escape the subsequent effort to determine ontologically that very escape.

(Butler 2001: 257)

---

The epistemic and tropological preconditions for this, Sitze suggests, are derived from the TRC’s valorisation of suffering. “[The Commission’s] emphasis on the *survival of suffering* established the possibility for *suffering’s survival*: its specifically pastoral powers renewed the capture of naked life by the jurisdiction of sovereign power” (pp. 36-37, cf. also the discussion pp. 47-77). This chiasmus, which Sitze considers with specific reference to the Mbeki regime’s notorious denialism concerning the transmission of HIV/AIDS and its effects on state policy between 1998 and 2003, generates an “uncanny repetition” of, for instance, the high infant mortality rates in the apartheid Bantustans (cf. p. 75, and particularly Sitze’s later work, 2004: 780-790).

Instead of conceptualising the beyond of discourse as pure exteriority, that is to say as “an absolute ‘outside,’ an ontological thereness that exceeds or counters the boundaries of discourse” (1993: 8), Butler would have us cast the problem in far more relational terms. What is at stake is not the (im)possibility of literal reference, so much as the ceaseless vertigo of the chiasmus, as the later formulation has it. “The very description of the extralinguistic body”, she notes, “allegorises the problem of the chiasmic relation between language and body and so fails to supply the distinction it seeks to articulate” (2001: 257). Butler will thus consistently stress the indissoluble trace of signification that adheres to the body even though the body seems, under certain philosophical constructions; or in certain institutional contexts, the torture chamber, for instance (cf. Scarry 1985), to efface discourse in favour of sheer materiality. For these and other reasons, she advances the axiom that “there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a formation of that body” (Butler 1993: 10).

It is pivotal to my argument to recognise that this generalised nostalgia for the irrefutability of the body, viewed as the particular symptom of a more overarching desire for mimetic adequation, is a feature precisely of the discourse of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Recall Richard Wilson’s claim that the TRC recruits the “victim” to the service of a nonethnic South African nationalism, and interpellates her as the measure of a reconstituted (because newly constitutional) form of citizenship (Wilson 2001: 13-17, cf. also 2-3). This codification is a resolutely corporeal one, as Wilson and others have claimed. The materiality of the South African body, the space of embodiment it occupies in its ongoing mutilation, or once occupied under the disciplinary apparatus of the apartheid state (prison cell, torture chamber, mass grave), constituted a central preoccupation of the TRC. Embodiment, whether thematised in testimony or evident, in evidence, as material residue on display before the Commission, was central to what Gary Minkley, Ciraj Rassool and Leslie Witz have analysed as the ocular politics and the realist epistemology of the Commission. The two are intimately related. At the visual core of the TRC hearings, the authors claim, were “descriptions, representations and conflicts around bodies in various states of mutilation, dismemberment, and internment within the terror of the past” (Minkley, Rasool & Witz 1996: 9). Through the “visuality of the body presented in discrete and individualised cases”, they add, “the past of apartheid becomes measurable, transparent, documentary and finite allowing for the final fatality of apartheid and a rebirth at the threshold of a new nation out of ‘exquisite cruelty’ [in Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s phrase]” (p. 12, cf. also Rassool, Witz & Minkley 2000: 126).

Basing myself partly on Minkley, Rassool and Witz's extremely prescient early critique of the TRC, I have recently begun to advance the argument that the visuality of the exhumed corpse, and in more condensed form, of the scarred, mutilated or wounded body on open display before the TRC, draws the legitimating authority of the index (in C.S. Peirce's sense, [1880]1992) and the grounding agency of the material body into visible convergence on the (more or less complete, more or less replete) surface of that body. The Commission's epistemology, premised on the very possibility of mimetic adequation that Butler opposes, makes the real seem to inhere in material embodiment under a scopic regime which matches past suffering to the "empirical edifice of the body" (Rassool, Witz & Minkley 2000: 126). Whereas the TRC's turn to the body seems to promise immediacy of reference, and the facticity of a resolutely material (because corporeal) historical narrative, it delivers instead a mnemonics whose recall of the body calls upon embodiment to provide the antecedent condition for the referentiality of history.<sup>8</sup> The abject or wounded or even partially decomposed body of the victim of human rights abuses upon which the Commission focused its gaze becomes a kind of archive, since the history of apartheid is inscribed in the materiality of this body. Thus, the scar for example, the most conventional of our schemas for understanding the inscription of violence on the body, is implicitly held to be the *amanuensis* of violence in the epistemology of the TRC. It foregrounds the realist modality of the written as the "pure encounter of an object and its expression" (Barthes [1986]1995: 261), where *writan*, as Joss Marsh reminds us, once meant "to score, incise, carve, engrave with a sharp instrument" (Marsh 1998: 261). Moreover, the scar is cast as the *truthful* amanuensis of violence, since the truth of its writing is validated by the substance of the body, an understanding which curiously replays the logic of that other tale by Kafka that haunts Coetzee's text, "In the Penal Colony" ([1919]1983).

Like the mnemonic apparatus of the TRC, "At the Gate" stages an appeal to the semiotic agency of the material body grounded in the speculative but nonetheless spectacular, irruption of blood. This irruption bequeaths to Elizabeth Costello a haunted intimation of veracity, a vision approaching "the sum of her faith" (Coetzee 2003: 211). Thus, in the second of the

---

8. I have treated the connection between the Peircean index and "the scar-as-sign" in my reading of J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, where I explore the consequences, for a gendered reading of the novel, of the collusion between scar and index: their seeming to constitute an exception to the arbitrary nature of the sign (Bethlehem 2003). I undertake a fuller articulation of the body politics of the TRC in the concluding chapter of my forthcoming book *Skin Tight: Apartheid, Literary Culture and Its Aftermath* ([2006]).

passages that I have cited, the appeal to the material body produces the effect of a suffusion of truth. But the *mise en abyme* of the act of reading, one of whose purposes I have already claimed, is to model the belief that we as readers invest in the body's effusion of truth, does not proceed without conflict. What we are given is the truth *in* – rather than *of* – the text. For Elizabeth has, quite simply, no veins to cut. Her embodiment is an afterimage of the written: it does not subtend referentiality in quite the same way as the body of the victim who testifies before the TRC. Instead we apprehend Coetzee producing “bodies” through recourse to the performative dimensions of a textuality that the passage in question purports to deny: “The ram is not just an idea, the ram is alive though right now it is dying” (Coetzee 2003: 211). Materiality of the letter, then, to recontextualise Paul de Man's phrase (de Man 1986: 89) – not materiality of the body *avant la lettre*. The give and take of an elaborately self-reflexive discourse appears to insist on this.

But does not this very insistence provide a possible critique of the corporeal economy of the TRC, precisely in that it reinstates the referential chiasmus through understated reliance on the overwriting that secretly inhabits the *Besitz/Besetzung* (possession/cathexis) of “pure body” – even, or better still, especially – in the service of a post-apartheid nationalism. After all, the material body, Coetzee is well aware, does not simply underwrite an excess of truth without also coupling the body to its historicity, to its contingent narrativisations. I take this understanding to inform his well-known admonition that “in South Africa it is not possible to deny the authority of suffering and therefore of the body. It is not possible ... for political reasons, for reasons of power” (Coetzee 1992: 248). Provided, of course, that we allow the emphasis to fall on “in South Africa” – in South Africa under the state of emergency evoked in *Age of Iron*, a text which like Coetzee's pronouncement on the body, arises from “[a] country prodigal of blood” (Coetzee [1990]1991: 57).

My recourse to *Age of Iron* is quite deliberate. It makes Elizabeth Costello's meditation on Homer's ram the site of palimpsest, of a textual haunting that emerges between the lines the moment Elizabeth Curren's description of the black boy victimised by the police is brought back into play: “Blood flowed in a sheet into the boy's eyes and made his hair glisten; it dripped on to the pavement; it was everywhere. I did not know blood could be so dark, so thick, so heavy” (Coetzee [1990]1991: 57). But does not this very trail suggest that Coetzee's avowal/disavowal of the textually *unmediated* body in “At the Gate” fails the very lesson that I have attempted to adduce? It is precisely in the *face of the victim* that the metafictional seizure (capture, convulsion) of corporeality assumes the force of historical repression. In the very staging of its metafictional constructedness, in its

willed detachment from all referential historicity except the history of its intertextual generation, the textual body that Elizabeth Costello offers us is the agent of a properly historical repression – while itself constituting, I would suggest, the phantasmatic trace, beholden to a certain *Nachträglichkeit* of that which is repressed.<sup>9</sup>

It is possible to view the relation I have sketched between Elizabeth Curren and Elizabeth Costello's afterlife as a form of metalepsis, a disruptive attribution of present effect to a remote cause (Lanham 1991: 99) which is yet another way of recasting the “delayed effect” that is *Nachträglichkeit*. The illicit joining of Curren and Costello reveals the literal belatedness of “At the Gate” to be an instance of what Cathy Caruth might term an “impossible” historicity. The blood spoor I have traced is the product of a specifically South African historicity whose intelligibility as traumatic symptom properly exceeds inscription within a single place or time (Caruth 1995: 5, cf. pp. 5-9 and 1997) but does not, I would caution, hereby come to stand outside history. The doubling that undoes the abstraction of Coetzee's expatriate metafiction rehearses a form of *errance* (de Man 1986: 91) whose very displacements produce its ethnicity. The failure of the metafiction to extradite itself enacts perhaps one of its more perverse successes. For might not this interdiction of extradition – this speaking across a prohibition (cf. Derrida [1996]1998: 31-34) – be more promising, after all, than the abstraction of a truth *distilled as the stillness of the soma*, living body and corpse both (Agamben 1998: 66); more telling than the persistence even now, that is to say, *still*, of the body's remains?

Unless we are prepared to countenance the loss of the body to the *Lösung*/(dis)solution of nationalism (and I include a precious and precarious post-apartheid constitutionality here, too), let us recall that the textual body is never truer than when it is besides itself. The delayed and relayed corpses/corpora of “Lesson 8: At the Gate” challenge us to reinterrogate precisely the pre-eminence of synecdoche and allegory in our critical reflections on those processes whereby, as well as those mnemonic and/or scopopic regimes wherein, the discrete human body is nationalised as public or state property.<sup>10</sup> And it is here, perhaps, that the enigmatic presence of Costello's Dulgannon frogs (Coetzee 2003: 216-221) might be recuperated

---

9. For a brief summary of the meaning and development of the term in Freud, see Laplanche and Pontalis (1973: 111-114).

10. I am grateful to Shai Ginsburg for our discussion of this point, in the wake of his work on the national allegory in pre-State Israel. See “Genre, Territory, Theory: Yosef Haim Brenner and the Erets-Israeli Genre”, paper presented at the Department of Comparative Literature and Poetics, Tel Aviv University, 23 May 2005. [In Hebrew].

against the judge-in-chief's "allegorical" (p. 220) misreading of her "belief" in them. In obstructing the relay – transfer/transference – of the allegory which they nevertheless allow us to entertain, they recall us to the awareness that the relationship which obtains between the living matter of the organism and its discursive reclamation, like the relationship between the body and the body politic, is sometimes chaotic, somewhat chiasmic, always the site where "belief" – a certain ideological configuration – is actively elicited.

But now my recourse to the restless still of the body's remains must give up its own ghosts, bound to the time and place of my writing – Mt Scopus, East Jerusalem, Israel. No spectral universality can be allowed to attach to the genesis of my text if it is to remain true to the leapfrog of displaced historicity it has traced. This is not all that is at stake, however. In studied but ineluctably complicit defiance of the discourses of Jewish nationalist entitlement by reason of bodily suffering which continue to justify the Occupation, let me emphasise – as a matter of political interest but not, I hope, instrumentalism – that the body, *pace* Elizabeth, does not speak itself except through massive, and potentially contested or contestatory, historical mediation. If there is an urgency to my rhetoric here, and I believe there is, it is because I too inhabit a country "prodigal of blood". And there are bodies – Palestinian bodies, Israeli bodies – on the line.

### Acknowledgement

- \* This article had its genesis in a shorter paper presented at "Contemporary Perspectives on J.M. Coetzee and Post-Apartheid South African Literature: An International Conference", held at the Royal Holloway College, University of London, Egham, United Kingdom, 29-30 April 2005. The conference was an occasion of rich intellectual exchange for which I thank our hosts. Thanks also to the anonymous referees of this journal for their thoughtful suggestions.

### References

- Agamben, Giorgio  
1998 *"Homo Sacer": Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. New York: Zone Books.
- Althusser, Louis  
[1969]1997 *For Marx*, translated by Ben Brewster. New York: Verso.
- Attridge, Derek  
2004a *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading {Literature in the Event}*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press.



- 2004b Ethical Modernism: Servants as Others in J.M. Coetzee's Early Fiction. Special Issue of *Poetics Today* 25(4): 653-671.
- 2004c *The Singularity of Literature*. London: Routledge.
- Attwell, David
- 1993 *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*. Berkeley, Los Angeles & Oxford: University of California Press; Cape Town, Johannesburg: David Philip.
- Barthes, Roland
- [1986]1995 The Reality Effect, from *The Rustle of Language*. In: *The Realist Novel*, edited by Dennis Walder. London: Routledge & the Open University, pp. 258-261.
- Bethlehem, Louise
- 2001 "A Primary Need as Strong as Hunger": The Rhetoric of Urgency in South African Literary Historiography. Special Issue of *Poetics Today*, South Africa in the Global Imaginary 22(2): 365-389.
- 2003 Aneconomy in an Economy of Melancholy: Embodiment and Gendered Identity in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. *African Identities* 1(2): 167-185.
- [2006] *Skin Tight: Apartheid, Literary Culture and Its Aftermath*. Unisa/Brill. (Forthcoming).
- Bloom, Harold
- 1973 *The Anxiety of Influence*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Butler, Judith
- 1993 *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. New York & London: Routledge.
- 2000 Restaging the Universal: Hegemony and the Limits of Formalism. In: Butler, Judith, Laclau Ernesto & Slavoj, Žižek (eds) *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*. London & New York: Verso, pp. 11-43.
- 2001 How Can I Deny That These Hands and This Body Are Mine. In: Cohen, Tom, Cohen, Barbara, Hillis Miller, J. & Warminski, Andrzej (eds) *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 254-273.
- Caruth, Cathy
- 1995 Introduction (Trauma and Experience). In: *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited with introductions by Cathy Caruth. Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 3-12.
- 1997 Traumatic Awakenings. In: *Violence, Identity and Self-Determination*, edited by de Vries, Hent & Weber, Samuel (eds). Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 208-222.
- Coetzee, J.M.
- 1978 *In the Heart of the Country*. Johannesburg: Ravan.
- 1982 *Waiting for the Barbarians*. New York: Penguin.
- 1983 *Life & Times of Michael K*. Johannesburg: Ravan.
- 1986 *Foe*. Johannesburg: Ravan.
- 1988 The Novel Today. *Upstream: A Magazine of the Arts* 6(1): 2-5.
- [1990]1991 *Age of Iron*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

- 1992 Interview. In: Attwell, David (ed.) *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*. Cambridge, Mass. & London: Harvard University Press, pp. 243-250.
- [1997]1998 *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*. Harmondsworth: London.
- 1999 *Disgrace*. London: Secker & Warburg.
- 2003 *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons*. London: Secker & Warburg.
- 2004 As a Woman Grows Older. *New York Review of Books*, 15 January 2004, pp. 11-14.
- [2003]2004 *He and His Man: Lecture and Speech of Acceptance upon the Award of the Nobel Prize in Literature, Delivered in Stockholm in December 2003*. New York: Penguin.
- 2005 *Slow Man*. New York: Viking Penguin.
- de Man, Paul
- 1986 Conclusions: Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator". In: *The Resistance to Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 73-105.
- Derrida, Jacques
- [1967]1976 *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- [1968]1982 Différance. In: *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, pp. 1-27.
- [1982]1987 Devant la loi. In: *Kafka and the Contemporary Critical Performance: Centenary Readings*, edited by Alan Udoff, translated by Avital Ronell. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 128-149.
- [1982]1992 Before the Law. In: *Acts of Literature*, edited by Derek Attridge, translated by Avital Ronell & Christine Roulston. Routledge: London & New York, pp. 181-220.
- [1996]1998 *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, translated by Patrick Mensah. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Gallagher, Susan Van Zanten
- 1991 *A Story of South Africa: J.M. Coetzee's Fiction in Context*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Ginsburg, Shai
- 2005 Genre, Territory, Theory: Yosef Haim Brenner and the Erets-Israeli Genre. Paper presented at the Department of Comparative Literature and Poetics, Tel Aviv University, 23 May 2005. [In Hebrew].
- Grant, Damian
- [1970]1985 *Realism*. London: Methuen.
- Jakobson, Roman
- 1960 Linguistics and Poetics. In: *Selected Writings*, Vol. 3. The Hague: Mouton, pp. 18-51.
- Kuykendal, Dorothy
- 2005 "I Follow the Pen": The (Dis)Location of Two Elizabeth C's. Paper presented at "Contemporary Perspectives on J.M. Coetzee and Post-Apartheid South African Literature: An International Conference", Royal Holloway College, University of London, Egham, United Kingdom, 29-30 April 2005.

- Kafka, Franz  
 [1914]1983 Before the Law. In: *The Collected Short Stories of Franz Kafka*, translated by Willa & Edwin Muir, edited by Nahum N. Glatzer, Harmondsworth: Penguin, pp. 3-4.
- [1919]1983 In the Penal Colony. In: *The Collected Short Stories of Franz Kafka*, translated by Willa & Edwin Muir, edited by Nahum N. Glatzer. Harmondsworth: Penguin, pp. 140-167.
- Lanham, Richard A.  
 1991 *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press.
- Laplanche, J. & Pontalis, J.-B.  
 1973 *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York & London: W.W. Norton.
- Malan, Rian  
 2003 Only the Big Questions. *Time Magazine*, October 13, 2003. Online: <<http://www.time.com/time/archive/preview/0,10987,493312,00.-html>>. Accessed 26 April 2005.
- Marsh, Joss  
 1998 *Word Crimes: Blasphemy, Culture and Literature in Nineteenth-Century England*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Minkley, Gary, Rassool, Ciraj & Witz, Leslie  
 1996 Thresholds, Gateways and Spectacles: Journeying through South African Hidden Pasts and Histories in the Last Decade of the Twentieth Century. Paper presented at the conference on "The Future of the Past: The Production of History in a Changing South Africa", University of the Western Cape, 10-12 July 1996.
- Peirce, C.S.  
 [1880]1992 [from] On the Algebra of Logic: A Contribution to the Philosophy of Notation. In: Houser, Nathan & Kloesel, Christian (eds) *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*. Vol. 1 (1867-1893). Indiana University Press, Bloomington & Indianapolis, pp. 225-228.
- Rassool, Ciraj, Witz, Leslie & Gary Minkley, Gary  
 2000 Burying and Memorialising the Body of Truth: The TRC and National Heritage. In: James, Wilmot & Van de Vijver, Linda (eds) *After the TRC: Reflections on Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press; Cape Town: David Philip, pp. 115-127.
- Scarry, Elaine  
 1985 *The Body in Pain*. New York & London: Oxford.
- Sitze, Adam  
 2003 Articulating Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Sovereignty, Testimony, Protest Writing. PhD thesis, University of Minnesota.  
 2004 Denialism. *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103(4): 769-811.
- Wilson, Richard A.  
 2001 *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimising the Post-Apartheid State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.