

Reading in the In-Between: Pre-Scripting the “Postscript” to *Elizabeth Costello*

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Summary

By offering a close reading and analysis of “Postscript”, the text that concludes Coetzee’s collection of “lessons” in his 2003 book *Elizabeth Costello*, in conjunction with Hofmannsthal’s 1902 “Chandos Letter” (including brief reference to the Nobel Address “He and His Man”), the essay demonstrates the implications of palimpsestuous reading. Informed by Gérard Genette’s study of the palimpsest as a mode of literary presentation particularly suited to poststructuralist understandings of the disassociation between author and protagonist, the essay argues, furthermore, that palimpsestuous writing articulates the conjunctive double of language and fiction as, philosophically speaking, the general and every single person’s writing/reading as particular at the point where mutually historicising and historicised imaginings intersect along an elliptical axis connecting diachronic distance and synchronic proximity.

Opsomming

Die opstel bied 'n dieptelesing en -ontleding van “Postscript”, die teks wat Coetzee se versameling “lesse” in sy 2003-werk *Elizabeth Costello* afsluit, tesame met Hofmannsthal se “Chandos Letter” van 1902 (met inbegrip van 'n vlugtige verwysing na die Nobel-toespraak “He and His Man”), en toon die implikasies van die palimpsestiese lees van 'n teks. Geïnspireer deur Gérard Genette se studie van die palimpsest as 'n literêre aanbiedingsvorm wat veral geskik is vir poststrukuralistiese begrip van die disassosiasie tussen outeur en protagonis, voer die opstel voorts aan dat palimpsestiese skryfwerk uiting gee aan die konjunktiewe dubbelwerking van taal en fiksie as, filosofies gesproke, die algemene en elke enkele persoon se skryf- of leeswerk as partikulier op die punt waar onderling historiserende en gehistorieseerde verbeeldinge mekaar sny op 'n elliptiese as wat diachroniese afstand en sinchroniese nabyheid verbind.

In the most recent Costello story, “As a Woman Grows Older”, published in the *New York Review of Books* in 2004, Coetzee’s fictional avatar, aging Elizabeth Costello, in anticipation of a rare meeting with her son and daughter, briefly reflects on the modality of “ambivalence”: “Ambivalence should not disconcert her,” says the narrative voice. “She has made a living out of ambivalence. Where would the art of fiction be if there were no double meanings? What would life itself be if there were only heads or tails and nothing in between?” (Coetzee 2004: 11). The zone of the in-between,

iterated in the two rhetorical questions, circumscribes both the *focus* and the *locus* of my essay; it is the gap between "heads and tails", the contiguous and yet distinct obverse and reverse "two sides of the coin" – to use yet another metaphor – or the "excluded middle" philosophically speaking which all Costello stories inhabit and which the "Postscript" (Coetzee 2003a: 227-230) contours. For what is implicitly at issue in the stories – or rather "lessons", as these hybrid texts are aptly subtitled in the book *Elizabeth Costello* – is the gap, the middle, the in-between, that they expose in numerous different thematic configurations. Thus the heads/tails – dichotomy comes into view, for instance, in the lecturer/speaker – audience/listeners binary in Lesson One: "Realism" (pp. 1-34); the contemplative life of the writer versus the active life of Christian missionary caring represented by sisters Elizabeth and Blanche/Bridget respectively in "The Humanities in Africa" (pp. 116-155), or between philosopher (Norma) and writer Elizabeth and between philosophical and literary discourse in "The Lives of Animals" (pp. 59-115), or between the "oral novel" (p. 53) of Africa and the European novel in "The Novel in Africa" (pp. 35-58), or between accounts of (imaginatively) demonstrated and experienced evil in "The Problem of Evil" (pp. 156-182), and between life and death and "other modes of being besides what we call human" (p. 188) in "Eros", and finally between the "fidelities" of "a writer" (p. 224) versus an author's personal conviction in "At the Gate" (pp. 193-226).

All the "lessons" remain inconclusive because they offer neither an escape from ambivalence nor resolution of "double meanings", although the first "lesson" of *Elizabeth Costello* adheres, at least, to a minimal narrative contract between a reader and a collection of hybrid metafictional texts.¹ Assisted by the mediating metaphor of bridge building, across "the territory in which we were" to "the far territory, where we want to be" (Coetzee 2003a: 1), the act of enunciation facilitates storytelling by way of a discursive leap. Yet, the compositional structure of the stories/lessons prevents any suture that would put to rest simultaneous conflicting feelings or close the gap between dichotomies set up by multivalent views espoused, voices aired and contrasting positions taken. Moreover, the "lessons" neither synthesise opposing views nor do they bridge incompatible sides so that "heads and tails", obverse and reverse, articulated structurally as

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1. The book that provides an account of the life and times of a female author defies the more conventional generic categories of creative writing, not so much because the stories occasioned by Coetzee's various international speaking engagements had appeared previously as individual publications but the text, besides being an obvious commercial venture in view of the coveted award of the Nobel Prize to Coetzee in 2003, is more akin to autobiography, albeit fictional, than the two autobiographies *Boyhood* and *Youth*.

“double” or paralogy emerge even more forcefully at a lesson’s closure than at its beginning. In fact, the ingenious figure of “doubling the point” that serves as title for the 1992 Coetzee collaboration with David Attwell, together with “the phantom presence of the middle voice”, mentioned in the brief 1984 “Note on Writing” (1992: 94-95 [p. 94]), signposts the very in-between that as nexus of all writing veraciously opens with the “Postscript” (2003a: 227-230) and which is at issue in my discussion.

Not one of the “Eight Lessons” but a desperate “Letter”, the epistolary “Postscript” pens, in the troubled voice of one “Elizabeth Chandos” a cry for help, on behalf of a husband, Philip, to an addressee, “Francis Bacon”. The reader might recognise in Francis Bacon (1561-1626) the lawyer, politician, essayist, and coinventor of the scientific method whose catch phrase, “Knowledge itself is power”, coined in 1579 (*Meditationes Sacrae*), so impressed critics in the wake of Foucault. But who is Elizabeth Chandos? What is her relation to (fictional) Elizabeth Costello with whom she shares besides her first name her initials? Who is the husband, Philip Chandos? More akin to the Nobel Address “He and His Man”, inasmuch as both pieces refer explicitly to a fore- or pre-text by way of an epigraph in form of citation from, respectively, a Hofmannsthal and a Defoe text, the “Postscript” does not seem to fit into the series of lessons that perform illuminating, albeit inconclusive instruction on narrative, on discourse and literature, and on the author in relation to everyday life and his/her reading public. The “Postscript” rather, instead of interrogating, as do the “lessons” the complexities of the triangular relation between *author* (the situated empirical voice that manipulates language and constructs texts), *writer/writing* (the voices of the text, including that of the narrator, that stage an imaginary universe), and *the written* (the textual manifestation or *gramma* as found by a reader)² leads to the very heart of what it means to actually “do writing” (Coetzee 1992: 94) in the in-between. The in-between is the place, as I shall demonstrate, where voice wrestles to stem verbal-figural contagion while simultaneously struggling to overcome the void, the basically unbridgeable gap between the semiotic and semantic dimensions of language; that is, according to Benveniste, the gap between the mode of significance proper to the sign, whereby meaningful worlds are recognised

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2. It is interesting to note that by fictionalising the triangular relation between author-writer/writing-the-written Coetzee, in the Costello stories and in the Nobel Address, liberates literary criticism from its secondary position that it occupies in relation to the “art of fiction”, since its inception in European Romanticism. Criticism, though, by attempting to reduce “ambivalence” or multivalency that is the character of all writing to merely one meaning, usually attempts to secure an unambiguous message for the reader there where Coetzee restores polyvalency.

independently of any reference, and the semantic aspect of language that needs to be understood rather than recognised, and that, as a result, is entirely referential and engendered by discourse. "The world of signs", Benveniste (1974: 65) says, taking up and developing de Saussure's antinomy between *langue* and *parole*, "is closed. From the sign to the phrase there is no transition, be it by syntagmatization or by any other means. A hiatus separates them." By foregrounding the perilous passage across two absolutely divided orders: from *langue* to *parole* or, rather, from language to actual discourse the "Postscript" holds in suspense the ambiguous relation between "heads and tails", semiotic obverse and semantic reverse of language, so to speak, that troubles all writing that reflects the conditions of its own articulation.

1 Reading "Postscript"

On first reading the anguished epistolary plea that shatters the largely calm and composed voice of the "lessons" I felt deeply affected, especially since the "letter" refers to a previous (absent) utterance of one Philip, whose "distress of mind so extreme" (Coetzee 2003a: 227) seems to have rendered him mute, save for his letter "dated this 22nd August". It is this earlier epistle that Elizabeth Chandos's "postscript" supplements by an expression of a devoted, loving spouse who despairs at the troubling "time of affliction" that has befallen them both, and out of which "[d]rowning" they "write" their "separate fates" from which they try to be "saved" by the addressee, Francis Bacon. Their perceived saviour, Bacon, appears as the man who not only masters the whole of language in its assumed transparent sovereignty of thought and writing, but also builds "judgements as a mason builds a wall with bricks" (p. 230). In contrast to Bacon's hold on speech the distress articulated in staccato cadence (especially from p. 228 onwards) that marks this short text's tortured struggle with the seemingly unavoidable figurality of language touched me to the core: What difference in affect, I thought, between the deeply emotional "Postscript" and Coetzee's indirect satire of celebrity authorship, embodied in the fictional Costello whose filial and academic encounters often make me chuckle with enjoyment at recognition of happenings in today's world of celebrity educators and literati. Realising in the process of reading the irreparable otherness that defines the relationship between language and experience, I felt that I was no longer merely trying to keep abreast with the verbal unfolding of this short piece of almost poetic, albeit somewhat breathless, prose. Instead I was collaborating in the text's staging of an *experimentum linguae* the nature and extent of which needed to be ascertained by repeated readings.

On the plane of story, the “letter” contrasts a past of enchanted, libidinal communicability reminiscent of a *unio mystica* (“when body and soul are one”, p. 228) with “the present time”, called repeatedly a “time of affliction” in which the letter-writer compares herself twice to a homeless “wayfarer”. Situated in a “dark and disused” mill with “rotting floorboards” (p. 228) she feels destined to offer an impossible truth in form of “revelation that sears the eye like staring into the sun” (p. 229). This allusion, by analogy, to Plato’s parable of the cave, reminds us of the liminal situation with respect to ever gaining possession of immutable forms (*eidos*, “reality” or “true substance”) of which humankind cannot glimpse but shadows on the cave walls. Not surprisingly therefore, Elizabeth Chandos asks “how” revelation is possible in such a situation and suggests that “the time is not yet come, the time of the giants, the time of the angels” (p. 229), a time in which an adamic language might again be identical with meaning and truth, capable of “revelation”. The twice-used enigmatic metaphor of “the angels” in relation to the repeated “flaming swords” (p. 228) refers, when combined into a single trope, to Genesis on the one hand and on the other to the companion piece to the “Postscript”, “He and His Man”. The latter speaks in one of the many reports that the fictionalised Defoe (“his man”) sends to “He” (capital h), who is none other than Robinson Crusoe, of a sighting of “an angel in white brandishing a flaming sword” which small-he (Defoe) dismisses as mere cloud formation. Derek Attridge (2004b: n9; 196-197) whose treatment of Coetzee’s oeuvre is the most comprehensive to date, provides for both story and metaphor the source in Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* (pp. 220-223). However, deciphering its constitutive tropes by no means exhausts the complexity of the much shorter “Postscript”. Instead the constant self-conscious referral to speech, writing, and especially figurality on the part of fictitious Mrs Chandos adds to the density of the text; a density enhanced further by the doubling of almost all verbal entities; not to mention a *Doppelgänger* motif, suggested by:

I who am his shadow know it when I am in my ruptures. Yet he writes to you [Bacon], as I write to you, who are known above all men to select your words and set them in place and build your judgement as a mason builds a wall with bricks.

(Coetzee 2003a: 230)

Derek Attridge (2004b: 196) pays scant attention to the “Postscript” whose epistolary format he contrasts with the Costello “lecture” while briefly pointing out that the “letter is written by the imaginary wife – another Elizabeth C. – of Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s imaginary Lord Chandos”. Despite the critic’s reference to the early-twentieth-century Austrian writer – a reference the “Postscript” itself makes in citation on the unnumbered

page facing the text beginning on page 227 (*Elizabeth Costello* 2003a) – the reader remains puzzled. She is not helped much either by Attridge's footnote suggesting that the "postscript" forms an extension of

Hofmannsthal's depiction of a man who has given up writing because he has found that language fails before the revelations he experiences in his daily life, [that] reads like a nightmarish version of some of Costello's fears about writing.

(Attridge 2004b: 196)

This cryptic and somewhat superficial interpretation aside, what is the reader to make of dryads who cannot be found in Wiltshire? And what actually *was* the content of the "letter", absent to the reader, "dated this 22nd August" (Coetzee 2003a: 227) which Elizabeth Chandos's letter of "11 September, AD 1603" (p. 230) recoups and supplements?

For answers to these questions and a more exhaustive reading of the "Postscript" we need to turn to Hofmannsthal's 1902 text that in German literature has become synonymous with modernism's much talked about crisis of language.³ Only by placing the Coetzee text and the Hofmannsthal precursor side by side will we find out about the vicissitudes of desire that make fictional Philip Chandos, in the words of Elizabeth (Coetzee 2003a: 227), "gaze like one bewitched at paintings of sirens and dryads, craving to enter their naked, glistening bodies". This libidinal surge to merge with the desired object of beauty and art reads in the words of Hofmannsthal's "Letter" (p. 131): "as the hunted hart craves water, so I craved to enter these naked, glistening bodies, these sirens and dryads, this Narcissus and Proteus, Perseus and Actaeon. I longed to disappear in them and talk out of them with tongues". That which in the voice of Hofmannsthal's male letter-writer refers to past "halcyon days" of planning great literary works "founded on I know not what sensual and spiritual desire" (p.131) corresponds to the yielding and, albeit unsuccessfully, consoling female voice of Elizabeth Chandos who tells of her flesh having had to (in a paradigmatic move) substitute for absent demigods/-goddesses:

But where in Wiltshire will we find a siren or a dryad for him to try? Perforce I became his dryad: it was I whom he entered when he sought to enter her, I who felt his tears on my shoulder when again he could not find her in me. *But a little time and I will learn to be your dryad, speak your dryad speech*, I whispered in the dark; but he was not consoled.

(Coetzee 2003a: 227)

3. For a detailed discussion of the seminal "Chandos Letter" and the crisis of language see Nethersole (2004).

The geographic designation “Wiltshire” anchors Coetzee’s “Postscript” in its para- or pre-text, albeit in an indirect way because it names the English county that must have been home to Elizabeth’s husband, Philip, of whom Hofmannsthal says in the opening lines: “*This is the letter Philip, Lord Chandos, younger son of the Earl of Bath, wrote to Francis Bacon, later Baron of Verulam, Viscount St. Albans, apologizing for his complete abandonment of literary activity.*” (italics in Hofmannsthal’s “Letter” p. 129). While Hofmannsthal signals the social status of the fictitious letter-writer in the aristocratic title, a status that is alluded to also in the routine activities of Chandos, a member of the landed gentry, Coetzee (as author, coinventor and composer of the “Postscript”, the written) drops such social markers linked to class, referring instead to “Wiltshire”, the county in which Bath is located. Thus furnished with a further connection between the two “letters” we can trace the manner in which Coetzee’s text takes up residence in its foretext (Hofmannsthal’s text in square brackets and in italics):

Dear and esteemed Sir, [*my esteemed friend*]

You will have received from my husband Philip a letter dated this 22nd August. [*This 22 August, A.D. 1603*] Ask me not how, but a copy of that letter has come under my sight, and now I add my voice to his. I fear you may think my husband wrote in a fit of madness, a fit that by now may have passed. I write to say: It is not so. All that you read in his letter is true, [*e.g. the pathological “inexplicable condition” of “the inner self... which is wont, as a rule, to remain locked up in me”, of the first fictitious letter-writer, together with his inability to find “a language in which inanimate things speak to me and wherein I may one day have to justify myself before an unknown judge.”*] save for one circumstance: no husband can succeed in concealing from his loving wife distress of mind so extreme. [*I live a life of barely believable vacuity, and I have difficulties in concealing from my wife this inner stagnation ...*] These many months have I known of my Philip’s affliction, and suffered with him.

Of course the epigraph, cut from Hofmannsthal’s text and “pasted” on an unnumbered page facing the text of “Postscript”, already connects the two epistles:

At such moments even a negligible creature, a dog, a rat, a beetle, a stunted apple tree, a cart track winding over a hill, a mossy stone, counts more for me than a night of bliss with the most beautiful, most devoted mistress. These dumb and in some cases inanimate creatures press toward me with such fullness, such presence of love, that there is nothing in range of my rapturous

eye that does not have life. It is everything, everything that exists, everything I can recall, everything my confused thinking touches on, means something.

(Coetzee 2003a: epigraph, "Postscript")

Yet without mapping fully Coetzee's text across Hofmannsthal's "Chandos Letter" the actual extent of the pastiche of the "Postscript" remains oblique. Consider, for instance, the citation in the epigraph just quoted that emphasises a sensible world pregnant with meaning that enters the "rapturous eye", the organ that perceives life before *logos* (speech) and through which an exterior world becomes accessible sensuously to the interiority of mind. Coetzee's epigraph, borrowed from his precursor Hofmannsthal, that calls for making life and nature's unspoken sign system intelligible ("means something"), becomes transparent when his following "overwritings" (again Hofmannsthal's text in square brackets and in italics) are taken into account:

Soul and body he speaks to me, in a speaking without speech; into me, soul and body, he presses what are no longer words but flaming swords. [*It is not easy for me to indicate wherein these good moments subsist; once again words desert me. For it is, indeed, something entirely unnamed, even barely nameable which, at such moments, reveals itself to me, filling like a vessel any casual object of my daily surroundings with a flood of higher life ... – all these can become the vessel of my revelation. Each of these objects and a thousand other similar, over which the eye usually glides with a natural indifference, can suddenly, at any moment (which I am utterly powerless to evoke), assume for me the character so exalted and moving that words seem too poor to describe it ... of being filled to the brim with this silent but suddenly rising flood of divine sensation a shudder at the presence of the infinite ...*]

(Coetzee 2003a: 228)

Where Hofmannsthal's text (pp. 135-136) articulates the mute rush, the orgasmlike onset of an experience of "divine sensation" that Chandos, before becoming anguished and "doubtful" (p. 134), once hoped to pen, "creating an interplay of eternal forces, something so marvellous as music or algebra" (p. 131), Coetzee's text expresses the intense moment of speechless worldism in a sexual encounter. However, the outcome of Elizabeth's erotic encounter resembles, in the phrase "no longer words but flaming swords" Boolean combinatorial logic (algebraic "and-or"/"nand-nor") by changing the obverse alphabetical entities: s-w-o-r-d-s into their reverse – w-o-r-d-s – thus rendering denotative solidity and certainty that usually attaches itself to the signifier fluid and reversible as if words were indeed coins having "heads or tails".

My raptures [Coetzee's italics] I call these spells. They come to me – I write

without blushing – in my husband’s arms. He alone is guide to me; with no other man would I know them.

We are not meant to live thus, Sir. *Flaming swords* I say my Philip presses into me, swords that are not words; but they are neither flaming swords nor are they words.

(Coetzee 2003a 228)

This *experimentum linguae*, informed by Boolean combinatorial logic and performed by the wordplay of Coetzee’s text (swords/words) leaves the speaking subject, born along a current of language, profoundly insecure with regard to firmly grounding utterance and hence meaning in distinctive nonfluid, irreversible signifiers that would fix and secure specific combinatorial signification. Not only is a linguistic experiment of a Boolean nature “like a contagion, saying one thing always for another” (Coetzee 2003a: 228) but the speaker/writer on literally entering verbal language recognises herself, unmoored from the supposedly stable domain of the semiotic, as “a wayfarer” who steps

into a mill, dark and disused, and I feel of a sudden the floorboards [Hofmannsthal p. 134: *rickety boards*], rotten with the wetness, give way beneath my feet and plunge me into the racing mill-waters; [Hofmannsthal, p.134: *everything disintegrated into parts, those parts again into parts; no longer would anything let itself be encompassed by one idea. Single words floated around me; they congealed into eyes which stared at me and into which I was forced to stare back – whirlpools which gave me vertigo and, reeling incessantly, led into the void.*] yet as I am that (a wayfarer in a mill) I am also not that; nor is it a contagion that comes continually upon me or a plague of rats or flaming swords, but something else. *Always it is not what I say but something else.* Hence the words I write above: *We are not meant to live thus.* Only for *extreme souls* may it have been intended to live thus, where words give way beneath your feet like rotting boards (*like rotting boards* I say again, I cannot help myself, not if I am to bring home to you my distress and my husband’s, *bring home* I say, where is home, where is home?).

(Coetzee 2003a: 228; Coetzee’s italics after the square brackets)

The “contagion” is a dual one because it emanates both from linguistic potential (the play of individual signifiers when semantic potential is viewed in Boolean combinatory logic) and from the Hofmannsthal pre-text that famously defined, for continental European modernism in 1902, the inability of words to ever reach their referent outside language. Beyond the rickety word-mill whose “rotting boards” of language are supposed to support the ontological “home” of a human being (in accordance with Heidegger who famously stated that language is the home of being), there are no words that denote an existing space other than the pre-text into which experience of the inexperiencible might settle a familiarity associated with

"home". Moreover, by rendering a commonly used metaphor "to bring home" immediately adjacent to the repeated question "Where is home?" Elizabeth Chandos's letter demonstrates the inability of utterances to ever free themselves from figurality by staying clear of contamination by figures of speech. Such seemingly unavoidable contamination leads to a further consequence: of actually paraphrasing and quoting from the epigraph, in the assertion that "all is allegory" (Hofmannsthal's phrases in bold):

All is allegory, says my Philip. Each creature is key to all other creatures. A **dog** sitting in a patch of **sun** licking itself, says he, is at one moment a dog and at the next moment a **vessel of revelation**. And perhaps he speaks the truth, perhaps in the mind of our Creator (*our Creator*, I say) where we whirl about as if in a millrace we interpenetrate and are interpenetrated by fellow creatures by the thousands. [Hofmannsthal: *an immense sympathy, a flowing over into these creatures, or a feeling that an aura of life and death, of dream and wakefulness, had flowed for a moment into them*]. But how I ask you can I live with **rats** and dogs and **beetles** crawling through me day and night, drowning and gasping, scratching at me, tugging me, urging me deeper and deeper into revelation – how?

(Coetzee 2003a: 229)

At stake in this passage is a zone of indistinction bordered, on one plane, by active and passive verb construction ("interpenetrate and are interpenetrated") followed by the conceptual pairing of perception-articulation ("dogs and beetles crawling through me ... urging me deeper and deeper into revelation", a revelation that for Philip Chandos (Hofmannsthal p. 135) defies expression in words. "[O]nce again words desert me. For it is, indeed, something entirely unnamed, even barely nameable which, at such moments reveals itself to me" On another plane, indistinction results from the way in which text B, Coetzee's "Postscript", literally inscribes itself into text A, Hofmannsthal's "Chandos Letter". Elizabeth Chandos's letter thus stages lexical, semantic and semiotic, "contagion" by way of intertextuality and citation, culminating in "allegory" in the form of an extended metaphor inasmuch as the structured system of the pre-text runs in continuous parallel, undergirded by the letter-writer's self-conscious foregrounding of analogical or simileic figures at heart of all tropes:

It is (like a contagion, I say: barely did I hold myself back from saying, a plague of rats, for rats are everywhere about us these days). Like a wayfarer (hold the figure in mind, I pray you), like a wayfarer), like a wayfarer I step into the mill, dark and disused.

(Coetzee 2003a; 228; my underlining)

Assessing her and her husband's "time of affliction" (p. 228; (Hofmannsthal's "malady" p. 129), arising "from the condition of my inner self" (in Philip's words), Elizabeth implies that both their desperate situations are compounded by the experience of a loss of self, a self that classical rationalism assumed to be both anchor and master of language. Thus despite repeated denials of madness, experience of the self as "wayfarer" conjures images of the pathological with the idea of "contagion", a contagion that suggests not only metonymic sliding of meaning from one thing to another because the two are adjacent, as we have seen earlier, but contagion in relation to Elizabeth's inference that they "are still in the time of the fleas" connotes also infection of one thing by another. Such wordless infection or contamination is conjured by the pre-text (p. 131) in the metaphor of a parasite, the "gnat", when Philip acknowledges his benefactor Bacon's "kind" reminders of earlier writing projects entertained by him, Philip, which appear to him now as if "bloated with a drop of my blood" they dance "before me like a weary gnat against a sombre wall". Contagion operates on a prelinguistic plane, hence Elizabeth concludes: "Words no longer reach him, they shiver and shatter, it is as if (*as if*, I say), it is as if he is guarded by a sheet of crystal" (p. 229), that reads in Hofmannsthal's foretext (p. 135): "*the most profound, most personal quality of my thinking remained excluded ... I was overcome by a terrible sense of loneliness; I felt like someone locked in a garden surrounded by eyless statues*". "But fleas," continues Elizabeth,

he will understand, the fleas and the beetles still creep past his shield, and the rats; and sometimes I his *wife, yes, my Lord, sometimes I too creep through*. Presences of the Infinite [*Presences of the Infinite*] he calls us, and says we make him shudder [Hofmannsthal: *celestial shudders that still linger about ...*]; and indeed I have felt those shudders, in the throes of my raptures I have felt them, so much that whether they were his or were mine I could no longer say.

Not Latin, says my Philip – I copied the words – *not Latin nor English nor Spanish nor Italian* will bear the words of my revelation.

(Coetzee 2003a: 230; my underlining)

Where Elizabeth ends with a plea to Bacon after having literally "copied the words" of the earlier letter, Hofmannsthal (p. 141) completes Philip's epistolary confession: "... but a language none of whose words is known to me, a language in which inanimate things speak to me and wherein I may one day have to justify myself before an unknown judge". Preceding this Hofmannsthal passage that metonymically by way of narrative metalepsis delineates the situation in which Elizabeth Costello finds herself in the story "At the Gate", is the passage in Philip's letter that speaks of what for

Elizabeth Chandos is her "*rush*" or her "*raptures*" (pp. 229-230): "It is then", we read in Hofmannsthal's "Chandos Letter" (p. 140) that "I feel as though I myself were about to ferment, to effervesce, to foam and sparkle. And the whole thing is a kind of feverish thinking, but thinking in a medium more immediate, more liquid, more glowing than words". Elizabeth appears to be in agreement because she says: "And indeed it is so, even I who am his shadow know it when I am in my raptures" (p. 230), that circumscribe what Hofmannsthal's Chandos calls (p. 138): "this strange enchantment" in which it seems "as though my body consists of nought but ciphers which give me the key to everything; or as if we could enter into a new and hopeful relationship with the whole of existence if only we begin to think with the heart". Such thinking, however, is predicated on fusion of irreconcilable difference (binaries) between the sensible and the intelligible, heart and mind, words and world that lingers as hope in all writing, although no writing can ever erase the gap between them. For the fusion or "closure" of this in-between must remain deferred forever in the same way in which the desire for the love object, mentioned by Elizabeth when she writes of Philip's "tears" after intercourse (p. 227) can never be gratified permanently and completely.

The similarities between an already existing literary pre-text and the Coetzee text that I tried to show in my reading thus far, are not confined to this particular example. The Nobel Address "He and His Man", *Foe* and *The Master of Petersburg* are but a few more examples that point to particular incidents of hypertextuality that, in contrast to Kristeva's term "intertextuality", not only incorporates voices of other writing synchronically but also inscribes within itself the body of another text. This "cloned" new text, or what Gérard Genette calls a *hypertext* which is any fiction that inscribes itself like the "Postscript" within the parameters of its predecessor, links the new writing to a *hypotext* – that is a particular pre- or foretext, usually produced by a different author. According to Genette, the resulting duplicity of the object, in the sphere of textual relations – a kind of "doubling the point" or Boolean algebraic potential of "heads or tails" as exercised in the "Postscript" by the "words/swords" inversion of the signifier – can be represented by the old analogy of the palimpsest.

Originally the palimpsest is a manuscript on which an earlier text has been effaced and the vellum or parchment reused for another. It was a common practice, particularly in medieval ecclesiastical circles, to rub out an earlier piece of writing by means of washing or scraping the manuscript to prepare it for a new text. Although the motive for making palimpsests seems to have been largely economic – reusing parchment was cheaper than preparing new skin – another motive may have been directed by the desire of church officials to "convert" pagan Greek script by overlaying it with the

word of God. Yet, as the unconverted script shines through the superimposed text, the effect is one more akin to the model for the function of writing that Freud discussed in the *Mystic Writing Pad*. Thus the palimpsest foregrounds the fact, famously argued by poststructuralists, that all writing takes place in the presence of other writing for which pastiche and parody are chief generic examples that, in the words of Genette's study, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (1997: 398), "designate literature as a palimpsest". (The structuralist study does not mention Coetzee although it contains a chapter on Tournier's rewriting of *Robinson Crusoe*.) Referring to Borges, Genette argues that "every hypertext" forges a particular relation between the text and its "foretexts" that far exceeds influence or intertextuality. "The hypertext invites us to engage in a relational reading, the flavour of which, however perverse, may well be condensed in an adjective recently coined by Philippe Lejeune: "a *palimpsestuous* reading" (Genette 1997: 398-399). So what, then, does a *palimpsestuous* reading produce that operates within the lattice work made up of Hofmannsthal's foretext and Coetzee's aptly titled supplementary "Postscript" that not only stands intratextually in relation to *Elizabeth Costello* but also overwrites hypertextually in 2003 the "Chandos Letter" hypotext written in 1902?

2 Palimpsestuous Reading

A palimpsestuous reading needs to broaden and deepen the work of philologically tracing antecedents to a particular piece of writing. For although knowledge of the hypotext is a prerequisite enabling such a reading, it is not sufficient as Derek Attridge's all too brief treatment of the Nobel Address shows. Thus the few references provided for Defoe's work assist a hermeneutical understanding of Coetzee's complex pronominal treatment of "He" ("character": Crusoe) and "his man" ("author": Defoe) and illuminate some textual figures (angels with flaming swords and "decoy ducks", for instance), but the problematic of the triangular relation between author-writer/writing-the-written that frames the "Address" remains unexplored. Although we cannot here in detail analyse "He and His Man" with its profound foregrounding of an absolute dissociation between author, narrator and character/actant that romanticised biographical criticism continually blurs, we should take note of the Boolean combinatorial logic staged by the text when it performs the reversal between author and character, reminiscent of the word play "sword/words" in "Postscript". That the palimpsest subverts the concept of the author as the sole originary source of his/her work and hence rejects the temptation of biographical

reductionism is borne out, for instance, by the amusing parody of the hypertextual "decoy ducks" and "engine of execution" in "He and His Man". In this text (the written) a narrator speaks of a snare in which a foreign "duck" (author) becomes trapped only to be killed, and the "condemned man", provided he can leap off the scaffold "between the knocking out of the pin and the descent of the blade" might be spared. The important question as to how to "figure" the metonymic relationship between *author-character* (*He*-Robinson) and *character-author* (*his man*: Defoe) – who share their evenings and "sometimes their nights" – arises, but an answer is endlessly deferred. For, despite the suggestion that it is not the author's language that "writes" the character, but the character's language that "writes" the author, the author-character relation is interrogated by yet another set of rhetorical questions grounded in the repeated simeleic *as*. Thus the question of the reverse-obverse relation of author-character is expressed: "[A]s master and slave? As brothers, twin brothers? As comrades in arms? Or as enemies, foes? What name shall he give this nameless fellow ..." and "[i]f he must settle on a likeness for the pair of them, his man and he, he would write that they are like two ships sailing in contrary directions, one west, the other east" (Coetzee 2003b).

In short, Coetzee, by tinkering with existing literary structures in "He and His Man" in a palimpsestuous way, demonstrates that writing fiction today means foregoing Romanticism's utopia of a world reborn in the spirit of poetic legislators. Moreover, the kind of palimpsestuous writing staged in the "Postscript" and the Nobel Address illuminates the, by now well-known, fact that the author, "the hand that holds the pen is only the conduit of a signifying process" (Coetzee 1992: 341). Drawing on the topical (Derridean) speech/writing distinction, Coetzee (1992: 65) says in conversation with David Attwell: "Writing is not free expression", it is not "wayward" like speech. Yet "[t]here is a true sense in which writing is dialogic: a matter of awakening the controversies in oneself and embarking upon speech with them". While such "controversies" are performed in the Costello stories, something other comes into view in "He and His Man" and especially in the "Letter", as we shall see. This other points to the porosity of partitions between genres in general and hypo- or foretexts and hypertexts in particular – a porosity due chiefly to the contagious potential of signifier and signified, respectively, as demonstrated in the compositional procedures of these two texts. The play with Defoe texts and the tinkering with Hofmannsthal's "Chandos Letter" may seem to be a mere formal "postmodern" aspect of literary production, a stylistic gesture that on closer examination, however, is quickly dispelled. Rather, we need to take seriously palimpsestuous writing because it opens a space for historiographical dialogue between writing and the always-already written, between past

imagining and reimagining from the standpoint of the “now”.

Reading palimpsestuously means placing two (or more) adjacent texts into mutually historicising and historicised connectivity along an elliptical axis linking the points between diachronic (temporal) distance and synchronic (textual) proximity, a reading animated by the “heads or tails” figure that defines the in-between at stake in the two “Letters”. For when we ask what has been “converted” by Coetzee’s overwriting of Hofmannsthal’s “Chandos Letter” the answer must be “very little”, as has been demonstrated in my reading of “Postscript”. The motive for the new text, therefore, must be similar, despite the different contextual situation together with the voice that separates the epistolary confession, penned, on the one hand, by the young poet and darling of Vienna’s *fin de siècle* culture-ravenous intelligentsia and on the other by an internationally acclaimed ageing novelist from Cape Town/Adelaide. Moreover, whereas the one letter originates in a male voice that our culture places on the side of authority to code and to master experience, Elizabeth’s postscript liberates writing from traditional patrimony that holds that the writer is someone who, in the act of writing, produces life. However, by resorting to an *écriture féminine* that overflows the binary opposition of patriarchal logic, the voice of the loving consort, Elizabeth, relieves the original letter’s male voice of its admission of having abandoned all “literary activity” that, in the explanatory opening, situates and frames Hofmannsthal’s text (Coetzee 2003a: 129). What had been a coherently phrased apology for a lack of communication between addresser and addressee in Philip’s letter, now turns, in the words of Elizabeth, into an exercise always passing underneath the signifier towards an anguished cry about a person beyond the reach of words: “Words no longer reach him, they shiver and shatter, it is as if (*as if*, I say), it is as if he is guarded by a sheet of crystal” (p. 229).

Both letters offer themselves as “mirrored image of [a] Self, reflected across the abyss of centuries”, to use the words of Hofmannsthal’s Chandos (p. 139), inasmuch as both texts – albeit divided only by *one* century – articulate the troubled relationship between language and experience on the one hand, and the liminality of language to articulate and to communicate, (“bring home to you”, in the words of Elizabeth Chandos p. 228), on the other. This liminality that comes into view in the space of the in-between is articulated philosophically as irreparable cleavage of the hitherto assumed link between the subject of experience and the subject of knowledge, leading to the twentieth-century crisis of experience. The “*undeclared assumption of the subject of language as the foundation of experience and knowledge*” (Agamben 1993: 47; Agamben’s italics), that shadows all ideas of the primacy of the subject of experience, has become untenable not only for contemporary philosopher Giorgio Agamben. It also already informs the

critique of a unitary self, voiced by the physicist Ernst Mach (1838-1916) and by Freudian psychoanalytical theory, two thinkers who speak intertextually from the Hofmannsthal text as is evident from its thematisation of the dissociation of language and experience. That the Cartesian self in whom thinking and being are united is nothing but a practical entity for the purpose of preliminary observation and that as mere function of an empirically given the ego is variable, becomes particularly obvious when considering the function of the first-person singular pronoun "I". The "I", we know already from the Symbolist poet Rimbaud, is "another" (the famous: *J' une autre*), and in 1885 Mach declared in his *Analyse der Empfindungen* [Analysis of Sensations] that the "ich ist unrettbar" [the ego is irredeemable]. In the place vacated by a unitary self in control of the subject, dwells in Hofmannsthal's text the Freudian split self animated by desire or what Mach called "sensations".

Sensations (prelinguistic excitations) are the determining force animating Philip's (Hofmannsthal p. 136) but also Elizabeth Chandos's existence. No matter how lowly or sublime the sources of sensation are, "an immense sympathy, a flowing over into these creatures, or a feeling that an aura of life and death, dream and wakefulness, had flowed into them – but whence?" (Hofmannsthal p. 137) has its counterpoint in the libidinal "rush" and "rapture" felt by Elizabeth. The reciprocity of sensation before a sublime in form of "celestial shudders" derive from "the miracle" of perceiving an object like "the shrubbery" (Hofmannsthal p. 137) or sexual intercourse (Coetzee 2003a: 227) as absolutes. At moments "when soul and body are one", says Elizabeth (p. 228) echoing Philip's words that "the whole of existence [is] one great unit: the spiritual and physical worlds seem to form no contrast" (Hofmannsthal p. 137), she feels "ready to burst out in tongues of angels" (p. 228). In instances of epiphany, as James Joyce once called the experience of unity between the ego and the objects in the world as such, communication and communion between self and others in wordless mystical union beyond language seem possible. However, both fictional letter-writers suggest that such communion is for them now a thing of the past. Moreover, the "flood of divine sensation" that "words seem too poor to describe" (Hofmannsthal p. 136), and that Elizabeth despairs "of explaining though they are clear to [her] eye" (Coetzee 2003a: 229), defy intelligibility. Instances that Coetzee, citing Hofmannsthal in the epigraph to "Postscript" describes as the sensuous world pressing towards a speaking self "with such fullness, such presence of love", cannot be put into words. In face of the fullness of being, Hofmannsthal's Chandos (p. 135) exclaims: "Words desert me", and Elizabeth Chandos describes the poverty of language in the simile of "words" that are mere "soldiers on parade, like soldiers on parade" (p. 229). Neither by doubling an already existing

“Letter” nor by duplicating the same soldier-metaphor and thus yielding to “contagion” (p. 229), is the sensation/desire abated that is felt by these “*extreme souls*” to which Elizabeth refers (p. 229; Coetzee’s italics). Aphasia threatens particularly in the situation of acutely felt distress that marks the “time of affliction I call the present time”, to use Elizabeth’s expression (p. 228). Between the obverse and reverse of sensation, that is between pleasure and pain both of which push the limits of utterance, Hofmannsthal-Philip’s and Coetzee-Elizabeth’s letters expose the interstice, the hiatus inherent in all language. Instrumentalised and incessantly instrumentalising language usually seeks to close the gap “between pure language and discourse”, as Agamben (1993: 55) puts it, by inferring that transparent communication between the semiotic and semantic orders, the essentially intranslatable and the potentially translatable, is merely a matter of clearing away ambiguity and preventing “contagion”. By re- and overwriting the “Chandos Letter” Coetzee’s palimpsestuous scription stages the very aperture of language as perilous in-between along the diachronic (temporal distance between authors) and synchronic (proximity of writer and the written) axis.

What this perilous in-between discloses, “through” the dual “agency” of Philip’s and Elizabeth’s letters (cf. Coetzee 2003a: 229) – and thus through the performance of the written rather than through authorial intention – is the unbridgeable gap that, according to Benveniste, exists between the semiotic and the semantic. Following Agamben (1993: 55), it is precisely this interstice where “the two orders, semiotic [or the essentially intranslatable] and semantic [or potentially translatable], remain separate and incommunicable” that is inhabited by Coetzee’s “Postscript”. As quite literally a “post-script” to an already existing “script” it stages counterfactually an *experimentum linguae* “in which”, as Agamben (1993: 5) would say, “the limits of language are to be found not outside language, in the direction of the referent, but in an experience of language as such in its pure self-reference”. This experiment strips the female voice of all content and attributes, leaving at the heart of the transcendental experience of the “I” only the “pure subject of the verb”, to use Agamben’s (1993: 30) expression again. Put differently; the thought or place of the first-person singular as matrix, put into question already by fictional Philip Chandos within the context of Freud and Mach some hundred years ago, is suspended once more.

“I have foresworn words,” said Philip Chandos (Hofmannsthal p. 136) at the time when his creator, Hofmannsthal, ceased writing poetry and turned all his energy, instead, to narrative prose and dramatic works. The “time” when “such extreme souls as I write of may be able to bear their afflictions”, has not yet arrived, Elizabeth (Coetzee 2003a: 229) echoes her

predecessor. In short, the *experimentum linguae* performed by the "Postscript" when read palimpsestuously does not merely invoke the double of exchange as both silent desire and verbal utterance that undergirds creative writing at the moment where an author invents the narrator and the style of the narrative that the narrator speaks and tells. It is not only the psychological instant of the in-between where, in Coetzee's words, the artist in quest for "the codes and the keys" can

make a tour of the inner menagerie [the zoo in which a multitude of beasts have residence] with a degree of confidence and emerge, when they so wish, more or less unscathed. From Freud's account of creative work I take one element: that creativity of a certain kind involves inhabiting and managing and exploiting quite primitive parts of the self. While this is not a particularly dangerous activity, it is a delicate one.

(Coetzee 2003a: 31)

It is rather an instance in which the experience of language as semantic-semiotic double revealing itself to itself exposes the post-Freud-Lacanian speaking subject as "multiple and multiply divided against itself" (Coetzee 2003a: 31), and hence as "wayfarer". Faced thus by the inexperiencible that arises at the instant when the traditional subject of experience becomes exposed to the realisation that "I" or self is not the *matrix of* but merely the linguistic *nexus between* experience, Philip and Elizabeth Chandos, skirting in extreme "distress of mind" the reticence of silence and the abyss of madness opened by the flood of contagion,⁴ seek a method that would lead them out of the crisis of experience and thus save them from "drowning" (Coetzee 2003a: 230).

Both fictional characters appeal to historical Francis Bacon who, after all, codified the *scientia experimentalis* as a sure road to knowledge along a pre-configured path of the *methodos*. Could inductive method and natural science, inventions traditionally ascribed to Bacon, assist the troubled pair, Philip and Elizabeth, in finding a less precarious "true way" by gradually deriving axioms from the senses and particulars in unbroken ascent until they finally arrive at the most general axioms? Would there be a road to truth that language might travel so as to approximate an instrumental,

4. Coetzee (1996: 180) in his work on censorship points out that, although if you are "flooded with contagion" there is the danger of madness, contagion as "an explanatory model of the communication of passions among masses of people" (traceable to the pioneering study of Gustave le Bon who recognised contagion as one of the three main features of the psychology of the crowd), can nevertheless, due to its metonymic sliding of meaning from one thing to the next, undermine censorship.

unambiguous system of scientific inquiry that, empirically fastened to the natural world, allowed for man's mastery over it and the objects in the world? The *experimentum linguae*, located in the interstice between word and world where its verbal interruptions of voice, citation, stop, and parenthesis deeply affect the reader who in turn suffers with Elizabeth, suffering with Philip Chandos (Coetzee 2003a: 227) suggests otherwise. The experiment in and with language in contrast to the scientific experiment does not offer a sure method or an unambiguous road. Instead language exposes an aporia, literally "the absence of a road", as the very site in which alone experience is possible for "man" today, as the philosopher Agamben (1993: 29) reminds us.

Unlike the sciences whose language is forced to make "judgements" by taking sides with *either* "heads" *or* "tails" so as to avoid unsettling aporias, fiction like life suspends judgements between obverse and reverse accounts, cleaving open the uncertainties of aleatoric human existence that scientific rationalism tends to efface. Where exigent vehicular, instrumental and instrumentalising language takes possession of its objects paradigmatically and promises, via a predetermined method, a single road to intelligibility that guarantees *one* closed "meaning" (semiotic), literary language, in its embrace of "double meanings" arising from articulating obverse and reverse metonymically, exposes, to use a phrase from Agamben again,

the word to its own mediality, in its own being a means without transcendence, communicates communication of a communicability it allows the being in a medium of human beings and thus it opens the ethical dimension for them.

(Agamben 1996: 59)⁵

Fiction pays the price with "double meaning" (Coetzee 2004: 11) for its sympathetic imagination "that", in the words of author Elizabeth Costello (Coetzee 2003a: 63) "allows us to share at times the being of another".⁶ In

5. It is worthwhile here to compare Agamben's insight with Derek Attridge's (2004a: 19) question of how "we can describe verbal creation". Concerned in his book with the increasing neglect of literary studies on the part of the academy, he offers, informed by the thought of Derrida and Levinas, as answer: "[o]ne approach that will allow" fuller cognisance of "a handling of language whereby something we might call 'otherness' or 'alterity', or 'the other', is made, or allowed, to impact upon the existing configurations of an individual's mental world – which is to say, upon a particular cultural field as it is embodied in a single subjectivity. Otherness is that which is, at a given moment, outside the horizon provided by the culture for thinking, understanding, imagining, feeling, perceiving" (2004a: 19).

our case "the agency of his letter", as Elizabeth Chandos (p. 229) calls the (Hofmannsthal) pre-text, at once doubles the potential of sympathy and my being, as a reader contaminated, "touched by contagion" (p.229). At the same time, by staging contagion as the being of language, the hypertext exposes also the aporiatic quality of figurality that dwells in all language and especially in creative fiction. "All is allegory, says my Philip" (p. 229), says Elizabeth, says Coetzee moving along the metonymic chain that links their narrative with Hofmannsthal's earlier one that suggested the figure of allegory in order to articulate the sensation of mystical unity between animate and inanimate objects. By thus making allegory into a cardinal figure – cardinal because allegory as a figure that, in contrast to the substantive, exclusive and closed symbol, denotes fluid, inclusive openness – the "Postscript" returns us to the signifying process instead of coagulating it. (We need to note here that "allegory" in the tradition of Walter Benjamin does not imply a fixed image as referent for a simile, as is commonly understood, but designates rather a precarious fissure or crack that suspends first and second distinct meaning.)⁷ In addition, the palimpsest foregrounds the fact that all writing takes place in the presence of other writings by

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6. In this connection we need also to remember the philosopher's view of fiction in relation to the apparent rationalism of "science". Thus Martha Nussbaum (2001: 123-125), in an attempt to re-evaluate the philosophy of the Stoa, praises the very "sympathetic imagination" of which Costello speaks, and calls literature, because it possesses "an element of projection, a going beyond the facts" an important part of "[a]ll of our ethical life". She further argues "that the sympathetic imagination can cross the species barrier" and favourably refers to "J.M. Coetzee's imaginary character Elizabeth Costello, a novelist lecturing on the lives of animals", who "points out that we are capable, with pain and effort, of thinking the fact of our own death. But then, why say that we're incapable of imagining the life of a creature of another species?" And quoting from Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals*, Nussbaum continues: "the heart is the seat of a faculty, *sympathy*, that allows us to share at times the being of another", in which Nussbaum reads confirmation for "the Stoic view that an emotion is an evaluative appraisal of the world" (Nussbaum 2001: 125), an appraisal that like the "neo-Stoic view" advocated by Nussbaum, is "cognitive, evaluative, and eudaimonist" (2001: 123).
 7. It is from a Benjaminian perspective that we need to reassess not only the traditional figure of allegory but also the allegorical content of Coetzee's oeuvre to which Derek Attridge (2004b: 32-64) refers. Attridge's seminal study on Coetzee rightly rejects the kind of allegorical readings of Coetzee's fiction that criticism has engaged in up till now; however, it would be highly desirable to subject the oeuvre to the kind of work done on the "German Mourning Play" by Walter Benjamin.

inscribing itself into the always-already written (hypotext). It is not “I” or people who “speak” language, but it is the reverse: language “speaks” people and “me”, as so aptly demonstrated by the *experimentum linguae*, an experiment that in accordance with Benveniste’s theory of enunciation demonstrates the work of pronouns as “shifters”. Through shifters, what Benveniste (1966) calls *indicateurs de l’énonciation*, language refers to its own taking place, to a pure instance of discourse in action. When one looks closely at the passage from language to discourse – or the relation between semiotic obverse and semantic reverse of language that is at stake in our two texts – the passage appears as a paradoxical act that simultaneously implies both subjectification and desubjectification, as Agamben observes:

On the one hand, the psychosomatic individual must fully abolish himself and desubjectify himself as a real individual to become the subject of enunciation and to identify himself with the pure shifter “I”, which is absolutely without any substantiality and content other than its mere reference to the event of discourse. But, once stripped of all extra-linguistic meaning and constituted as a subject of enunciation, the subject discovers that he has gained access not so much to a possibility of speaking as to the impossibility of speaking – or, rather, that he has gained access to being always-already anticipated by a glossolalic potentiality over which he has neither control nor mastery.

(Agamben 2002: 116)

Palimpsestuous writing thus subverts the concept of experiencing unitary subjecthood, together with a notion of the author as the sole originary source of his/her work, rendering biographical criticism questionable. By deferring meaning of a work down an endless chain of signification, the lattice work of the palimpsest together with allegory as principle of composition, matched by “ambivalence” (Coetzee 2004: 11) as response, continuously invites metonymy by way of contagious/contiguous sliding beneath the signifier, something that undermines all master interpretations⁸ aiming at clear, convincing and unambiguous meanings. It would be facile, though, to see either the palimpsest or palimpsestuous writing and reading as merely asserting the well-known supplementarity of language and writing. Rather, by way of situating itself historically between a past and a

8. We should note here Coetzee’s reminder of the work done by “contagion” (cf. Note 4):

Relinquishing of an imaginative grasp upon the future means a loss of hope, but from a critical position from the verb *krino*, “to accuse”, “to bring to trial” the seemingly paranoid text offends reason Reason cannot explain paranoia to itself, explain it away. In paranoia, reason meets its match.

(Coetzee 1993: 283)

present in the interstice between one particular potential being given, namely the pre-text or hypotext, and one potential being written within its parameters, the palimpsest establishes an elliptical trajectory between particular points of past and present discourse. Inasmuch as the "Postscript" converts Hofmannsthal's spiritual, disembodied coding of worldless epiphany into the psychoanalytical language of desire, it links the extraneousness implicit in poetic speech that always knows of the impossibility of speaking other than in "tongues" and figures – in contrast to instrumental speech – across the trajectory of modernism. Yet neither pre-text nor post-(script) text resolves the problem associated with modernism's crisis of experience in face of the self's awareness that an impossibility of speaking has, in an unknown way, come to speech; "I" is always other. Literary, and especially poetic, language has always known this; and by staging the suspension of language and discourse, the semiotic and semantic – and, by analogy, glossolalic "contagion" and muteness (or madness) – Coetzee's palimpsestuous "Postscript" leads its readers to experience, in Agamben's words just cited, the "paradoxical act that simultaneously implies both subjectification and desubjectification".

Palimpsestuous writing in general, it can be said, topologically marks a point where mutually historicising and historicised imaginings (for instance the poet's ability to render intelligible sensuous experience) intersect along an elliptical axis, an axis that links (temporal) diachronic distance and (spatial) synchronic proximity. Palimpsestuous writing and reading open a historiographic space that is not an index of a nostalgically recouped and preserved past. Rather, by overwriting the always-already written in a way demonstrated by Coetzee's "Postscript", specific past constellations are re-activated by the now, so as to mark both distance and proximity to past concerns and situations. Thus, instead of seeing in the prefix "post" – as in "Postscript", *Postmodernism*, et cetera – a mere chronology of coming after, palimpsestuous reading and writing knot the temporal "before" and "after" together into a spatiotemporal constellation that provides the measure of concern for an age revelling in nostalgia and historical reconstruction with scant concern for remnants of unfinished business such as what it is that the poets can and cannot say.

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