

Wordsworth's Disgrace: The Insistence of South Africa in J.M. Coetzee's *Boyhood* and *Youth*

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Summary

This article takes issue with the critical tendency to understand J.M. Coetzee's autobiographical novels *Boyhood* and *Youth* as applications of Coetzee's statements on confession and on "autobiography" in *Doubling the Point*. I use Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* to argue that his work resists such a reductive interpretation, and that it correlates such an interpretation with certain pedagogical and poetical positions, which all converge in the figure of William Wordsworth. I then argue, through close readings of *Boyhood* and *Youth*, that Coetzee's autobiographical work situates his own writing practice in relation to these positions, and that they formulate a specifically South African response to them that consists in an explicitly "prosaic" form of fiction, which embodies a way of relating experience and recollection that can best be understood in relation to the Wordsworthian program that *Boyhood* and *Youth* reconfigure.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel neem stelling in teenoor die neiging in kritiek om J.M. Coetzee se outobiografiese romans *Boyhood* en *Youth* te vertolk as toepassings van Coetzee se stellings oor belydenis en oor "autobiografie" in *Doubling the Point*. Ek gebruik Coetzee se roman *Disgrace* om aan te voer dat sy werk weerstand bied teen so 'n reduktiewe interpretasie en dat dit so 'n interpretasie korreleer met sekere pedagogiese en poëtiese standpunte wat almal in die figuur van William Wordsworth konvergeer. Voorts voer ek aan die hand van 'n noulettende lees van *Boyhood* en *Youth* aan dat Coetzee se outobiografiese werk sy eie skryfpraktyk in verhouding tot hierdie standpunte plaas en dat hulle 'n spesifiek Suid-Afrikaanse respons daarop formuleer, 'n respons wat uit 'n eksplisiet "prosaïese" vorm van fiksie bestaan. Dit behels 'n manier van ervaring en herinnering met mekaar in verband bring wat ten beste verstaan kan word aan die hand van die Wordsworthiaanse program wat *Boyhood* en *Youth* herkonfigureer.

In spite of difference of soil and climate, of language and manners, of laws and customs: in spite of things silently gone out of mind and things violently destroyed; the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society ...

William Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*"

Against the background of the prevailing critical image of J.M. Coetzee as an eminently unsociable writer of hypertheorised metafiction, the publication of his autobiographical novel *Boyhood* in 1997 inevitably came as something of a surprise. Less surprising is the way in which the critical reception of Coetzee's autobiographical work has tried to contain the impact of that surprise. The program of that containment, as it can be observed throughout different critical essays, goes as follows: first, it duly notes that "the notoriety of Coetzee's reputation as a fiercely private person" (Collingwood-Whittick 2001: 15) left us unprepared for the 1997 publication of *Boyhood* (Attridge 2004: 140); then, it reprograms this surprise in the assertion that we should have been expecting it all along, if only we had not failed to register the autobiographical promise of "the invaluable frame of reference provided by Coetzee's own theoretical writing on the genre" of autobiography (Collingwood-Whittick 2001: 14) in *Doubling the Point*. This 1992 collection of essays and interviews conducted with David Attwell is then said to have announced, in two privileged moments, not only the possibility of an autobiography, but also the fact that this autobiography would take the particular form of a third-person present-tense narration. First, there is the "acute analysis of confession" (Attridge 2004: 141) in the 1982-1983 essay "Confession and Double Thoughts", a text Coetzee himself saw in hindsight "emerging as pivotal" (Coetzee & Attwell 1992: 391); this essay offers, in the words of Derek Attridge, a demonstration of "the structural interminability of confession in a secular context" (2004: 142). That this theoretical impasse will find its formal solution in a third-person present-tense narration is ascertained by the second moment our interpretive program invokes: in the "Retrospect" at the end of *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee sketches "the first half" of his life, the part up till his move from England to Texas in the sixties (the terrain to be re-covered by *Boyhood* and *Youth*), in, precisely, the third-person present tense. This short narrative breaks off when Coetzee comments on "the formalistic, linguistically motivated regimen" he subscribed to during the writing of his dissertation on Beckett. He parenthetically notes the reason for his decision to arrest his autobiographical narrative at this precise moment: "The discipline within which he (and *he* now begins to feel closer to *I*: *autre*biography shades back into autobiography) had trained himself/ myself to think brought illuminations that I can't imagine him or me reaching by any other route" (Coetzee & Attwell 1992: 394). Coetzee goes on to note that the confession-essay "marks the beginning of a more broadly philosophical engagement with a situation in the world".

It is then the "philosophical" status of these two moments that explains their privileged role in the prevailing interpretation of Coetzee's autobiographical performance: the "philosophical" message of *Doubling the Point* delivers both the meaning and the form of an autobiographical project that is thus preinterpreted as the application of this philosophical meaning.

“Coetzee” then becomes the name of an eminently closed program that pre-forms our interpretation of it.

The problem with this construction, and the reason I want to propose a different reading of Coetzee’s autobiographies in this article, is that the meaning of *Boyhood* and *Youth* is then already prescribed – and readable as a philosophical, non-fictional discourse – in 1992. If we bear in mind David Attwell’s statement on Coetzee’s work that it rediscovers “fiction’s capacity to reconfigure the rules of discourse” (Coetzee & Attwell 1992: 11), the autobiographies’ smooth reduction to this pre-established meaning in effect abolishes their status as fictions, that is, as a form of writing that is capable of changing the rules imposed on it from outside.¹ Taking this reconfigurative potential seriously, as I propose to do here, implies then at least an acceptance of the fact that *Doubling the Point*’s relation to the autobiographies is not that of a philosophical master-interpretation to its application. This acceptance is facilitated when we note that *Doubling the Point* itself already warns against the construction of such a relation. David Attwell’s first question in the book’s opening interview, for instance, starts with “I would like to begin at the beginning, by raising the question of autobiography”, an issue Coetzee’s answer translates into “a question about telling the truth rather than as a question about autobiography”, never resolving the question beyond the assertion that “[t]ruth is something that comes in the process of writing, or comes from the process of writing” (p. 18).

As this invites us to read the actual writing that allegedly supports the prevailing understanding of Coetzee’s autobiographies, we can note that while this line of interpretation unflinchingly quotes Coetzee’s parenthetical remark on the shading of *autre-* into autobiography, it does so without retaining the parentheses and, therefore, the sentence surrounding it (see Lenta 2003: 160, Collingwood-Whittick 2001: 21, Attridge 2004: 140): “The discipline in which he ... had trained himself/myself to think brought illuminations that I can’t imagine him or me reaching by any other route.” The reason this sentence is generally omitted is, I want to suggest, that it considerably qualifies the self-evidence of the general elevation of Coetzee’s “shading” into a moment of enlightenment when it is read carefully: it envisions the more gloomy alternative scenario of an “illumination” reached by a “discipline” and a “training” that is a one-way route rendering its alternatives unimaginable. Given the fact that Coetzee asserts, at another place in *Doubling the Point*, that in the face of history, “the task

1. An equally obvious rejoinder to this reduction to pre-established meaning would, of course, be to note the (non-philosophical) format of the “Lessons” of *Elizabeth Costello*, which similarly demands a consideration of the relation between fiction and philosophy that does not simply privilege the latter.

[of fiction] becomes imagining this unimaginable" (p. 68), it is nothing less than the relation between history and fiction – which the prevailing interpretation of Coetzee's autobiographies forecloses – that is brought into play here. What is suggested here is that the hermeneutical program that I have sketched in the reception of Coetzee's autobiographies may in fact be a more violent "disciplining" of the text and of the power of writing than this program acknowledges. In the rest of this article, I will show how this more violent aspect of hermeneutic harmonisation is correlated in Coetzee's work with certain pedagogical and poetical positions, which all converge in the figure of William Wordsworth. I will argue that Coetzee's autobiographical work situates his own writing practice in relation to these positions, and that they ultimately formulate a specifically South African (i.e., non-English) response to them that consists in an explicitly prosaic (i.e., non-poetic) form of fiction.

Coetzee's work stages the violence of hermeneutical illumination in *Disgrace*, the only novel to have appeared in-between the two autobiographical instalments. As "disgrace" is a term that also figures prominently in *Boyhood* (see *B*: 8, 21, 65, 76, 112),² *Disgrace* can also be read as the elaboration of this term, as also a gloss on one crucial aspect of the autobiographies. David Lurie, the book's soon-to-be-disgraced protagonist, professor of literature and writer of a book on Wordsworth, is teaching a class on Wordsworth's failed encounter with Mont Blanc in Book 6 of *The Prelude*. Lurie's failure to move his class beyond "silence" and "blank incomprehension" in his discussion of a first excerpt brings him to invoke a second passage in order to get his message of the happy coexistence of "imagination" and "the onslaughts of reality" across.³ Only, these two

2. Page references in the text to *Boyhood*, *Disgrace*, and *Youth* will be cited preceded by the abbreviations *B*, *D*, and *Y*.

3. A canonical statement on this "coexistence" is to be found in Book VII of *The Prelude*. I quote it here because it anticipates the terms of my further discussion of the relation between Wordsworth and Coetzee:

But though the picture weary out the eye,
By nature an unimaginable sight,
It is not wholly so to him who looks
In steadiness, who hath among least things

An undersense of greatest; sees the parts
As parts, but with a feeling of the whole.

(VII 731-736)

Book VII is entitled "Residence in London," which is also the setting of Coetzee's *Youth*. The rest of my argument should make clear that London is the place where the paths of Wordsworth and Coetzee most emphatically fail to cross. See also note 5.

passages do not happen to add up to a harmonious solution, as Lurie himself notes: "The [second] passage is difficult; perhaps it even contradicts the Mont Blanc moment". Yet his hermeneutical desire to harmonise these two moments – which, as readers of *Disgrace* will appreciate, is never simply that, as the whole passage is also both a ploy in and an uncomfortably transparent allegory of Lurie's relation to Melanie, one of the students in the class, with whom he is sexually involved – is strong enough to cover up this embarrassment with a violent interpretive imposition: "*Nevertheless, Wordsworth seems to be feeling his way toward a balance*" (*D*: 23-24; my italics). This balance is what the book calls "the harmonies of *The Prelude*" (*D*: 13).

In this context of the question of interpretation, it is relevant that *The Prelude* is, among other things, a particularly strong instance of a literary work that double-times as the story of the genesis of its own poetical achievement, and therefore as a preformation of its own interpretation (and its demise in the rest of *Disgrace* should warn against a repetition of this configuration in the case of Coetzee's autobiographies).⁴ The formal success of its narrative of the "growth of a poet's mind" (the poem's subtitle) assures the applicability of its lesson to at least the whole of Wordsworth's poetical development which it traces (Pfau 1997: 303), and, for David Lurie, also to the reality of post-apartheid South Africa. Later in the class on Wordsworth, David Lurie once more attempts to bring home Wordsworth's lesson of the harmony between the imagination and "the onslaughts of reality", in a last effort to overcome the "dogged silence" (*D*: 32) of the class: "Wordsworth is writing about the Alps We don't have Alps in this country, but we have the Drakensberg, or on a smaller scale Table Mountain, which we climb in the wake of the poets, hoping for one of those revelatory, Wordsworthian moments we have all heard about" (*D*: 23).

Lurie's attempted translation does not lead to the desired illumination. South Africa, a country in which, Coetzee once wrote, "light and shadow are static" (Coetzee 1988: 43), apparently resists entrance into Wordsworth's pedagogic fantasy of a tranquilly recollectable education by nature's teaching – which Lurie, in the rest of *Disgrace*, will learn with a vengeance through a very different re-educational program.

I will show in the rest of this article that in order to valorise *Boyhood* and *Youth* as both "fictions" and "autobiographies", Coetzee's staging of Wordsworth in *Disgrace* is crucial – and, even more pointedly, its evocation of Wordsworth as the writer of a self-interpretive autobio-graphical English poem. Against the books' facile reduction to a "philosophical" meaning that was established in a very different South Africa (that from before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, to name but one context whose relevance

4. For a sophisticated exposition of this hermeneutical double timing, see the last chapter of Pfau 1997.

for the issue of autobiography cannot simply be dismissed), their reading as a counterperformance to the Wordsworthian position they configure can make sense of this performance as what Stathis Gourgouris has called a *(myt)historical* gesture. In his book on “Literature as Theory for an Antimythical Era”, Gourgouris defines as “antimythical” “whatever element cultivates the allure of a transcendental signifier” (say, *The Prelude*, or certain invocations of *Doubling the Point*). Gourgouris’s claim for literature, then, comes close to David Attwell’s understanding of the “reconfiguration of the rules of discourse” performed by Coetzee’s fictions: he proposes to consider “the claim of literature’s intrinsic theoretical capacity to be a performative matter, a matter of (re) framing the conditions of action and perception within a shifting social-historical terrain, which renders one’s relation to the object of knowledge a process (praxis) of restlessness and transformation” (Gourgouris 2003: 11). By taking into account “literature’s intrinsic capacities to theorize the conditions of the world from which it emerges” and to performatively intervene in them (p. xix), the autobiographies can appear as no longer merely the belated applications of a “transcendental signifier” – which would repeat the violence of David Lurie’s interpretive balancing-acts – but rather as *fictions* that do not culminate in a philosophical statement, but that include their status as a third-person present-tense narrative written in English prose in South Africa (each of these terms will be shown to matter) as a last stage *within* their reconfigurative performance. As *autobiographical* fictions, then, they also offer a clue to the way Coetzee envisions his own prosaic writing practice in *Boyhood* and *Youth* – which is not to say that this insight should cultivate the allure of an alternative transcendental signifier that can be applied to the rest of Coetzee’s oeuvre.

As I already suggested, Wordsworth enters Coetzee’s work as a problem of translation: in the introduction to *White Writing* (1988), Coetzee describes the problem with South African nature poetry as the resistance its landscape offers to the imposition of meaning: “The poet scans the landscape with his hermeneutic gaze, but it remains trackless, refuses to emerge into meaningfulness as a landscape of signs” (Coetzee 1988: 9). The rest of the book goes on to identify the poet’s “imperial eye” (p. 174) as Wordsworth’s; Wordsworth is credited with the insight into the shortcomings of the painterly principle of the picturesque for “express[ing] the feeling of someone confronted with the grandeur of the Alps” (p. 41, n1), but his corrective theory of imaginative sublimity still, in Coetzee’s words, “responds to the question of how landscape can be composed as a significant whole in the imagination in the absence of some aesthetic principle ... to give it unity” (p. 41).⁵ Because this is still a response to a hermeneutical

5. An exemplary reading of Wordsworthian sublimity is Hertz 1978. He talks about Kant’s “mathematical sublime” which arises “out of sheer cognitive

and therefore distinctly European question, however, Wordsworth's answer is of only regional relevance. Coetzee writes how "in European art the sublime is far more often associated with the vertical than the horizontal", and this sublime thus finds no application on "the South African plateau". Coetzee writes: "Wordsworth called sublimity 'the result of Nature's first great dealings with the superficies of the earth' ... not considering that plains, as well as mountains and oceans, resulted from these dealings" (p. 52).

In *Disgrace*, David Lurie achieves the bridging of this geographical gap by a relation of mastership, in which he himself appears as the "disciple" of his "master", Wordsworth – and after Coetzee's 1994 detour through Dostoevsky's Petersburg (in *The Master of Petersburg*), we are entirely prepared for the demise of this model.⁶ This is not the place to offer a complete reading of *Disgrace*, but a shorthand for the book's development may well run as follows: Lurie's disgrace develops as the increasing impossibility to remain blind to the fact that it is not so much the "disciple" that is disappearing as the complement of the "master" in post-apartheid South Africa, but rather the "servant" or the "slave". In other words, while the real problems besetting Lurie can best be described as an effect of the disappearing distinction between master and slave (most obviously in his relation to his daughter's neighbour Petrus, who becomes "his own master" (*D*: 114-

exhaustion, the mind blocked not by the threat of an overwhelming force, but by the fear of losing count of or being reduced to nothing but counting – this and this and this – with no hope of bringing a long series or a vast scattering under some sort of conceptual unity" (Hertz 1978: 62). Hertz's positioning of Wordsworth's exhaustion in Book VII of *The Prelude*, the one recounting his "Residence in London" (and, even more specifically, also in the description of the performance of "Jack the Giant-killer", a description to which *Disgrace* refers (see *D*: 178)) is appropriate. In the words of Becker-Leckrone, "Wordsworth's London is a kind of hell of the imagination, where an intense and often horrific overload of sensory input challenges the poet's powers of understanding and meaning-making" (Becker-Leckrone 1998: 999). This challenge characteristically results in the compensatory invocation of the "Spirit of Nature's" "[c]omposure, and ennobling harmony" at the end of Wordsworth's residence in London (VII: 767-72), a recuperation which *White Writing* shows to be unavailable in South Africa (see Coetzee 1988: 51-55). Wordsworthian sublimity, in other words, can arguably master a sensory overload, but is inapplicable to the problem posed by a landscape that refuses to make *any* sense. In the terms of Aldous Huxley's famous "Wordsworth in the Tropics", this distinction mirrors that between the jungle and the veld: "But in any case it is not loneliness that oppresses the equatorial traveller: it is too much company" (Huxley 1956: 115).

6. For the functioning of this master trope within the institutional legacy of Wordsworth, see Reid 2004: 145-170.

117)), Lurie insists on attempting to solve them by a restoration of the relation between master and disciple (this still makes him want to “guide” Lucy after her rape (*D*: 156, 161)). What primarily feeds his blindness is the figure of Wordsworth: talking to Melanie, Lurie says that “Wordsworth has been one of my masters”, and the book adds: “It is true. For as long as he can remember, the harmonies of *The Prelude* have echoed within him” (*D*: 13).

I have already pointed to the violence of this harmonisation in the Alps-passage. *Disgrace* offers a second scene of the disgrace of this masterly instruction when Lurie, after the exposure of his dealings with Melanie, is referred to as “the disgraced disciple” of Wordsworth with a reference to *The Prelude*’s “Blest Babe” passage. This passage from the second book offers *The Prelude*’s most explicit exposition of Wordsworth’s pedagogical program:⁷ its subject is the blessed babe, “[n]ursed in his Mother’s arms,” and thereby “[a]n inmate of this active universe” (ll: 235, 255): “Along his infant veins are interfused/ The gravitation and the filial bond/ Of nature that connect him with the world” (ll: 243-245). This graduation from mother into “the world” has, in this passage, an explicit poetological correlate: The infant’s “mute dialogues with [his] Mother’s heart” are, because they figure as the origin of Wordsworth’s poetical development in *The Prelude*, retroactively qualified as “the first/ Poetic spirit of our human life,” that remain “[t]hrough every change of growth and of decay,/ pre-eminent till death” (ll: 269, 261-266). With this assured possession of the poetical spirit, then, Wordsworth’s poetical education is the mere “display” of the unchanged means “[w]hereby this infant sensibility” was “[a]ugmented and sustained” (ll: 270-273). Because it is the development of an intrinsically meaningful project, this program can henceforth transfigure the negativity of experience, “the onslaughts of reality” (*D*: 24), into a stage in the growth of the childhood mind into that which the mother has always already made it the father of.

It is this blissful educational fantasy that enters the life of John in *Boyhood* in the shape of his childhood companion, the *Children’s Encyclopaedia*:

Childhood, says the *Children’s Encyclopaedia*, is a time of innocent joy, to be spent in the meadows amid buttercups and bunny-rabbits or at the hearthside absorbed in a storybook. It is a vision of childhood utterly alien to him. Nothing he experiences in Worcester, at home or at school, leads him to think that childhood is anything but a time of gritting the teeth and enduring.

(*B*: 14)

7. See, again, Reid for the history of how “‘Wordsworth’ has generally served as the taken-for-granted embodiment of a set of hermeneutic and pedagogical principles” (Reid 2004: 3).

By the time the boy realises the incompatibility of Wordsworthian innocence and South African experience, the first two chapters of the book have already unhinged the applicability of Wordsworth's pedagogy. The first problem is the mother, as the "mute dialogues" are replaced by her "dogged silence" (B: 3): "He shares nothing with his mother" (B: 5). The education into a poetry expressive of the "filial bond" with nature, which Coetzee in *White Writing* has identified as the search for "a natural or Adamic language, one in which Africa will naturally express itself, that is to say, a language in which there is no split between signifier and signified, and things are their names" (Coetzee 1988: 9), is already frustrated in the book's first lines: "They live on a housing estate outside the town of Worcester, between the railway line and the National Road. The streets of the estate have tree-names but no trees yet" (B: 1). Not only are things not their names, these names even fail to refer to what they name. The Wordsworthian preconditions of tranquil recollectability are therefore rigorously unfulfilled. Whereas the boy's father and his father's brothers do reminisce about their schooldays with "nostalgia and pleasurable fear" (B: 9), their recollected education does not resemble that of the infant babe in the bosom of nature: what they recall is their schoolmasters' regime of caning (B: 9), a violence which I already showed to be the dark truth of a (Wordsworthian and hermeneutical) scenario of progressive illumination. It is because these occurrences of the mother, of experience, of language, and of recollection do not add up to the meaningful whole of a Wordsworthian education that the boy's childhood weighs on him like "a burden of imposture" (B: 13).⁸ The boy's initial situation is marked by his exposure to the experience of the incompatibility of, on the one hand, the Wordsworthian educational fiction (see Reid 2004: 163) imposed on him and, on the other, the much bleaker program of a disciplining by the onslaughts of reality, which he refuses in the name of precisely the Wordsworthian imposition: "The very idea of being beaten makes him squirm with shame" (B: 8). Yet the alternative,

8. At one moment (which brings the whole Wordsworthian edifice into play), the book explicitly indicates that the lifting of this burden seals the demise of "apprenticeship" – and of the innocence of England. When Eddie, a young Coloured boy who serves the Coetzees as a servant, runs off and is returned by the police, the young John muses: "Obviously Eddie would have to be sent back to Ida's Valley. Now that he had dropped the pretence of being content, he would run away at every opportunity. Apprenticeship had not worked" (B: 74). The punishment is delivered by Trevelyan, the English lodger, who tortures the boy. "So Trevelyan, who was English, was the one to beat Eddie How does Trevelyan, then, fit into his theory that the English are good?" (B: 74-75). The boy continues to owe Eddie, who is now "in disgrace" (B: 76), for having taught him to ride the bicycle. This achievement is conveyed in the terms of *Disgrace's* positioning of Wordsworth: "[A]ll of a sudden he *mastered* the art of *balancing*" (B: 75; my italics).

Wordsworthian road is, in the South African context, equally shameful: "He has never been beaten and is deeply ashamed of it. He cannot talk about canes in the easy, knowing way of these men" (B: 9).

It is important to insist that Coetzee's books do not simply dismiss the elements of Wordsworth's educational program: the relevance of Wordsworth's terms is precisely that the books actively and performatively ("(myt)historically") reconfigure them. For instance, the boy's failure is emphatically qualified as a failure to add up these terms into a harmonised, meaningful whole: in the boy's idiosyncratic preference for the Russians over the Americans, the book notes that "[h]e knew everything there was to know about Russia: its land in square miles, its coal and steel output in tons, the length of each of its great rivers, the Volga, the Dnieper, the Yenisei, the Ob" (B: 27). This prosaic enumeration, however, does not add up to poetic harmony, that is, to a well-rounded identity. This failure is repeated, near the end of *Boyhood*, in the boy's relation to England:

There is the English language, which he commands with ease. There is England and everything that England stands for, to which he believes he is loyal. But more than that is required, clearly, before one will be accepted as truly English: tests to face, some of which he knows he will not pass.

(B: 129)

This passage still betrays a crypto-Wordsworthian conception of "experience" as the appropriate road to the "proper", "the real", which the book qualifies as "the English" (B: 29, 52-53). The question on which *Boyhood* ends still understands the proper way to integrate these experiences into an identity to be the work of recollection – yet this adoption of another Wordsworthian term begins to register an important difference. The boy's family have just participated in the funeral of the boy's aunt, who had devoted her whole life to the translation, the printing, and the binding of a book written by her father. The title of this book is *Deur 'n gevaarlike krankheid tot ewige genesing*, that is, "Through a Dangerous Malady to Eternal Healing" (B: 117). The recuperation of the onslaughts of reality that this title suggests seals the book's fate in South Africa: it remains unread.⁹ Yet, importantly, the unsold copies *remain*; also,

9. The autobiographies consistently trope "writing" as that which remains, as that which is unable to disappear. The boy's father's decline is discovered in the shape of "the cache of letters" he "hides at the bottom of his wardrobe" (B: 156); the boy's first death-fantasy comes after his near-drowning, when drowning "would have been quite appropriate": "Then all that would have been required of Michael [the boy who saved his life] would have been to write the letter to his mother" (B: 16-17). In *Youth*, the relationship with one of the young man's partners "comes to a head when, while he is out of the flat, Jacqueline searches out his diary and reads what he has written about

the funeral of the boy's aunt has not resulted in a successful burial: the coffin is not yet "lowered into the grave" when it starts raining, and the company leaves the graveyard (*B*: 164). It is this double *insistence of the remains* that disturbs the tranquillity of the resurgence of the memorial imperative, and turns it into something altogether more melancholic than what the Wordsworthian program envisioned:

[N]o one has given a thought to the books ... that no one will ever read; and now Aunt Annie is lying in the rain waiting for someone to find the time to bury her. He alone is left to do the thinking. How will he keep them all in his head, all the books, all the people, all the stories? And if he does not remember them, who will?

(*B*: 166)

One way to situate the answer of the autobiographies to this self-addressed question is by tracing their reconfiguration of Wordsworth's key concepts of experience and recollection (the terms in which this question is still formulated), from the initial "dogged silence" in *Boyhood* to *Youth*. As the crucial role of dogs in *Disgrace* may already suggest, a not merely fanciful way of doing this is following precisely the "dogs" associated with this silence. They first recur in the young boy's attempt at recounting "his own first memory": this memory tells of "a small spotted dog" that is hit by a car – "its wheels go right over the dog's middle". The truth of this fiction, however, is immediately qualified when the book adds that "[t]here is another first memory" (*B*: 30). This unrecuperability of a primal scene again targets the cornerstone of the Wordsworthian edifice of recollection, the mother: "His very first memory, earlier than the dog ... is of her white breasts. He suspects he must have hurt them when he was a baby, beaten them with his fists, otherwise she would not now deny them to him so pointedly, she who denies him nothing else" (*B*: 35). It is the awareness of the contingency of this cornerstone – a "rock" is the term the book uses (*B*: 35, 116) – that interrupts the mute dialogue of love: "She loves him absolutely, therefore he must love her absolutely: that is the logic she compels upon him. The thought of a lifetime bowed under a debt of love

their life together" (*Y*: 8). Also, the letters from his mother he receives in London prevent the extinguishing of the "memory of the family and the country he left behind" (*Y*: 98). As I show in this essay, it is the persistence of the letter that the young Coetzee, at the end of *Youth*, will assume as his literary vocation. I would also propose that this awareness of the insistence of the letter can account for the fact that Coetzee's fiction of the last decade (since *The Master of Petersburg*) operates at a fundamental level by literal recurrences – I will soon propose "dog" as one such insistent form; "shame" and "disgrace" are also likely candidates, as are the characteristic duplets in *Disgrace* ("burnt, burnt up," and the like). I have elsewhere tried to sum up *Disgrace* as a cruel pun on the sequence "desire"/ "despair"/ "disgrace".

baffles and infuriates him to the point where he will not kiss her, refuses to be touched by her. When she turns away in silent hurt, he deliberately hardens his heart against her, refusing to give in" (B: 47). So much for the infant babe, then.

Only two pages after the destruction of this fiction, "[h]is mother decides that she wants a dog" (B: 49). The boy claims his share in this acquisition: "He insists on being the one to name it." This dog, however, resists playing to the rules of this imposition: the dog is "not yet full grown when he eats the ground glass someone has put out for him". The boy helps to bury the dog. "Over the grave he erects a cross with the name 'Cossack' painted on it. He does not want them to have another dog, not if this is how they must die" (B: 50).

This then leaves us with the following development: *Boyhood* moves from a "dogged" silence over the freely fictionalised creation of a dog to the insistence of the remains of the real, irreplaceable dog. This ternary structure can serve as a shorthand for the development of the young Coetzee's sense of memorial vocation,¹⁰ while it can also explain the shifting geographical and temporal terms in which *Boyhood* and *Youth* cast the notion of experience. The places in the books are indeed crucially articulated with a distinct temporality: whereas the South Africa of *Boyhood* is the incapacitating site of imitation, miming and aping (Y: 90),¹¹ which

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10. Here the autobiographies' interruption by *Disgrace* again becomes relevant; at the beginning of the novel, Lurie abounds in apologetic animal-metaphors to claim his right of desire (see D: 10, 25, 56, for instance); this desire is consistently troped as a "gaze" (D: 12), which falters when the dogs later in the novel stare back (D: 81, 85, 142). Lurie realises that the dogs' "lot" consists in "waiting their turn" (D: 85), that "they too feel the disgrace of dying" (D: 143), and when he realises that "suddenly and without reason, their lot has become important to him" (D: 126), this logic crucially positions the mortal dogs in Lurie's attempt "to accept disgrace as [his] state of being" (D: 172). It is because of the implication of the imperial gaze – which, as I noted, Coetzee associates with Wordsworth – that this acceptance takes the form of a re-education of the eye (D: 218). For the figure of the gaze in Coetzee, see Marais 2000: 71, and Coetzee 1988: 163-167.
11. Commenting on his depiction of the Karoo in *In the Heart of the Country*, Coetzee writes: "[T]he Karoo threatened only the tedium of reproduction, reproduction of a phraseology in which the Karoo has been done to death in a century of writing and overwriting" (Coetzee & Attwell 1992: 142). In the autobiographical sketch at the end of *Doubling the Point*, the first half of his life, before the "more broadly philosophical engagement with a situation in the world" (p. 394), is described thus: "In the first half he reacts: he does not engage with his situation at a philosophical level" (p. 392). This period is also marked by the "dogged" pursuit of "a career in mathematics" (p. 393). Whereas this sketch maintains the binary opposition between the reactive and

corresponds to the first stage of uncreative, dogged silence, London, where John moves in *Youth*, is lived under the imperative of a “readiness” to be “transformed” (Y: 93); the young poet is “ready for anything, in fact, so long as he will be consumed by it and remade” into “his new, true, passionate self” (Y: 111). Experience, that is, is reduced to the occasion for the recognition of “the self-generating, self-built powers of his mind” that also structures the development of *The Prelude* (Becker-Leckrone 1998: 1011), which corresponds to the second, properly Wordsworthian stage – that of an unbound poetical imagination.

The onslaughts of reality, however, – and this is a third geographical and temporal position, and one which was not yet available in the binary construction of the autobiographical sketch in *Doubling the Point* – doggedly *insist*. And because the second position is associated with a Wordsworthian conception of experience and imagination, it is in this third position that Coetzee’s reconfiguration of Wordsworth will be found. The onslaughts of reality had already insisted earlier in *Boyhood*, of course, most obviously in two encounters with “Coloureds”, and most explicitly in a scene where John and two friends trespass on the property of an Afrikaans farmer. Their punishment is announced as “a cane, a strap; they are going to be taught a lesson”. The instruction comes, eventually, in the shape of the farmer and his dog. Musing on his disgrace, the boy realises that “[t]here is nothing they can say to redeem the experience” (Y: 71). When *Youth* writes that “London is proving to be a great chastener”, the only instruction the outcome of this chastening still allows is learning your lesson “like a beaten dog” (Y: 113). Where the paradigm for the young Coetzee’s exaltation of experience is that of the “transfiguring fire of art”, the “fiery furnace” of poetry (Y: 3, 11, 25, 30), “the work of transmuting experience into art” (Y: 44, 95), London has, near the end of *Youth*, most radically chastened this harmonising recuperation of experience:

Experience. That is the word he would like to fall back on to justify himself to himself. The artist must taste all experience, from the noblest to the most degraded It was in the name of experience that he underwent London ... [Everything] can be regarded simply as experience, as a further stage in his journey into the depths.

It is a justification that does not for a moment convince him. It is sophistry, that is all, contemptible sophistry There is nothing to be said for it; nor, to be ruthlessly honest, is there anything to be said for its having nothing to be said for it.

(Y: 164)

the philosophical, I argue that the autobiographies configure a third position. For a rather impressionistic sketch of Coetzee’s “logic of threes”, see Barney 2004.

It is at this moment near the end of *Youth* that the book refuses the two most familiar models for the inclusion of experience in an artistic autobiography: it is not a straightforward *Künstlerroman*, in which the artist is “enriched and strengthened” (*Y*: 66) by his experiences in order to write the work we are reading, and in which the success of this achievement retroactively valorises these experiences; nor is it a confession that congratulates itself on its conversion into the insight into the vanity of these experiences:¹² there is nothing to be said for its having nothing to be said for it. It is this radical chastening that prevents the impasse that Coetzee in “Confession and Double Thoughts” has called “a potentially infinite regression of self-recognition and self-abasement in which the self-satisfied candour of each level of confession of impure motive becomes a new source of shame and each twinge of shame a new source of self-congratulation” (Coetzee & Attwell 1992: 282). This double dismissal of the models of experience-as-enrichment and of the confessed insight into the vanity of experience – which can ultimately both be referred back to the model of *The Prelude* – means that Coetzee’s books, by the very fact that they still appear as autobiographies, occupy a third autobiographical position different from both: they *remain* as works of prose. I will attempt to show how this third configuration of recollection and experience is the autobiographies’ particular reconfiguration of the Wordsworthian model, and how this reconfiguration is presented as a distinctively South African one.

This third position is figured, by the autobiographies themselves, as that which outlives, in the books’ geological imaginary,¹³ poetry’s cleansing and transfiguring fire, that is, as earth and water. Early in *Youth*, the operation of water is figured very much like that of fire: “From the waters of misery one emerges on the far bank purified, strong, ready to take up again the challenges of a life of art” (*Y*: 65). The growing awareness that “South Africa is a wound within him” (*Y*: 116), however, will recall the would-be-poet in London to a scene in *Boyhood*: while visiting the farm of his father’s family, the boy encounters “a canvas water-bottle” from which he drinks,

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12. These models are obviously not so much dismissed as reconfigured; Attridge mentions the examples of, among others, Joyce, Proust, Rousseau, and Tolstoy (Attridge 2004: 140-141) and concludes: “This dense web of allusion ... places the book firmly within a long European tradition even while it asserts its marginality” (p. 155, n 20).
13. In *White Writing*, Coetzee recalls “a recurrent theme of South African landscape writing” which resists the (Wordsworthian) imperial gaze by calling for “a geological, not a botanical gaze”, because “the true South African landscape is of rock, not foliage” (Coetzee 1988: 167). Because this tradition is, as Coetzee notes, “above all an art of deep reading” (p. 168), it will become clear that Coetzee’s relation to it is again one of reconfiguration, rather than a mere dismissal or an unconditional embrace.

yet “[h]e pours no more than a mouthful at a time. He is proud of how little he drinks. It will stand him in good stead, he hopes, if he is ever lost in the veld” (B: 83).¹⁴ There seems to be a connection, then, between the specificity of South Africa and the scarcity of water, that is, of the element that also figures the position of Coetzee’s autobiographical prose itself. This prose seems to respond to a particularly South African situation, an insight that only dawns on the poet while he is in London. The farm is also the one place where the young boy has a sense of belonging to something that is “greater than any of them” (B: 96). This belonging is explicitly also said to be a rootedness in “the stories” of the farm (B: 22): the farm is covered “by a soft white web of gossip spun over past and present” (B: 85).¹⁵ Near the end of *Youth*, this childhood experience comes to insist at the moment when he refuses to abandon the writing of his thesis on Ford Maddox Ford: “Yet he does not want to abandon it. Giving up undertakings is his father’s way. He is not going to be like his father. So he commences the task of reducing his hundreds pages of notes in tiny handwriting to a *web of connected prose*” (Y: 136; my italics).

As the scene with the water-bottle already suggested, this call to prose coincides with the discovery, while reading “memoirs of visitors to the Cape”, that “South Africa is different” from England, and different in the way the abundance of England’s “sounding cataracts” (B: 105) (the only line from Wordsworth quoted in the book), are different from South Africa’s economical water-bottle. Whereas England is “by now wrapped in centuries of words”, in the case of South Africa, “[w]ere it not for this handful of books, he could not be sure he had not dreamed up the Karoo

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14. In the next paragraphs, the book describes another water-experience in which the young John “and his brother launch a galvanised-iron bathtub into the dam [situated near the farmhouse], climb unsteadily in, and paddle it back and forth across the surface”; the boy realises that “[b]etween him and death there is only a thin sheet of metal. Nevertheless, he feels quite secure, so secure that he can almost doze. This is the farm: no ill can happen here” (B: 83). The example of this scene is the famous boat-stealing scene in Book I of *The Prelude* (lines 357-414). Wordsworth’s scene shows a similar progress from an act of transgression, over a fear about this transgression to a compensation for this fear, yet lodges the latter in the “Wisdom and Spirit of the Universe” (line 401) Against this spiriting away of “blank desertion” (line 395), Coetzee’s reconfiguration insists: “He wants to be a creature of the desert, this desert, like a lizard” (B: 83).
15. *Youth* similarly features one epiphanic moment of belonging, which is again explicitly a counter to the teleology of transfiguration: “He journeyed to the great dark city to be tested and transformed, and here, on this patch of green under the mild spring sun, word of his progress has, surprisingly, come. If he has not utterly been transfigured, then at least he has been blessed with a hint that he belongs on this earth” (Y: 117).

yesterday" (*Y*: 137). It is this opposition between English imaginative abundance and the scarcity of South African stories that generates the writer's prosaic responsibility. The writing of a "web of connected prose", that is, appears as a distinctly South African (that is, distinctly non-English) necessity, which cannot take the form of Wordsworthian poetical harmonies. Unlike poetic recollective harmonising, prose, the young poet discovers, "seems naggingly to demand a specific setting" (*B*: 62), and this setting is, for John, emphatically South Africa. It is South Africa's nagging need for a storied web of description, for a connection to particulars that are not spirited away into harmonious universals, that obligates what I want to call Coetzee's prosaics of enumeration – an account of particulars which need no longer be harmonised into a meaningful poetic whole; the realisation that "[o]ne day the farm will be wholly gone, wholly lost" suffices to already "griev[e] at that loss" (*B*: 80). This mourning of the farm, which was announced in the question on which *Boyhood* ends, takes the form of an enumeration of the animals that are no longer there – "horses, donkeys, cows with their calves, pigs, ducks, a colony of hens with a cock that crowed to greet the sun, nanny-goats and bearded billy-goats" (*B*: 82). It is, then, the notion of prosaic enumeration that, after the stages of "dogged silence" and of the poetic transfiguration of reality, appears as the distinctly South African connection between experience and recollection; it is only through their prosaic enumeration, and not through the imposition of the Wordsworthian sublime, that the particulars of South Africa are allowed to remain and to go on insisting.

It is in this sense that, as Derek Attridge writes, "[t]he truth that *Boyhood* offers, then, is first and foremost that of testimony" as a "documentary work" (Attridge 2004: 155). In the first interview in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee suggests a distinction between "two kinds of truth, the first truth to fact, the second something beyond that" (Coetzee & Attwell 1992: 17). He further defines this second kind of truth as "something that comes in the process of writing, or comes from the process of writing" (p. 18). Attridge's statement on the truth of *Boyhood* – and the same goes for *Youth* – can then be seen to properly connect both kinds of truth into Coetzee's self-addressed imperative to reconnect the process of writing to the (decidedly non-English) precariousness of South African fact. The autobiographies, as *fictions*, reconfigure their self-addressed imperative as a responsibility to South African facts that, without their reconfiguration, would be "wholly gone, wholly lost". The fictions, as *autobiographies*, also implicate their act of self-writing in this reconfiguration of the process of writing. I would suggest that the third-person present tense, which, as Attridge has noted, manages to avoid "self-reflexivity" (Attridge 2004: 143), is the books' way of signalling that they also "document" their writing subject; the third-person present tense, in other words, as the appropriate mode for enumerating a subject, for keeping it implicated in the process of its

reconfiguration in writing, rather than sublimating it into the wholeness of an achieved identity. An enumerated identity remains exposed on the surface of the written text.

In *Boyhood* and *Youth*, as I have suggested, that textual surface is figured as a water-surface. This image provides another – admittedly rather extravagant – instance where the distinction of South Africa can be glimpsed. In *Boyhood*, the boy imagines “[w]hat he would write if he could” to be “[l]ike spilt ink, like shadows racing across the face of still water” (*B*: 140). In London, the young poet repeats that “[p]rose is like a flat, tranquil sheet of water on which one can track about at one’s leisure, making patterns on the surface” (*Y*: 61). For South African prose, however, the tranquillity of this water is finally something too reflexive, too Wordsworthian; as Coetzee writes in *White Writing*: “Bodies of still water lend themselves to metaphors of thinking; in European Romantic landscape art they are associated with reflection, contemplation, and the values attached to the contemplative posture”. Coetzee explicitly links this conception to Wordsworth: “as Wordsworth points out, lake water is also transparent, its transparency rendering it penetrable into its depths by the eye, the mind” (Coetzee 1988: 44). In violent contrast to this composure of the Wordsworthian depths, one water-scene in *Youth* shows the young poet “out of his depth” (*Y*: 36). The young Coetzee has accidentally impregnated one of his sexual partners, to his own dismay: “How can a child be a father?” (*Y*: 32). As this echo of Wordsworth suggests, it is indeed the sexual instruction by Wordsworth’s pedagogy that has been the unlikely cause of this pregnancy. Whereas Afrikaans, for the young John, is a language of “monosyllabic heaviness,” full of words “to do with *fok* and *piel* and *poes*” and “*effies*[condoms]” he finds solace in the chaste English genealogy in which the child is father of the man: “He knows how babies are born. They come out of the mother’s backside, neat and clean and white. So his mother has told him years ago It is part of the trust between his mother and himself” (*B*: 57-58). What could have saved this misconception from resulting in a fateful pregnancy is, obviously, the Afrikaans “*effies*”, but because the young poet refuses this Afrikaans vulgarity in the name of a Wordsworthian sexual fiction, pregnancy becomes unavoidable. The fruit of this wilful refusal of the Afrikaans language is duly aborted. Still, because, as I showed, the fate of this foetus, as the unanticipated result of the failure to integrate a Wordsworthian fiction with South African fact, is also the condition of the books’ South African prose, it floats with prosaic necessity to the element of that prose, to the troubled water of “the waves off Woodstock”. The young Coetzee imagines how the aborted foetus is “flushed down the toilet” and carried “out into the bay”:

Is he too going to mourn? How long does one mourn, if one mourns? Does the mourning come to an end, and is one the same after the mourning as before; or does one mourn forever for the little thing that bobs in the waves off Woodstock, like the little cabin-boy who fell overboard and was not missed? *Weep, weep!* cries the cabin-boy, who will not sink and will not be stilled.

(*Y*: 35-36)

It is this insistent crying and bobbing of the cabin-boy, which recalls the question on which *Boyhood* ends, that finally obligates Coetzee's reconfiguration of Wordsworth's memorial profession, his self-addressed South African imperative to let the insistence of the stillborn fruits remain unstilled in the waters of his prose, because these fruits depend on their prosaic enumeration for their continued existence.¹⁶

Heeding this imperative is a matter of neither "readiness" nor a doggedly incapacitating "miming", it is, in the words of *Youth*'s last paragraph, a willingness to continue "an attenuating endgame" (*Y*: 169). To return to David Attwell's appraisal of Coetzee's "fiction's capacity to reconfigure the rules of discourse", this work is "at once an embrace and a reconfiguration" (Wenzel 2000: 108) of what it responds to as to its insistent given. This can be the unburied corpse of Aunt Annie, the howling foetus, and, as the latter is the fruit of a conflict that is also Coetzee's, also Coetzee's own prose. I want to suggest that by paying attention to the books' performance of reconfiguration, we no longer require a "philosophical" statement to make this work meaningful, as the work assures its own significance through its reconfigurative performance. Importantly, one of the insistent remains that the books' performance can be said to reconfigure is Wordsworth's poetry itself. The relation between Wordsworth and Coetzee must then not be reduced to an opposition between the "colonial" and the "postcolonial", or between "poetry" and "prose". Rather, Coetzee reconfigures Wordsworth's poetry into a form of prose that is more adequate to the South African situation to which it responds. What this prosaic reconfiguration still indicates, however, is, to return to Stathis Gourgouris's words, the persistence of literature's *poietical* capacity – in the sense of offering "a performative indication of how encountering the world is a creative/destructive intervention, an alteration of the framework of every such encounter" (Gourgouris 2003: xiv). Coetzee's prose, like Wordsworth's poetry, performs a (*myt*)*historical* gesture, and part of that gesture consists in the negation of the relevance of Wordsworth's gesture for the South African situation.

Here, this *poietical* capacity takes the form of a creative preservation. In a recent article, Geoffrey Hartman has attempted the juxtaposition of Wordsworth's and Coetzee's ethics of preservation. Hartman stages a Wordsworth

16. For an exemplary institution of the South African imperative of mourning, see Sanders 2002.

who, very much like Coetzee's autobiographies, "cannot subdue the fear entirely, that the natural world he has known and loved will cease to be", a fear that converts the "nonhuman orders of creation" into an "obligation"; because Nature is "fading as a crucial object of imaginative regard", "[t]he burden of caring for Nature, for its facilitating environment, would shift to the mind at a time when mind is most in need of nature" (Hartman 2003: 271). Hartman sees Coetzee's novels posing the same question of how to deal with "an endangered life-world" (p. 270) that threatens to disappear and that thus depends on man's mind for its continued existence. Hartman's reading is no doubt closer to Wordsworth's poetry than the Wordsworth that Coetzee's prose in *Boyhood* and *Youth* reconfigures into a poet of harmonisation (and it would be presumptuous to think that J.M. Coetzee, writer-scholar, would disagree with this assessment). The more crucial point, however, is that the autobiographies have already acknowledged just that, in reclaiming their Wordsworth for a distinctly South African practice of prosaic enumeration. Hartman may be right about Wordsworth, but this is an English Wordsworth who cannot, because of "difference of soil and climate", "of things silently gone out of mind and things violently destroyed", be translated into South Africa. The fact that Hartman can make a claim for Wordsworth that is very similar to the one Coetzee's autobiographies make for themselves, however, does invite the consideration of both texts as testimonies to literature's persistent capacity to reconfigure the rules of discourse. It is this persistence that should warn against their restless sublimation in the fiery furnaces of a hermeneutical apparatus that executes, like the clinic incinerator burning the dogs in *Disgrace*, its program of tossing literature's *poietical* potential "into the fire unmarked, unmourned" (*D*:178), performing its work of "sublimation, as alcohol is sublimed from water, leaving no residue, no aftertaste" (*D*: 142). Because of the precarious interdependence of South African particulars and the web of prose that must preserve them because they cannot do so themselves, it is on the persistence of this aftertaste that survival depends – for Wordsworth, the dogs, the foetus, Aunt Annie, "nanny-goats and bearded billy-goats", and all those we cannot afford to cease to enumerate.

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