

The Grounds of Cynical Self-Doubt: J.M. Coetzee's *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime*

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Summary

In this article, I argue that J.M. Coetzee's autobiographical trilogy can be read as a set of texts in which the author responds to the problem of cynical self-doubt, as it is described in Coetzee's writings on confession from the mid-1980s. Against Derek Attridge's critical view of the relation between Coetzee's autobiographies and these early writings, I argue that Coetzee's texts do not passively abide by the author's early scepticism, but rather inspect the grounds of cynical self-doubt and show its position to be intellectually confused. I specifically demonstrate that Coetzee's texts present cynical self-doubt as an intellectualisation of akratic failure (weakness of will). The texts not only analyse the crisis from which cynical self-doubt emerges, but also try to look beyond a sceptical perspective. With this in mind, this article will read Coetzee's autobiographies as writings that "aspire to a condition of gossip". In this aspiration, the autobiographies point to an ethic of assent they themselves cannot yet fully inhabit.

Opsomming

In hierdie artikel voer ek aan dat J.M. Coetzee se outobiografiese trilogie gelees kan word as 'n stel tekste waarin die outeur 'n antwoord bied op die probleem van siniese selftwyfel soos dit voorkom in sy werke oor belydenis sedert die middeltagtigerjare. Teenoor Derek Attridge se interpretasie van die verhouding tussen Coetzee se outobiografieë en sy vroeë kritiese werke, voer ek aan dat die outobiografieë die skeptiese twyfel nie sondermeer aanvaar nie maar poog om die gronde daarvan te ondersoek en dit as intellektueel verward uitwys. Ek toon spesifiek aan dat Coetzee se tekste 'n intellektualisasie van akratiese mislukking (swakheid van die wil) voorstel. Ek stel dat siniese selftwyfel in die outobiografieë ontmasker word as synde 'n rasionalisering van wilswakheid. Die tekste poog nie slegs om die krisis wat spruit uit die skeptiese twyfel op genealogiese wyse aan die lig te bring nie, maar ook om verby die skeptiese perspektief te kyk. So lees ek dan Coetzee se outobiografieë as tekste wat aspireer om 'n skinderdiskoers te wees. Hierdeur wys die tekste heen na 'n etiek van bewilling wat hulle self nie ten volle kan beliggaam nie.

Introduction

In *Doubling the Point*, David Attwell gathers previously uncollected essays by J.M. Coetzee, and interviews their author about their content as well as the contexts in which they were written. In one of these interviews, Coetzee states that he thinks of his essay “Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky”, originally published in 1985, as an essay “pivotal” in his development as a writer (Coetzee & Attwell 1992: 391). The core idea or problem Coetzee discusses in this essay can be summarised quite readily. In a secular context, the achievement of a satisfactory conclusive confession is frustrated by the hyperconscious, self-reflexive scepticism of its confessant. As the confessant inspects his initial confession, he will discern a deeper underlying truth (or motive for confession) which the first confession had distorted or omitted and which in turn requires further confession. Every new confession is submitted to this process of revision, and every new confession brings the confessant pleasure or distinction at uncovering deeper layers of shameful motive.

Coetzee succinctly describes this cynical, sceptical crisis as “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). In the absence of the possibility of the intervention of grace, which can only ever occur in a sacramental context, the process of sceptical revision is bound to repeat itself with every renewed attempt to confess with a sense of absolute finality. As such, Coetzee argues that secular confession is reduced to a practice which must endlessly defer the attainment of truth which is its aim. Because the structure of sceptical revision is entrenched, the confessant can never conclusively tell “an essential truth about the self” (Coetzee 1985: 194). This truth would consist of a certain account of the motives behind one’s acts and would not be impeachable by doubt.

In the aforementioned interview, Coetzee also retrospectively reflects on his 1985 essay. He states that, looking back on his essay, he sees his argument as one in which “a submerged dialogue between two persons” was taking place, one of whom he identifies as “the person I desired to be and was feeling my way toward” and the other as “the person I then was, though he may be the person I still am” (Coetzee & Attwell 1992: 392). These two persons have as their “field of debate” the possibility of “truth in autobiography”. For Coetzee, this “debate is between cynicism and grace”.

He identifies the cynical position with the person he was or may still be, and the position of grace with the person he wants to become. Coetzee defines cynicism as “the denial of any ultimate basis for values”, and subsequently contrasts it with grace as “a condition in which the truth can be told clearly, without blindness”.

Coetzee describes the cynic as one who believes that “there is no ultimate truth about oneself, [that] there is no point in trying to reach it, what we call truth is only a shifting self-reappraisal whose function is to make one feel good, or as good as possible under the circumstances, given that the genre [of autobiography] doesn’t allow one to create free-floating fictions”. For Coetzee, the cynic says that “autobiography is dominated by self-interest”: “In an abstract way one may be aware of that self-interest, but ultimately one cannot bring it into full focus”. As such, “the only sure truth in autobiography is that one’s self-interest will be located at one’s blind spot”.

This description of the cynic’s perspective I shall specifically recycle in my own subsequent description of the cynical self-doubter as one who thinks that we are always inescapably self-interested, even when we try not to be, or even if we can never know where our particular self-interest lies in any given case.

In his 1984 Inaugural Lecture at the University of Cape Town, *Truth in Autobiography*, Coetzee (after Dostoevsky) criticises the way in which Rousseau conceives of his autobiographical practice. In his *Confessions*, Rousseau wrestles with an inability to speak the truth about himself so as to uncover layer upon layer of secret shameful impure motive. In Coetzee’s eyes, Rousseau’s practice depends on this process of continued yet incomplete unveiling and debunking for its continued attractiveness to its readers, since shameful secrets alone can serve as those elements that will distinguish the confessional autobiographer and set him apart from others. Rousseau’s obscured, underlying motivation is an interest in distinction. Truth is not within reach, and this is (in part) because it is not in the interest of the autobiographer to run out of shameful secrets with which to participate in the trade of literary confession. In doubting Rousseau’s “sincere” struggle with himself in unveiling layers of shameful secrets, Coetzee asks: “Was the absolute of sincerity invented in a spirit of sincerity?” (Coetzee 1984: 5) As such, Coetzee’s analysis takes a genealogical approach to the concept of sincerity by seeking its hidden origins in the autobiographer’s self-interest in setting himself apart.

In *Boyhood, Youth and Summertime*, Coetzee takes a further step in submitting the principle of doubt behind genealogy, which itself is in fact a practice that bears striking resemblances to Rousseau’s self-directed scepticism, to its own genealogical investigation. In the autobiographies, Coetzee thereby seems to ask: Was the suspicion of the genealogist invented by a man who was entirely clear on the origins of his own motives for suspicion? The autobiographies show that the obscured origins of cynical self-doubt lie in an akratic failure to act in accordance with our moral motives. In this way, the texts show the philosophical view of cynical self-doubt to be deeply confused. This further step ultimately enables Coetzee to look beyond a sceptical self-understanding.

In Response to Derek Attridge

In his book-length study of J.M. Coetzee's oeuvre, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, Derek Attridge includes a chapter titled "Confessing in the Third Person". As the title of his essay indicates, Attridge seeks to address Coetzee's unexpected use of the third person and the present tense in writing his autobiographies, since the genre usually favours the use of the first person and the past tense.¹ For Attridge, Coetzee's reliance on the third person and the present tense reads as an attempt to pre-empt the problem of cynical self-doubt he would otherwise face in writing an autobiographical account of his life. In other words, the use of the third-person present tense allows Coetzee to write successful secular confessions. Attridge argues that the effect of the use of the third-person present tense in the autobiographies is that it "heightens the immediacy of the narrated events" and that "denies the text any retrospection" (Attridge 2004: 143). This stylistic choice "dissociates the narrative voice from the narrated consciousness". Elke D'hoker argues that the choice precludes not only "the self-conscious irony with which any confessional narrator tends to look back on his or her younger self" but also "the reflections on the trustworthiness of personal memories or the truth of specific self-revelations that typically accompany confessions" (D'hoker 2006: 40). Thus, Coetzee "prevents the interminable spiralling of confession by short-circuiting it before it even gets going" (Attridge 2004: 143).

Attridge assumes that the autobiographies simply abide by, but seek to circumvent, the sceptical problem that Coetzee focused on in the 1980s. This article disputes several central claims Attridge makes.² I provide an

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1. Coetzee's reliance on a combination of the third person and the present tense is not only crucial to Derek Attridge's critical response to the autobiographies. It is also a central focus in Margaret Lenta's reading of both *Boyhood* and *Youth* (Lenta 2003), and in Sheila Collingwood-Whittick's reading of *Boyhood* (Collingwood-Whittick 2002).
 2. I am indebted to Pieter Vermeulen's criticisms of Attridge's programmatic *autre*biographical reading of Coetzee's autobiographies (Vermeulen 2007: 180-182). Vermeulen purposely avoids confronting these texts with the author's early writings on confession so as to emphasise the texts' independent capacity to reconfigure and impart literary meaning. By contrast, I argue that a close reading of the texts shows that they set out to undo the philosophical confusion at work in the essay on confession. In developing this line of approach, however, I am indebted to Vermeulen's emphasis on the role of a notion of "persistence" (Vermeulen 2007: 197) in Coetzee's writing, as opposed to Attridge's implicit emphasis on closure. Nevertheless, I react to Vermeulen's neglect of the role of fictionalisation in the autobiographies, which is implicitly manifested in his stress on the texts' "prosaic enumeration" of "South African particulars".

alternative to Attridge's reading of Coetzee's use of the third-person present tense. In doing so, I will lay the groundwork for a clarification of the way Coetzee's autobiographies doubt cynical self-doubt. I argue that the autobiographies are self-reflexive, self-repudiating metafictional texts that refuse to impose the form of closure Attridge attributes to them.

Attridge's line of reading also implies that we ought to be able to establish a relatively straightforward distinction between author and autobiographical subject – a position clearly advanced by Attridge's distinction between “narrative voice” and “narrated consciousness”. Attridge recycles a term Coetzee provides in *Doubling the Point* to state his view that we must read the autobiographies as *autobiographies*, the term Attridge relies on to suggest that Coetzee's texts describe the life of “another person” (Attridge 2004: 143). In response to this view, I shall call into doubt any possibility of distinguishing in an absolute sense between Coetzee and his autobiographical subject, “he”, to whom I will henceforth refer simply as John.

The relationship between John and the author (henceforth “Coetzee”) cannot be described in terms of a hermetic separation. A much more ambiguous relationship of association and dissociation is at play in “Coetzee's” texts, which also undermines a traditional conception of the author as one who writes from a position of distance and authority. The texts indicate that the relation between “Coetzee” and John is marked both by fundamental similarity and irreconcilable difference. I argue, in other words, that the autobiographies are written in such a way as to unsettle attempts to establish a final, clear-cut distinction between these two poles.

Shame, Paranoia, Weakness of Will

Let us gather a few textual threads that should help to begin to clarify several of the points I make, and allow us to establish the very important role of shame, paranoia and weakness of will in the texts. In *Youth*, John gradually develops a sense of himself as a moral failure. At first, he believes himself to be one who carries the artist's flame. He believes this flame secretly burns within him (Y 5) and that it will inevitably lure to his side one single woman that is destined for him. He will not have to seek her out, as she will find him. John's Destined One will “glide wordlessly by his side, return with him ... to his bedsitter, make love to him, vanish into the darkness, reappear the next night” and “again embrace him, again, on the stroke of midnight, vanish, and so forth, thereby transforming his life” (Y 52). In visiting him, she will release “a torrent of pent-up verse”. Over the course of this transfiguration John would only ever remain a passive figure. However, the Destined One never visits John. Consequently, the transfiguration he had hoped for never takes place.

John's “entanglements” (Y 167) with the “ordinary” women (Y 127) to

whom he resorts in the absence of his Destined One lead him to believe he is a moral failure. John begins to think he is a “cold” man (Y 95). Near the end of *Youth*, John repeats that “for the present, the present indefinite, he is cold: cold, frozen” (Y 168). In being cold, he not only lacks the “heat” of the artist, which he sees as the source of poetry, but also simple human “warmth”. He is one who suffers “a sickness, a moral sickness: meanness, poverty of spirit”. The nature of this sickness is such that he is unable to occupy himself with “ordinary things” (Y 95) and perform ordinary acts of decency or reciprocity.

In *Boyhood*, the trope of heat, coldness and warmth serves to trace the cause of John’s abjection to his inability to perform acts of will. In one relevant scene in *Boyhood*, John is set to participate in a Boy Scout’s test. To win “a woodman’s badge” (B 15), the boy has to start a fire. He fails but waits “and stands by his pile of twigs” to receive the badge despite his failure. But, the text twice repeats, “nothing happens”. This description in *Boyhood* links John’s passive failure to try again and succeed (or fail better) to his unfruitful understanding in *Youth* of artistic production as a process of passive transfiguration and release. The description also prefigures John’s gradual realisation in *Youth* that he does not carry within himself the artist’s flame (Y 67). That is, he begins to realise that he has not become “the poet, the maker, the active principle” and will not become these because “he does not trust the will” (Y 166). He sees that “[u]nless he wills himself to act, nothing will happen, in love or in art”.

Boyhood traces the source of John’s inaction to various experiences that have taught him to regard action as a path to exposure and to shame. In one episode, John and his friends “strike off into the hills” and trespass onto an Afrikaner’s farm (B 70-71). They are discovered by the farmer’s son. He threatens that his father will punish them with “a cane”. John grows “light-headed with fear”. He thinks “there is no appeal they can make”: “they are guilty, he most of all”, since he has acted as “the ringleader” and “assured the others, when they climbed through the fence, that it could not be a farm, it was just veld”. Although the farmer eventually lets them go unharmed, the experience will come to inform the boy’s sensibility. At a later point, John, for instance, states that “he used to be full of ideas, ideas for places to go, things to talk about, things to do”: “he was the leader, the others followed” (B 151). “At the age of thirteen”, however, he has acquired a “new, ugly self” that is “surly, scowling, dark”. While he “wants to be drawn out of” this new self, he also thinks that he “cannot do it by himself” (B 152): “Everyone is staring at him, judging him, finding him wanting”.

John’s teacher, Miss Oosthuizen, is “an excitable woman”, prone to caning her pupils. John is horrified by these beatings: “The very idea of being beaten makes him squirm with shame” (B 6). It is this fear of public exposure that informs John’s sensibility in *Boyhood* and in *Youth*. “If the other boys can bear the pain,” John thinks, “then so can he, whose willpower

is so much greater.” Still, “[w]hat he will not be able to endure is the shame”. This view, together with the episode of trespassing, is part of an evolution by which John comes to regard the external world as a hostile environment as opposed to a site for human fulfilment. Despite his initial belief in *Boyhood* in his superior willpower, the texts indicate that an ability to accept exposure to this supposed hostile environment will have its negative effects. In *Youth*, it informs John’s fits of shame-induced paranoia (*Y* 4, 17, 129) and his failures of will (e.g. *Y* 166).

Fictionalisation

This line of interpretation also casts a different light on John’s assertion that “for the present, the present indefinite, he is cold: cold, frozen”. The remark qualifies the texts’ reliance on the present indefinite and suggests that the texts’ use of the present indefinite identifies “Coetzee’s” writing in the autobiographies with John’s moral squalor. No absolute dissociation between author and autobiographical subject is possible in “Coetzee’s” autobiographies. The texts’ use of the present tense stresses that they enact, embody or extend the same crisis of shame that causes John’s weakness of will.

In *Summertime*, “Coetzee” draws attention to the fictional nature of his text by referring to the now supposedly deceased J.M. Coetzee, and by way of stating that the author during the 1970s lived with his widower father. Coetzee’s dedication in *Age of Iron* tells us, however, that his mother died during the 1980s and that she outlived her husband by three years. The middle part of *Summertime* presents a series of interviews with fictionalised acquaintances. In these fictional interviews, *Summertime* insists on presenting John as an unmarried man, and thereby continues along the path set by *Youth*, which itself already makes no mention of Coetzee’s marriage to his ex-wife Philippa Jubber – a fact which Attridge’s reading also mentions. In the interviews, for instance, the women in John’s life describe the unsatisfying relationships they had with him. Adriana felt repelled by his awkward, clumsy attempts at courtship; Julia, a married woman with whom John has an affair, thinks he is lacking as a lover; Sophie, John’s colleague and another married woman with whom he had an affair, does not believe John was either a great writer or person. The remarks of these three women specifically draw attention to “Coetzee’s” omission of any reference to his ex-wife and so to the role of fictionalisation in his autobiographies. Given its blatancy, it seems clear that a proper understanding of the role of fictionalisation in the texts is necessary to provide an accurate reading of them.

In his remarks on *Youth*, Attridge states that Coetzee’s fictionalisations render “the notion of autobiographical ‘truth’ particularly problematic”, but

he solves this dilemma by stating that “the urge to confess may itself distort the representation of the past, producing an exaggeration of one’s failings” (Attridge 2004: 161). As such, for Attridge, the general tone of bleakness he encounters in *Youth* certainly provokes the thought that by giving us so little in the way of compensatory moments of generosity and joy Coetzee has succumbed to this tendency”. By following this line of interpretation, Attridge plays down the satirical aspect of “Coetzee’s” writing and also underestimates the extent to which “Coetzee’s” writing is characterised by an impressive sense of self-control and self-awareness. Attridge presents Coetzee as one who has “succumbed” to an “urge”. In what I hope should prove to be a more sympathetic reading of the autobiographies’ manipulations, I argue that *Youth* and *Summertime*’s distortion of historical facts is in fact part of a purposive pattern these texts employ in order to analyse a moral crisis which they not only describe but also seek to embody.

“Coetzee’s” intentional distortion of the account of his life pre-empts the “self-satisfied candour of each level of confession of impure motive” (Coetzee & Attwell 1992: 282) that is bound to set off the sceptic’s spiralling. At first sight, the texts’ candid duplicity is not incompatible with Attridge’s line of reading, in so far as this reading insists that the autobiographies mean to pre-empt the spiralling self-reflexive doubt Coetzee discusses in his early writings on confession. This spiralling is inspired by a sense of shame at one’s sense of distinction in being shamed, which itself is subject to further shame and suspicion. This process will repeat itself endlessly. If one fictionalises one’s life, however, one cannot be properly shamed by what one reveals. As such, “Coetzee” remains sensitive to the threat of spiralling. Still, candid duplicity renders problematic Attridge’s attempt to read the texts as secular confessions. The goal of confession, Coetzee states, is to find “an essential truth about the self”. We can concede that this truth can be drowned out by an excess of historical facts. However, the necessity of a process of selection does not entail that we can legitimately consider an account that intentionally distorts crucial facts of its confessant’s life a confession.

“Coetzee” enacts, embodies and criticises John’s crisis of shame and paranoia by *publicly* and *blatantly* distorting the facts of his life in his autobiography. In *Youth*, for instance, John states that, to become a great artist, he must avoid falling into “the trap of marriage” (Y 10). Attridge notes that this emphasis on an avoidance of marriage distorts the historical facts of Coetzee’s life, since Coetzee was married to his ex-wife Philippa Jubber during his time in London. In omitting any reference to Coetzee’s marriage to Jubber, *Youth* implicitly relates John and “Coetzee” to S.T. Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner as a figure who equally rehearses an endless sense of crisis (e.g. Y 101).

Coleridge's character famously rejects marriage, because he sees it as a rejection of community, rather than a reinforcement or an affirmation of community. The Mariner aspires to an inclusive sense of community which includes "all things both great and small" and thereby seeks to repent for his refusal to acknowledge the claim of love the Albatross made on him. In Stanley Cavell's reading of Coleridge's poem, the Mariner rejects marriage because "it is no longer a sacrament, neither sponsored by God nor ratifiable by society as society stands, but it is a new mystery to which outsiders, however close in kind, are irrelevant" (Cavell 1989: 64). Under these circumstances, "[t]o marry ... is to be willing to have a further adventure of aloneness, without solitude but also without society". Marriage can risk being "a further investment of our narcissism". "Coetzee's" omission of his own marriage points to a similar approach.

On the one hand, "Coetzee's" blatant distortion of the facts of his own life rehearses the paranoia and shame that take possession of John's mind in *Boyhood* and *Youth*. In *Youth*, I will show, John is presented as one who manipulates and distorts the story of his life. I should already note here, however, that there is a crucial difference between John's manipulations and "Coetzee's". Their distortions are performed in the opposite spirit: John manipulates the story of his life so as to try and cover up shameful facts, whereas "Coetzee" appears to manipulate the story of his life to present himself as a more radical failure than the facts appear to allow.

On the other hand, I argue that "Coetzee's" blatant distortions indicate that, in order to relieve the crisis of shame that affects him, it is not sufficient to find a form of escape, for instance in marriage. Instead, it requires a perpetual working through of this moral crisis by way of a set of literary texts that embody it. This endless working through links "Coetzee" to the figure of the Ancient Mariner.

The texts' working through is fruitful only in so far as they do not merely reproduce John's crisis: they present it thematically in describing John's state of mind, but also embody it by blatantly distorting the historical facts of Coetzee's life in giving that description. They thereby bring it to light so as to analyse it and disabuse us of it. Yet they disabuse us of it by pointing beyond themselves to an ethic of assent and inclusiveness which they cannot inhabit. They do so by aspiring to a condition of gossip they can never reach. This ethic of inclusiveness, I would suggest, is not the absolute ethic of assent and inclusiveness the Mariner proposes. The Mariner's ethic becomes impossible precisely because of its absolute nature. Because he seeks an absolute community, the Mariner can never be part of one. He is bound to remain a wanderer, because any particular affirmation threatens the aspiration to absolute inclusiveness.

Narrative Perspective: Narration and Auto-Narration

A first piece of textual evidence for the above reading of the complex relationship between “Coetzee” and John concerns the first page of *Boyhood*, which gives us a sense of the complexity of narrative perspective in the autobiographies. The first word of *Boyhood* is “they”: “They live on a housing estate outside the town of Worcester, between the railway line and the National Road” (B 1). In the reader’s experience, this “they” seems to demand a referent which the text does not directly provide. The reader quickly finds out that this “they” includes a boy, his brother, his mother and father, but only at a later point in the text this “they” is identified as Coetzee’s family, and that we are, for instance, told the name of the boy whose mind we have entered, John, or the name of the boy’s mother, Vera. The text does not identify this “they” directly because it would not make sense to do so: *Boyhood* narrates the *private* thoughts of John, and for John it is simply entirely obvious to whom this “they” refers.

In this way, *Boyhood* instantly presents John as one caught up in the act of telling “the story of himself” (B 161) *to himself*. This process is entirely private, inspired by a suspicion towards the external world and an attempt to limit exposure to its vicissitudes. The interiority created by this self-protective process of auto-narration is, however, not a flourishing one, exactly because of its avoidance of all things external. The story of himself is the “only story” John “admits”. The text’s use of “admits” implies a form of passive acceptance, as opposed to an active and self-aware creative process. The text also links the process to John’s feelings of gloom and constriction and oppression and to his inability to see “the world as it really is”. Those moments during which John can see the world as it is are epiphanies which he experiences only sporadically. During these epiphanies, John sees himself from the outside as “a child”, or as one who is “still as stupid and self-enclosed as a child: childish; dumb; ignorant; retarded”. Thus, John’s auto-narration is not a process that seems to have offered the boy a sense of self-possession. It only exacerbates his sense of alienation. The boy’s disposition is marked by secretiveness and an inability to express his true interests or leanings, as is evidenced by his hiding the fact that he prefers the Russians to the Americans (B 26) and by his belief that “[w]hatsoever he wants, whatever he likes, has sooner or later to be turned into a secret” (B 28). All these elements point the reader to the conclusion that it is odd that he is now reading John’s story, as the story gives access to his mind.

In fact, “Coetzee’s” texts have been rendered undecidable in terms of their narrative perspective. To corroborate this point of view, I would like to take a brief look at *Boyhood*’s first use of the pronoun “he,” which itself is meant to qualify our understanding of the text’s style. In the autobiographies, we find various references to the way in which John suffers at the hands of the suffering of others. The very first pages of *Boyhood* describe such an

instance. They can be read as a primal scene meant to prefigure the way in which John's sensibility will eventually evolve. In this opening, John and his mother decide to construct a chicken run, but find that their chickens "do not flourish". They do not lay eggs because of the adverse surroundings in which they are being kept. John's mother's sister advises her that the chickens "will return to laying only after the horny shells under their tongues have been cut out" (*B* 1). As John's mother forces open the chickens' beaks and "picks at their tongues" they "shriek and struggle, their eyes bulging" (*B* 1-2). This intense confrontation with suffering horrifies John. In describing the boy's revulsion, the text relinquishes its use of "they" and for the very first time employs the pronoun "he": "He shudders and turns away". Thus, the text marks the use of the pronoun as an index of John's alienation, of his loss of a connection to the larger "they" of which he had initially considered himself to be a solid part. His family he initially describes as a "they" not only because the text's subsequent reliance on the third person stylistically requires it, but also because he considers his family, much like himself, "unnatural and shameful" (*B* 6). Finally, John's confrontation with the shrieking chickens marks the point at which we realise that the text provides access to his inner workings. The text at this point for the first time uses a verb that directly recognises John's cognitive activity "He thinks of his mother slapping stewing-steak down on the kitchen counter and cutting it into cubes; he thinks of her bloody fingers". Out of suffering emerges thought, but not in any positive sense. The sentence shows that the boy's confrontation with the suffering marks the emergence of a fundamental sense of powerlessness. John, for the first but not the last time, turns away from the horror he faces. The scene marks the exterior world as a site of disappointment and suffering in which he finds he cannot meaningfully intervene. This view comes to inform John's eventual inability to express himself in ordinary ways, or in writing, while in London.

In South Africa, John is always "shutting out the world, hiding" (*B* 28). His failure of self-expression and his lack of self-possession cause him to become "stunted" (*B* 140). The text links this stunted sensibility to his disempowered auto-narration's use of the pronoun "he": "Whoever he truly is, whoever the true 'I' is that ought to be rising out of the ashes of his childhood, is not being allowed to be born, is being kept puny and stunted" (*B* 140). In attempting to escape to London to become a writer, John initially tries to find a route to self-expression in a poetics that can only reproduce the sense of passivity and powerlessness that defines his boyhood. As such, "Coetzee's" concerted effort to narrate John's auto-narration marks a victory over this sense of powerlessness and alienation, and a return to an admittedly ambiguous form of self-possession and authority.

The effect of "Coetzee's" combination of the third person and the present tense is complex. The use of the third person, which also allows "Coetzee" to introduce a layer of irony into his texts, has a distancing effect. The use of

the present tense creates an unsettling sense of nearness. Combined these two elements serve to impress upon the reader the idea that he has been given access to an interior life marked by a desire to remain at a remove from an everyday reality which it must nevertheless confront. In other words, the present tense evokes the undesirable impingement of an everyday reality upon an alienated subjectivity, a “he”, which is unable to effectively cope with the vicissitudes of the environment in which it finds itself, and which narrates a story to itself so as to gain a sense of control. At the same time, the use of the third person, even though *Boyhood* will primarily qualify it as an index of John’s alienated auto-narration, is one that allows “Coetzee” to employ free indirect speech to build in layers of irony. “Coetzee” both inhabits and ironises John’s perspective: he identifies with him even as he distances himself from him. And because “Coetzee” links his use of the third person to John’s alienated auto-narration, we are invited to read the autobiographies as “Coetzee’s” public narrations of John’s private or secret third-person present-tense stories of himself.

Akratic Failure, Intellectualisation and Cynical Self-Doubt³

In my reading of John’s revulsion at his mother’s treatment of their chickens, I focused on John’s powerlessness in being faced with the pain of others. “He shudders and turns away” from a scene that disturbs him. This moment of powerlessness marks the beginning of a process of auto-narration that is meant to keep the world at bay. The obvious impossibility of doing so is evoked by the sense of impingement created by the text’s combined use of the present tense and the third person. This type of turning away from the other’s moral claim on us can lead us into the philosophical confusion of cynical self-doubt.

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3. In my reliance on a concept of intellectualisation I implicitly reference Cora Diamond’s view of the place of deflection in philosophy. In Diamond’s reasoning, philosophy can sometimes serve to deflect “difficult[ies] of reality” that unsettle and resist “one’s ordinary mode of life, including one’s ordinary mode of thinking” (Diamond 2008: 58). Diamond’s essay, which is amongst other things a response to *Elizabeth Costello*, is itself the subject of Stephen Mulhall’s excellent study *The Wounded Animal: The Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy*. Both Diamond and Mulhall pay attention to Stanley Cavell’s work on other minds’ scepticism in their treatment of Coetzee. In this work, Cavell conceives of a return to the ordinary from sceptical doubt as a return to an acknowledgment of the other. Diamond and Mulhall have little to say about Coetzee’s struggle with his own form of sceptical doubt: cynical self-doubt. In this essay, I produce a quasi-Cavellian reading of the autobiographies by arguing that “Coetzee” conceives of the return to the ordinary from cynical self-doubt as a return to the condition of gossip.

Cynical self-doubt intellectualises the following everyday experience: often we find we wish to go beyond our own self-interest in our everyday dealings, yet find ourselves unable to do so, either because we feel powerless or unable to do so or because we are unable to see how our intervention can be truly significant to a given situation. Coetzee himself has referenced, in this very respect, “the fact of suffering”:

Let me add, *entirely* parenthetically, that I, as a person, as a personality, am overwhelmed, that my thinking is thrown into confusion and helplessness, by the fact of suffering in the world, and not only human suffering. These fictional constructions of mine are paltry, ludicrous defenses against that being-overwhelmed, and, to me, transparently so.

(Coetzee & Attwell 1992: 248)

An overwhelming awareness of suffering can lie at the heart of cynical self-doubt. In response to a situation in which we feel we cannot meaningfully respond, we retreat into self-interest despite ourselves. This discordance produces alienation. But it can also be intellectualised into a form of cynical self-doubt. It is easy to state, from a removed intellectualised vantage point, that we are always inescapably self-interested, even if we can never fully grasp how exactly we are self-interested. It is easier, at least, than it is to recognise that we are subject to akratic failures to act in accordance with our particular moral judgments or intentions. Instead of accepting the responsibility we have in this type of weakness of will, it is convenient to relinquish this responsibility by saying that we cannot control or gauge our obscure, underlying, radical, ineradicable self-interest.

Still, cynical self-doubt need not emerge from desperate but noble circumstances: it can also be reinforced simply by callous behaviour. As I have mentioned before, John, in *Youth*, behaves callously towards the “ordinary” women he engages with. One of these girls is a virgin whom John deflowers. They stain the mattress of the house John is home-sitting. He is disturbed to find that the girl is unashamed, as he listens in on her through the door of the bedroom as she gossips with the housekeeper. In his room, he thinks of a way to end the shameful affair: “The unsettling lovemaking, the whispering women, the bloody sheets, the stained mattress: he would like to put the whole shameful business behind him, close the book on it” (*Y* 130). In response to his shame, he turns over the mattress, hurries the girl off and offers her money for a taxi. Soon after, the girl, a travelling companion of one of John’s South African cousins, returns home. John thinks that “[t]hey are safely away, he need not face them again” (*Y* 130). Nevertheless, this has yet not settled the matter, as John himself soon seems to realise:

There remains the question of what to make of the episode, how to fit it into the story of his life that he tells himself. He has behaved dishonourably, no

doubt about that, behaved like a cad. The word may be old-fashioned but it is exact. He deserves to be slapped in the face, even to be spat on. In the absence of anyone to administer the slap, he has no doubt that he will gnaw away at himself. *Agenbyte of inwit*. Let that be his contract then, with the gods: he will punish himself, and in return will hope the story of his caddish behaviour will not get out.

(Y 130)

In *Youth*, then, the self-protective process of auto-narration of *Boyhood* has become one of which John has actively taken control. In the above excerpt, the text implicitly links this shift, which also implies that “Coetzee’s” fictionalised autobiographies are to be understood as inverse versions of John’s own tendency to manipulate the story of his life, to the emergence of self-reflexive cynical scepticism. In other words, the text links John’s active manipulation of the story of his life for reasons of self-protection to the emergence of cynical self-doubt. Doubt, then, is to be read as a form of self-protection. John prefers private self-mortification to actual exposure or public shaming. It is this preference for private self-mortification which we intellectualise into a sceptical doubt about our ability to speak truthfully about ourselves, given that we cannot trust our motives in confessing.

John’s desire “to close the book on the affair” specifically recalls a remark from Coetzee’s 1985 essay on confession, in which he describes absolution as the final stage of confession: “Absolution means the end of the episode, the closing of the chapter, liberation from the oppression of memory” (Coetzee 1985: 194). This stage can never come to fruition when self-reflexive scepticism starts taking hold once we intellectualise our akratic failure in an attempt to avoid shameful exposure. To confess once and for all the reason we believe we did what we did leaves us exposed, but with this exposure comes relief from the oppression of a guilty memory. To level a cynical doubt at what one believes to be one’s reasons for having acted in a certain way allows one to avoid this exposure. Often it is easier to opt for this type of intellectualised failure – to control an underlying akratic failure by assuming doubt’s position of intellectual failure – than it would be to grant ourselves vulnerability and relief.

This is especially true if an underlying problem is that one feels, as John does, that we do not merit relief. John has “no doubt” he acted “dishonourably” by going against his own moral codes. He “has no doubt that he will gnaw away at himself” and punish himself. His transgressions lead him to abide by an ethic of self-mortification. “Coetzee’s” strategic repetition of “no doubt” in the above excerpt hints that we must not interpret cynical self-doubt as a serious philosophical position, but that we must see it as the intellectualised version of a rather facile ethic of self-mortification.

How, then, does this conclusion relate to the specific form of the texts as fictionalised autobiographies? In wilfully distorting the historical facts of *Youth* and *Summertime*, and by relying on these distortions to present

himself as a worse failure than the facts appear to allow, “Coetzee” has chosen a form by which he identifies his writing with the type of sensibility his autobiographies discuss in content. I would coin the ambiguous phrase “a failure to fail” to capture the idea that some of Coetzee’s fictions are meant as an investigation of our failures in order to fail (our self-imposed failures). These self-imposed failures are themselves a response to, and an expression of, an inability to allow failure or exposure (viz. *Disgrace*’s David Lurie). According to this line of reading, *Youth* presents scepticism as one version, or an intellectualised instance, of a tendency we have to fail *in order to* fail. In it, we respond to an inability to fail and suffer exposure by proposing a different failure that only at first sight seems more important than the actual relevant underlying failure to which it responds. While the position of cynical self-doubt appears to thoroughly unsettle our sense of ourselves, it in fact provides a reprieve for the way in which akratic failure compromises self-possession.

Near the end of *Youth*, John, who has become exasperated with his artistic ineptness, his callous inability to establish reciprocal relationships with others, his sophistic self-justifications, and his facile self-mortification, thinks to himself: “Death to reason, death to talk! All that matters is doing the right thing, whether for the right reason or the wrong reason or no reason at all” (*Y* 165). John’s distrust of our reasons for acting and for speaking, and his distrust of reason’s capacity to provide a proper perspective according to which we should act or speak, is a version of the sceptical doubt with which Coetzee wrestles in his early writings on confession. John’s view is influenced by cynical self-doubt. His statement calls into doubt our reasons for acting, but it thereby overlooks the fact that the cynical self-doubt to which it gives expression is itself produced by an akratic failure to act on existent reasons we have to act in moral, just or conscientious ways.

Youth in fact implies that what matters is not, as John would have us believe, that we do the right thing regardless of what reasons we have for acting morally, but rather that we accept that we must act according to those reasons. A failure to act on those reasons leads us into a crisis of cynical self-doubt in which we no longer trust our reasons for acting. This sceptical doubt only ever exacerbates itself once it arises, since its corrosive distrust of our reasons further impairs our ability to act in accordance with those reasons. This, in turn, must inevitably feed the crisis of cynical self-doubt, which itself once more exacerbates weakness of will. This, then, is conclusive proof of cynical self-doubt’s status as a philosophically confused position.

Beyond Cynical Self-Doubt: Aspiring to the Condition of Gossip

It does not follow from the above genealogy of cynical self-doubt that “Coetzee” has definitively refuted his sceptical doubt about our ability to tell an essential truth about ourselves. There is nothing in “Coetzee’s” distortion of the facts of his life to suggest that he now straightforwardly believes that we can simply speak such a truth. It does suggest that he is no longer as impressed by the cynical version of the sceptical argument. This insight is driven home by the fact that “Coetzee’s” autobiographies are themselves a highly elaborate attempt to present a *plausible* interpretation of the types of experiences and motivations that cause cynical self-doubt to arise. The status of the autobiographies can be described using a term Coetzee provides in an article written in 2000 entitled “A Fiction of the Truth”: “[P]erhaps the best you can hope for will not be the history of yourself but a story about yourself, a story that will not be the truth, but that may have some truth-value, probably of a mixed kind – some historical truth, some poetic truth” – “[a] fiction of the truth”. Nevertheless, what limits the fit between this description and the autobiographies is the fact that “Coetzee’s” texts make space for the articulation of a poetic truth *by purposely distorting* certain historical facts. It is in part by distorting historical facts that they are able to explore in a literary fashion the obscured reasons one can have to believe truth in autobiography to be impossible. This fictionalised, literary, truth-oriented self-interpretation responds to the sceptic’s perspective not only by showing the grounds of cynical doubt to be suspect, but also in supplanting the cynical sceptic’s wish for an incontrovertible yet unattainable truth.

Still, if a more definite change of perspective is to be accomplished, it is not sufficient for “Coetzee” to simply remain sceptical of scepticism by turning doubt upon doubt itself, since it follows that he would thereby remain unable to endorse any positive program. Cynical doubt is bound to find an obscured form of self-interest at the bottom of every form of life it must eventually reject. In response, “Coetzee’s” texts point to an alternative ethic of assent which they cannot yet fully inhabit. This is what I mean to capture if I say that the autobiographies aspire to a condition of gossip. To achieve a condition of gossip would constitute a full return from cynical self-doubt and cynicism to the ordinary.

Youth’s description of John’s irritated and paranoid response to the gossip and confidences between the girl he has deflowered and the housekeeper, on which he listens in from behind his bedroom door, is linked to an earlier episode in *Boyhood*. In this episode, the boy secretly and longingly eavesdrops on women gossiping in the kitchen of the Coetzee family farm (B 85): “[I]f he stands at the kitchen door he can hear, passing between his aunt and the two women [who work in the kitchen], a low stream of talk that he loves to eavesdrop on”. This talk is “the soft, comforting gossip of women, stories passed from ear to ear, till not only the farm but the village

at Fraserburg and the location outside the village are covered by the stories, and all the other farms of the district too: a soft white web of gossip spun over past and present”, which recounts “who is getting married to whom, whose mother-in-law is going to have an operation for what, whose son is doing well at school, whose daughter is in trouble, who visited whom, who wore what when”. As such, *Youth*’s implicit reversal of this earlier scene into a scene of paranoia and shame links the boy’s inability to participate in gossip and be exposed to others in the self-revealing act of gossip to his inability to establish reciprocal relationships with women. It is equally clear that the discourse of gossip – of “mere” “talk” (*Y* 165) – is a mode of discourse in which we not only recognise our specific interests, circumstances and surroundings, but also fully invest in them. This investment is absent in John’s withdrawn, self-absorbed auto-narrations.

In this reading, the discourse of gossip also stands for a more inclusive sense of community. In gossip, one recovers from the sense of aloneness, which, according to Cavell’s reading of Coleridge, can only be perpetuated by marriage in its current state. This line of reading gains further depth if we recall that the women with whom John’s aunt gossips are non-whites under the apartheid regime. Here I should also mention John’s shame at his difference from the reigning Afrikaner ideology in *Boyhood* (e.g. *B* 18-24) and so acknowledge a political aspect to John’s shame, paranoia and alienation. In *Giving Offense*, Coetzee states that “[f]or decades South Africa lived in a state of paranoia” (Coetzee 1996: 34). “[I]nsecure regimes” like apartheid use paranoia as “a technique of control” to “break down the bonds of human sympathy and trust”. It fragments society “into tens of millions of individuals living on islands of mutual suspicion”. The women’s web of gossip is a mode of discourse that defies this process. It safeguards a sense of reciprocity and community beyond paranoia, alienation and political division. As such, it goes against John’s despair in *Youth* that “[b]etween black and white there is a gulf fixed” that is “[d]eeper than pity, deeper than honourable feelings, deeper even than goodwill” (*Y* 17). It stands for the “warmth” (*Y* 168) that is lost in John’s initial sense of himself as a hot artist whose amorality serves his art (*Y* 30) and in his later sense of himself as cold. Similarly, the cynic loses sight of the fact we live our lives within “a matrix of satisfactions, mutual sustenance and things and modes of being worthy of appreciation” (Kolnai 1977: 85) because he fails to act upon the reasons which this matrix provides. If we regain our appreciation of this matrix, which figures as the subject of discussion in the women’s gossip, we can also regain our ability to act in accordance with those reasons.

As I have said, the middle part of *Summertime* consists of a set of fictionalised interviews. These are conducted by a sensationalist biographer, Vincent, with a number of people who knew the late J.M. Coetzee. Vincent is out to gather tawdry stories or comments about the late author and is sometimes successful. At one point, one of the interviewees, Martin, accuses

Vincent of a lack of seriousness. Martin wonders whether Vincent's account will be "slanted toward the personal and the intimate at the expense of the man's actual achievements" and whether it will "amount to anything more than ... women's gossip" (S: 218). As such, *Summertime* reads as a satirical play on Coetzee's reputation as a dour, reticent, secretive personality. The picture that emerges during these interviews, which include a fair bit of gossip, exacerbates the account we are given in *Youth* of John as an alienated, awkward, self-absorbed, sexually inhibited and unproficient man.

Yet these bits of gossip go against the spirit of gossip, since they are a part of orchestrated stories "Coetzee" writes as stories by fictionalised acquaintances who are supposed to have known him. As such, "Coetzee" self-consciously presents his texts as texts that aspire to the condition of gossip, but also as texts that can never actually fulfil that aspiration. They can only point to this alternative attitude, in which we are fully engaged with our surroundings and in which we openly acknowledge our stakes in them even as we accept the possibility that we thereby expose ourselves. They can never really embody this attitude. There is probably nothing more paranoid than writing a text in which you imagine the gossip people will spread about you after you have died. As such, "Coetzee's" "gossip" about himself by fictionalised acquaintances is also meant to be read as a satirical response to his sense of shame or paranoia. It does not follow that he thereby escapes the grasp of paranoia or shame.

"Coetzee's" texts expose their author to a fictionalised version of his own life that is more shameful than the facts of his life appear to allow. As such, they try to participate in the spirit of gossip. In this circuitous fashion, "Coetzee's" metafictional writing, with its layers of irony and ambiguity, tries to repudiate itself. Yet it fails to do so: it does remain, after all, an ironic, self-reflexive form of metafiction that will not speak to us directly. Still, it is by failing to inhabit the condition of gossip that these literary texts can lead us out of the sense of crisis they embody. Or, to provide a positive explanation of the aim of "Coetzee's" project to bring us beyond scepticism, we can say that the texts will not embody the condition of gossip because they mean to lead us into it. In so far as we regard the autobiographies only as elaborate metafictional set pieces, we will have failed to achieve this condition of gossip.

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