EMBEDDED SUBJECTIVITY IN THE WORK OF J.M. COETZEE

By

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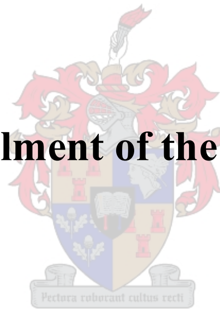

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DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis consists of my own original work, and that I have not previously in its entirety, or in part, submitted it at any university for a degree.

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Signature: M.E. Smuts **Date**

ABSTRACT

This thesis is the result of an immersion in the work of J.M. Coetzee. I have taken various of Coetzee's novels, namely *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons*, *Disgrace*, *The Master of Petersburg*, *Foe*, *Life & Times of Michael K* and *Slow Man*, and constructed readings of these novels from the inside out. The overarching concern of the dissertation is the notion of subjectivity and Coetzee's methods of representing subjectivity. It is my contestation that the experience of authentic subjective awareness arises from the process of reading itself. It is not a state of being that is described by the text, but rather a layered constellation of substitutive exchanges that emerges from the process of textual relation. The notion of embeddedness serves as a description of the way in which the text materializes this experience of subjectivity.

The structure of exploration in each chapter has taken as its paradigm a conceptual concern arising from the text itself. In the first chapter (*Elizabeth Costello*) the concern is with structure itself. The character of Elizabeth struggles against the limitation inherent in the process of representation; this struggle is read as an indication of authentic subjective experience in the face of reduction to a system of codes. The second chapter (*Disgrace*) attempts to formulate the dynamic of subjective awareness in romantic terms. I construct a reading of Lurie's predicament in terms that arise from his conceptual environment, in order to indicate the primacy of textual materiality as the locus of subjective awareness. The notion of the classic informs the third chapter (*The Master of Petersburg*). I use an essay by Coetzee to delineate a conception of the classic, which is then applied as a theoretical framework for an exploration of Dostoevsky's pursuit of his stepson. The fourth and last chapter (*Foe*, *Life & Times of Michael K* and *Slow Man*) focuses on Coetzee's use of the body as a figure for embedded subjectivity. It emerges that the body as a trope of embeddedness forms an important aspect of Coetzee's work throughout his career. As such it is a very suitable figure for describing the dynamics of embeddedness as a mode of representation that aligns itself with the textual materiality of subjective being.

OPSOMMING

Hierdie tesis het ontstaan as die gevolg van ‘n noukeurige ondersoek na die werk van J.M. Coetzee. Ek het myself laat begelei deur die inhoud van verskeie van Coetzee se boeke, naamlik *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons*, *Disgrace*, *The Master of Petersburg*, *Foe*, *Life & Times of Michael K* en *Slow Man,* om intensiewe lesings van hierdie boeke te konstrueer. Die oorkoepelende bemoeienis van die verhandeling is die konsep van subjektiwiteit en Coetzee se metodes van subjektiewe voorstelling. Ek beweer dat die ervaring van outentieke subjektiewe gewaarwording gesetel is in die leesproses. Dit is nie ‘n toestand van wese wat deur die teks beskryf word nie, maar eerder ‘n verweefde raamwerk van substituwe wisseling wat kom uit die proses van tekstuele relasie. Die konsep van inlywing (“embeddedness”) dien as 'n beskrywing van die manier waarop die teks hierdie ervaring van subjektiwiteit konkretiseer.

Die struktuur van ondersoek in elke hoofstuk neem as paradigma 'n konsepsuele vraagstuk wat reeds gesetel is in die teks. In die eerste hoofstuk (*Elizabeth Costello*) is die bemoeienis met struktuur as sodanig. Elizabeth se karakter stry teen die inperking wat noodwending saamgaan met die proses van voorstelling; hierdie stryd word gelees as 'n aanduiding van outentieke subjektiewe ervaring teenoor die druk van vermindering tot 'n stel kodes. Die tweede hoofstuk (*Disgrace*) poog om die dinamiek van subjektiewe bewustheid te formuleer in terme wat afkomstig is van die romantiek. Ek konstrueer 'n lees van Lurie se toestand in terme wat kom van sy konsepsuele omgewing, om sodoende die voorrang van tekstuele materialiteit as die lokus van outentieke subjektiwiteit aan te dui. Die konsep van die klassieke belig die derde hoofstuk (*The Master of Petersburg*). Ek gebruik 'n essay van Coetzee om 'n begrip van die klassieke te formuleer, wat dan toegepas word as 'n teoretiese raamwerk waarbinne Dostoevsky se soeke na sy stiefseun ondersoek word. Die vierde en laaste hoofstuk (*Foe*, *Life & Times of Michael K* en *Slow Man*) fokus op Coetzee se gebruik van die liggaam as 'n figuur vir ingelyfde subjektiwiteit. Dit blyk dat die liggaam as 'n figuur van inlywing 'n prominente aspek van Coetzee se werk vorm deur sy loopbaan. As sodaning is dit 'n baie handige figuur om die dinamiek

van inlywing te beskryf as 'n modus van voorstelling wat sigself koppel aan die materialiteit van die teks.

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INTRODUCTION

SUBJECTIVITY, EMBEDDEDNESS AND THE ACT OF READING

At the heart of *Youth*, J.M. Coetzee's fictionalized biography of himself, lies the question of writing, of what it means to write:

> The question of what should be permitted to go into his diary and what kept forever shrouded goes to the heart of all his writing. If he is to censor himself from expressing ignoble emotions – resentment at having his flat invaded, or shame at his own failures as a lover – how will those emotions ever be transfigured and turned into poetry? And if poetry is not to be the agency of his transfiguration from ignoble to noble, why bother with poetry at all? Besides, who is to say that the feelings he writes in his diary are his true feelings? Who is to say that at each moment while the pen moves he is truly himself? At one moment he might be truly himself, at another he might simply be making things up. How can he know for sure? Why should he even *want* to know for sure? (9)

The kind of writing at stake here is diary-writing. From the passage, one gathers that diary writing is supposed to be the place where self-expression occurs. It has, in this case, the character of confession, of "expressing ignoble emotions". The purpose of the confession is transfiguration from "ignoble to noble". This transformation will occur through the turning of shameful reality into poetry. The purpose of poetry, in this case, would be to make known to the world that the creator of the poetry is "noble" – that he, the writer, is valuable, and that which he has to express is worthwhile. The chain of events, if one is to strip them down into their basic elements, goes as follows: the ignoble subject expresses his ignoble thoughts and emotions; at a later stage, those ignobilities are transformed into nobilities; the nobility then projects back onto the subject, making it noble. The writing subject thus

engages in writing to create for itself a reality in which it is "noble" – in which it has intrinsic value, beyond the arbitrary struggles of everyday life. The medium of transformation is poetry, but there is no certainty about who or what is supposed to transform the emotion into poetry in the first place – the passive voice ("how will those emotions ever *be transfigured* into poetry") suggests an impersonal activity. It appears that there is a fracture in the consciousness of the subject: the self that feels emotion and the self that expresses are not identical.

However, this entire project is brought into question when the writer casts doubt on the truth of the ignoble emotions he is expressing. How can the transfiguration from ignoble to noble be legitimate if the original material, the ignoble self-expression, does not emerge from the true self? The key to this problem seems to be the figure of the "censor" - that part of the self which decides what is to be expressed, and what is to remain "shrouded". The image of the "censor" emphasizes the duality of the writing subject – there is a part of the subject that experiences desire, that has a "*want*", and there is a regulating part of the subject, through which the desire has to pass before it is written on the page. One suspects that it is this second, regulating part of the subject, the "censor", that will be tasked with transforming the self-expression into poetry, at an unspecified later stage.

If one is willing to go ahead with the image of the censor, one sees that it has implicated itself into the constitution of the desiring self. This emerges from the last part of the passage, where the protagonist questions his ability to know whether he is being truthful or not: "Why should he even *want* to know for sure?". The italicized "*want*" is the impulse arising from the desiring subject; the question mark is the censor. The doubt, it seems, has burrowed through the folds of subjective awareness into the birthplace of desire. That is to say, "he", the composite subject, does not exist as a compartmentalized entity channelling its desire into the world anymore – the lines between the censor and the desiring subject have been blurred. The inner subject, the locus of desire, becomes a constellation of impulses that vie with each other for precedence in a hierarchy of truth, but the standards of truth that regulate the

hierarchy have melted into doubt. Consequently, the strongest impulse of the subject becomes the yearning for truth itself.[1]

Thus one becomes aware that the notion of subjectivity has undergone a transformation of its own in the writing. The censor, which is the discriminating force responsible for selecting the words that appear on the page, does not grant access to a deeper, truer subjectivity. The notion of a deeper, truer subjectivity is no more than a yearning that animates the work of the censor. Authentic self emerges as a figure of textuality. It is a fiction that can be used to legitimize the project of writing, but it does not exist of itself in any identifiable sense. Its true, unmediated existence cannot be found in the representation that constitutes the text. Reading, in this case, becomes a question of opening oneself to the process of selection that produces the text, which is informed by the desire for truth. This becomes apparent in the endless self-doubt of the represented subjectivity – it seems as if the writing subject is hesitant to claim a truth value for any of his assertions. The reader does not attempt to listen for the voice of the true subject, the safekeeper of the truth that speaks from beneath the words; instead, the reader enters into communion with the representation that is the text, during which his own standards of ascribing meaning inhabit the same space as that of the text.

This dynamic, between the notion of authentic subjectivity (of being "truly himself"), the experience of desire (the "*want*") and the realization that these aspects are subsumed by the imperative of textual representation (the domain of the discriminating "censor"), inform my study of Coetzee's work. Specifically, I intend to illustrate the implications of this dynamic during the process of reading. A conventional model of reading would posit, in the first place, an author who wants to express something; it is up to the reader to discover what the author is trying to express. The authorial subject experiences a desire to express its own worth and authenticity (to gain "nobility"), which results in the activity of writing. The reader reads the text in order to gain access to its truth, whether it be factual knowledge,

1 Writing of the character named Henrik in a book by Sándor Márai, *Embers* (transl. 2003), Coetzee says, "With age, it seems, we begin to accept that our desires have found and will find no real echo in the world.... So of Konrad [another character in the book] he demands no more than the truth" ("Sándor Márai" 96). The character of Henrik has abandoned all hope of finding an "echo" for his innermost desire; as compensation for this loss he now desires to find the truth.

emotional power, philosophical enlightenment or religious persuasion – even the activity of reading for diversion bases itself on the assumption that the text has a certain power of usurpation, something upon which the reader depends to put him in touch with a reality outside his own subjective isolation. Isolation, in this context, implies the intuition of solitude that arises from the subject's awareness that the fundamental nature of its desire will never be shared. Thus the reader attempts to connect with a force that is foreign to his own constitution in order to take him out of himself.

Coetzee's preoccupation with authenticity and representation, however, leads one to a notion of reading that departs from the abovementioned model. Now, it seems, the true subject has at most only provisional status – it exists only as a device for introducing that which follows. This provisional subject creates a textual representation, based on the decisions of that part of subjective being which judges the value of impulses. Only "true" impulses are permitted to go into the text. The reader, for which one also provides a provisional subjectivity, brings to the text his own range of value preferences, with regard to what is meaningful and what is not. These forces, the value-discriminations inherent in the representation of the text and the reader's discriminatory self, engage in a communal space, characterized primarily by its convergence in time. The process of identification – the reader's experience of another, subjective reality – does not occur between the provisional true subject of the author and the provisional true self of the reader. Instead, the provisional subject becomes a constellation of contesting impulses, of which the textual representation is a frozen instant. The reader opens himself to the representation, which affects him to the extent that it interferes with his own representation of meaningful symbolic references. Identification, which is the counter for the abovementioned intuition of solitude, thereby resides in the confluence of the textual representation and the reader's symbolic consciousness.

This dynamic has been expressed by various critics of Coetzee's work. Mike Marais, who writes about the paradoxical impossibility of imaginative identification in Coetzee's work, writes, "*Disgrace* undermines, even as it installs, the possibility of [developing a sympathetic imagination] and thereby questions the ability of the imagination to achieve what it is supposed to achieve" ("J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and

the Task of the Imagination" 76). The purpose of the imagination is sympathetic identification with the other[2]. Marais argues that the novels precipitate an experience of alterity in the reader instead of granting the reader a privileged insight into the character's experience of alterity. In other words, the meaning of reading a novel by Coetzee resides precisely in the vertiginous effect that it creates in the mind of the reader, and not in any totalizing observation that the reader might make about the characters in the novel.

According to Marais, Lurie cannot find a position sufficiently free of historical conditioning from which to understand his daughter on her own terms. Instead the novel itself "attempt[s] to make of reading an event in which the reader encounters what exceeds the cognitive categories of his culture and over which he can exercise no control" (88). This encounter does not lead to an understanding of the other, precisely because it is an encounter with the unknowable, but it does render the reader "unable to exclude the otherness of what he reads from his psyche" (89). This otherness, which has "invaded and possessed" (89) the mind of the reader, gives him a sense of "the inspiration that may derive from the sense the imagination imparts of that over which it has no power" (89). Ultimately, therefore, the novel affects the subjective experience of the reader by reproducing the sense of awe in the face of alterity.

For Marais, this effect of inspiration is what constitutes the meaning of the novel. It serves as a justification for the deprivation of coming up against an insurmountable wall: the impossibility of achieving the ethical imperative of sympathetic identification. *Disgrace*, it seems, has the potential for transplanting the experience of authentic yearning – authentic in the sense that it underscores the work of representation, and therefore remains unrepresentable in itself – into the minds of attentive readers. The seed of this idea has sprung into the minds of numerous critical perspectives on Coetzee's work. Marais is not alone in his appreciation of the way in

2 Following Levinas, Marais conceives of imaginative identification in ethical terms: "For Levinas, the precondition of ethics is a relationship in which the self responds to 'a singularity without the mediation of any principle, any ideality'…. Singularity is thus that which exceeds representation and therefore repetition" (90, footnote 4). Thus the problem is raised of simulating the process of imaginative identification – and therefore the basis for ethical action – in language, which cannot deny for itself the status of mediation.

which the novels circumvent their ostensible deadlocks, namely the impossibility of identification, the inevitability of solitude.

Derek Attridge has also speculated on the extent to which Coetzee's writing dramatizes the frustrated attempts of his characters to express the authenticity of their desire, but then reproduces this very desire, or intimation of authenticity, in the minds of his readers. He approaches this notion through the process of canonization, which is a figure for the individual's desire to make itself known in a mutually understood discourse. Provisionally, the process of canonization is defined as the "widespread recognition within the institutions of publication and education that a body of texts by a single author constitutes an 'important', 'serious', 'lasting' contribution to 'literature'" (168). It is a definition that presupposes the presence of autonomous value and transcendental truth as a characteristic of certain texts[3]. Attridge problematizes this notion by asserting that texts are, on the contrary, "*manufactured* from the resources of a particular culture in order to gain acceptance within that culture" (172). Thus a canonical text does not tap into a supra-historical, eternal truth to acquire its status, but derives from the material of the culture in which it is read. It needs to partake in one of the communal modes of discourse, "the body of recognised narrative" (175), in order to be understood; it needs to sacrifice a portion of its originality – its authenticity – in order to be read.[4]

In other words, a text must present itself in an accepted symbolic currency if it wants to be understood. More than that, it always already originates from the bedrock of the familiar. The paradox implicit in this process is that the text must sacrifice its impulse toward originality in order to share it. This is tantamount to saying that if a text wishes to reproduce its affect in the mind of the reader, it must first recant the desire to demonstrate in a superficial sense that which it wants to achieve. Accordingly, the text must find a way to retain its singularity in spite of the fact that it is a representation, which cannot accommodate singularity because the symbols of representation are a conventional commodity.

3 This notion is still alive and well in the work of a critic like Harold Bloom, who recognizes "aesthetic strength" (29) as a feature of canonized texts. He conceives of "aesthetic strength" as a textual synthesis of "mastery of figurative language, originality, cognitive power, knowledge [and] exuberance of diction" (29).

4 See chapter four for a more detailed discussion of what constitutes "the classic", i.e. that which is canonized.

This desire of a text to be read, to rework itself into the cultural context from which it arose, figures as a model for the subject's urge to make itself known. “What *Foe* suggests is that the same imperative drives our self-presentations and representations; unless we are read, we are nothing” (174), says Attridge. Specifically, the character of Susan Barton dramatizes this “double bind” (175): she wants her story told by an accomplished author (Foe), in order to legitimize the authenticity of her experience on the island, but increasingly she realizes that this will result in a silencing of those aspects that, to her mind, constitute the value of her subjective experience. The presence of Friday is an acute reminder of the silences that cannot be approached through the text. If one looks back to Marais' aforementioned notion of alterity, one could conceive of Friday as the unknowable other, the silence that is not represented *in* the text, but carries into the mind of the reader as an experience of alterity.

Attridge poses the question of what will happen to Coetzee's work if it is canonized. His answer is that it will lose its “uniqueness” (186) and its potential for introducing alterity into the subjective experience of the reader – and thus the ability to have a liberating effect on that subject – because it “will be dissolved by the ideologically-determined voice which the canon grants” (186). However, he fits in well with the number of critics who discern the possibility of renewal in Coetzee's work, by stating that novels which are alert to the pitfalls of canonization, like *Foe*, could change the very premise of canonization, “so that new and presently unimaginable ways of finding a voice, and new ways of hearing such voices, come into being” (186). If one carries this further, it becomes a way of saying that the aspects of Coetzee's work which resist canonization are those aspects which it would be worthwhile to canonize, or to posit as the defining terms of a new cultural discourse. It seems, however, that if this were to happen, if new ways of understanding were to “come into being” (186) and the unimaginable became imaginable, the work would lose the potency of its effect, because it would negate the possibility of introducing the unimaginable as an unsettling force into the subjective experience of the reader. The challenge for the author, in this case, would be to keep alive the notion that there is something worth understanding in the text, without betraying the secret that will unlock that understanding. In a certain sense, the text has to direct itself toward the notion of coming “into being”, but it must refrain from fulfilling that motion.

This thesis originates from the perplexing effect of that unsettling force. I hope to demonstrate that Coetzee's work is characterized by an encompassing allegiance to the originality of subjective experience – the experience of being human, in its purest terms. The authenticity of this experience, the fact that it resists assimilation into the discourse of criticism, constitutes the destabilizing energy of his texts. It is, of course, problematic to build one's thesis around an absence, namely that which cannot be represented, but I seek to get around this problem by delving into the actual dynamics of representation in Coetzee's work. The abridged version of what I have discovered is this: that which is represented in Coetzee's work is the motion of a consciousness that is itself constantly plagued by the endless deferment of meaning, but nevertheless finds itself pushed forward by the desire for truth. Each novel can be read as a crystallization of this process in language. Thus the subjective experience embedded in the text is the actual motion of a symbolic consciousness (a consciousness that becomes aware of itself through the act of symbolizing) at its most basic level.

The motion of the consciousness presents itself to the reader as an enigma. Like the protagonist of *Youth*, the reader cannot ascertain whether he is reading the depiction of "true feelings", or whether he is being involved in an elaborate scam. On the one hand, the reader feels pity and condescension for the hapless protagonist's pursuit of eminence; on the other hand, the reader has a mounting sense that the narrator is implicating him in an ironic self-mockery. Eventually, the reader comes to the realization that it is impossible to discern whether the narrator is being sincere or ironic[5]. The text is sincere in the sense that it acknowledges its own doubt, but it is ironic in the sense that one cannot be sure whether the doubt itself is really felt or whether it is contrived in the service of sincerity. The reader is perpetually frustrated in his attempts to get behind the text. This incessant ambiguity of tone is not merely a textual device. Rather, it seems to be a depiction of the ambiguity that resides within the processes of consciousness itself. However, if one states that the text is a sincere representation of ambiguity, the endless deferment starts anew. This kind of reading – trying to discover the truth behind the mode of expression – appears to lead into a dead end of reiteration. Hence I have immersed myself in the dynamics of

5 I take my lead here from Coetzee's essay on the apparently endless economics of confession, "Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky." (1992)

representation that constitutes each of Coetzee's novels discussed in this thesis, in order to demonstrate the way in which the ambiguities of deferment become concrete in embedded texts that open new worlds of possibility for the reader.

I intend to use the notion of embeddedness to encapsulate the self-reflective inscription of consciousness into symbolic language. In my use of the term, embeddedness is a mode of representation that is differentiated from other modes of symbolic representation by the fact that it acknowledges the inaccessibility of a stable reality, whether that reality be objective (realism) or subjective (modernism). In realism, it is expected of the reader to enter into a tacit agreement that he is reading a representation of reality. This reality can be assimilated by the reader if he pays due attention to the particularities of the text. In other words, if the reader takes into account the limitations of representation and equips himself with the proper tools for reconstruction – namely, knowledge of historical context, stylistic preference and ideological hubris – he can rebuild a picture of the reality behind the text for himself. In realism, the subjective presence of the author is an obstacle towards achieving an objective idea of the reality behind the text.

In modernism, there is a change in emphasis towards the very subjectivity of the text[6]. One thinks in this context specifically of authors like Joyce and Woolf. It is not expected of the reader to achieve a sense of objective reality anymore. Instead he enters into a tacit agreement that the reality behind the text can only be perceived through the prism of subjective experience. There is a shift from the objectively real to the reality of the subject. The channels to objective knowledge are narrowed, and the reader acknowledges that one can no longer escape the injunction that all representation is subjective. To read a text is to see the world through a lens of subjective perception. Instead of being a hindrance, the subjective presence of the author – the author's experience of a sadly distant reality – becomes the focus of reading.

6 This dynamic can also be explored fruitfully in the context of the romantics (see chapter two). However, there is an important shift in tone between romanticism and modernism – whereas the romantics celebrated the self as the authentic vessel of truth, the modernists seem to lament the inescapability of the self.

In the case of realism, the subjective experience of consciousness stands as an obstacle between the reader and the real; in the case of modernism, it becomes an avenue through which the reader has limited, mediated access to the real. What, following Coetzee, I have called embeddedness, may be characterized as a mode of writing in which both the subjective and the objective reside as a figure of textual representation. The actual person of the author, the subject of enunciation (Benvenuto and Kennedy 169), the focal point that experiences itself as the primary organ of perception and expression, has grown unfathomably distant. However, this does not imply that the real - the unmediated real – is foregrounded in the representation of the text. Instead, the text becomes a portrayal of the discourse spoken by the self to itself about the world. It is a representation, with the word as its most basic representative unit, of the language that constitutes the subject's perception of itself in the world.

Thus one can no longer call upon the subject of enunciation behind the discourse as the ground of the text; nor can one hope to gain access to an objective, material reality through an engagement with the representation. Instead, the language of the representation constitutes the experience of subjective consciousness. The words of the representation, the units of symbolic meaning, are the means for the subject to create for itself a notion of material reality, but it is also this creation of reality that gives the subject a means of experiencing itself. The language of representation makes the motion of experience concrete. It provides a material reality in which consciousness acquires a sense of dimension and thus of experience itself. In the most fundamental sense, therefore, the act of representation is a means for subjective consciousness to come into being. A consciousness which is thus embedded in language finds itself equipped with the materials of referentiality, in a semantic sense, but also with a heartbeat of tone and rhythm, which are aspects of the emotive and aural aspects of language, respectively.

The notion of embeddedness – Coetzee's own term – is raised pertinently in the first chapter of *Elizabeth Costello*, which deals with the problem of representation in an environment characterized by seemingly endless referentiality. Speaking to her son, John, she says, “Kafka's ape is embedded in life. It is the embeddedness that is important, not the life itself. His ape is embedded as we are embedded, *you in me, I in you*” (32, my italics). Elizabeth states unambiguously that the personal experience of

reality ("life"), the secret behind the representation, is not what is at stake. What matters is the substitutive relation between the various subjectivities at stake in the process of reading. Elizabeth is not a part of John, nor he of her, but they determine each other through the act of relation that occurs at the moment of inscription into discourse ("you in me, I in you"). One should not lose sight of the fact, however, that Elizabeth herself is a figure of subjective consciousness within the bounds of textual representation – she is a character in a book. Just as Elizabeth the character has a sense of herself as a being that finds meaning through embeddedness in other discursive realities, and not in herself alone, the reader has a sense that the mode of subjective existence being represented here only acquires reality as a discursive event. Elizabeth's self-reflexivity, her notion of subjective being as a figure of multiple referentialities, cannot be isolated as the totality of subjective experience, because the notion itself emerges as a relational construct.

What is embedded in the discourse, therefore, is the subject's awareness of embeddedness as its mode of existence. Embeddedness implies the relation of phenomena within a discursive context, but the relation itself cannot be abstracted into final terms. The resonance of phenomena within the materiality of textual representation constitutes the experience of subjectivity, rather than pointing to an experience that resides elsewhere. The reader of Coetzee's work does not acquire a sense of the subject as a totality of experiences – instead, the reader experiences the motion of experience itself. The experience of subjectivity that emerges from the relation of textual phenomena acquires motion and temporal reality once the reader engages with the text. Reading in this sense implies that the reader's own experience of subjective reality comes into being as a motion of substitution with the materiality of the text. The philosophy of Ricoeur presents one with a suitable description of the type of reading that takes into account the embeddedness of subjective consciousness:

> [O]bjective meaning is not something hidden behind the text. Rather it is a requirement addressed to the reader. The interpretation accordingly is a kind of obedience to this injunction starting from the text. The concept of 'hermeneutical circle' is not ruled out by this shift within hermeneutics. Instead it is formulated in new terms. *It does not proceed so much from an intersubjective relation linking the subjectivity of the author and the*

> *subjectivity of the reader as from a connection between two discourses, the discourse of the text and the discourse of the interpretation.* This connection means that what has to be interpreted in a text is what it says and what it speaks about, i.e., the kind of world which it opens up or discloses; and *the final act of 'appropriation' is less the projection of one's own prejudices into the text than the 'fusion of horizons' – to speak like Hans Georg Gadamer – which occurs when the world of the reader and the world of the text merge into one another*." (377; my italics)

The agent of interpretation in this explanation of hermeneutics (which concerns itself, at the most basic level, with the interpretation of texts) brings his own array of representations to the table. During the activity of reading, the discourse of the text and the reader's own discourse – which consists of the variety of languages in which he perceives the world for himself – occur simultaneously. That is to say, they happen at the same time. There is interpenetration between the different discourses of representation. The reader, who has (let us say) hitherto been unaware of the constructed nature of his own subjective reality, finds himself immersed in a representation which appears convincing in its own respect – which appears to be rooted in a material reality to the same extent as the reader feels himself to be rooted. However, the textual representations of Coetzee's work seem to be aware of their own incompletion, of holes that seem to give way to something beyond, something that cannot be given form. By virtue of the text's apparent rootedness in a clearly delineated framework of reference, the representation nevertheless persuades the reader of its legitimacy. This enables the reader to open himself to what the representation has to say, and before long he becomes aware of certain gaps in his own constructed consciousness, a consequence of the symbolic interpenetration between the discourse of the text and the discourse of the reader. Hence the representation forces the reader to construct his own version of the reality that informs the textual representation.

The way in which this thesis engages with Coetzee's work is an attempt to demonstrate the convergence of textual representation and the reader's own construction of subjective reality during the process of reading. Each chapter takes its discursive material from a text by Coetzee in order to explore the dynamics of textual

appropriation that constitutes the act of reading. As such, this thesis does not focus on the reception of Coetzee's work within the larger critical community. Rather, it concerns itself with this reader's experience of textual appropriation and attempts to delineate through demonstration a notion of subjectivity as an experience embedded in the materiality of representation. As such, I hope to demonstrate the functionality of embeddedness as a concept that allows the reader to open Coetzee's texts for himself.

CHAPTER 1

THE SUBJECT AND THE QUESTION OF FORM

In 1793 Friedrich Schiller, a German poet, wrote a series of letters to his Danish benefactor, Prince Friedrich Christian of Schleswig-Holstein-Augustenburg, on the subject of aesthetic education (2). These rather beguiling letters attempt to demonstrate the transition of humanity, in abstract terms, from a condition of pure, unmediated sensuality to a state of ordered freedom.[7] Aesthetics denote the medium through which this transition is supposed to occur. Its work is characterized thus:

> In order to describe a shape in space, we must *set limits* to infinite space; in order to represent to ourselves an alteration in time, we must *divide* the totality of time. So we arrive at reality only through limitation, at the *positive*, or actually established, only through *negation* or exclusion, at determination only through the surrender of our free determinability. (*On the Aesthetic Education of Man* 91)

The elements of this exposition, namely “space”, “time”, “reality”, the “established” and “determination”, provide one with a useful key to describe the implications of narrative representation for the subject. One notices specifically that it is necessary to sacrifice the potential in order to reach the actual. In the terms of this chapter, which explores the perseverance of authentic expression – or the persistence of the subject's allegiance to its own authenticity – in the face of the normative effects of genre-bound representation, it becomes a question of attaining a sense of actuality in the text without sacrificing the potential authenticity of the subject.

“Space” and “time”, the first two elements in the passage above, are the two cardinal dimensions of narrative. Without these properties, a linguistic construction cannot be said to constitute a narrative. “Time” is primarily a property of verbal constructions. “Space” seems to be evoked through the lexical categories of nouns and adjectives,

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7 “The whole burden of the argument in these Letters is, in a single sentence, that Man must pass through the aesthetic condition, from the merely physical, in order to reach the rational or moral.” (Introduction by Snell 12)

which concern the physical properties of objects, in the broad sense of that term. The shared aspect of these dimensions, from the position of the reading subject, is their tendency toward exclusion. That is to say, the correlation between reading the words "room" and "she had danced" is that both set limits to the imaginative activity of the reader. Everything that is *not* "room" is closed off, just like everything that is *not* in the temporal space of the completed past is suspended, at least until further formulations open them up again. The point is that the activity of reading a narrative is characterized by a continuous limiting of potential. Before the first word is read, the possibilities are endless, but they are not actualized; once it is read, and until the last word is read, the possibilities constantly diminish, even as they are actualized. Thus the construction of language is always a restriction and diminishing of potentiality.

From the outset, therefore, the project of representation must come to terms with the fact that it sacrifices abundant potential in order to attain materiality, in the sense that it acquires characteristics. The same holds for what Schiller calls "determination", which one could characterize as the attainment of embodied existence. Embodied existence, in this case, means that that which previously only existed as potential now acquires the ability to interact and grow. In the context of this thesis, that which sacrifices its "free determinability" in order to acquire embodied existence, is the subject. As I have outlined in the introduction, this thesis concerns the subject's desire for authentic expression. In this chapter, I intend to explore the effect of the limitation described above on that subjective desire, which is paradoxically also the motivation for the creation of the representation. I use Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* to explore this dynamic, because it foregrounds the issues at stake.

Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons appeared in 2003. It is made up largely of reworked pieces that had previously been published at intervals between 1996 and 2003. Most of these pieces had their genesis as lectures or readings at seminars (Lenta, *Coetzee and Costello* 105). Furthermore, two of them appeared, along with four intellectual responses, as *The Lives of Animals*, a book that Coetzee published in 1999. The only pieces that seem to have been written exclusively for *Elizabeth Costello* are the last two chapters (or "lessons"), namely "Eros" and "At the Gate".

Each piece, or “lesson”, deals with an episode in the life of the title character, Elizabeth Costello. She is an elderly Australian writer, born in 1928, who has all but lost the desire for self-expostulation. She has grown tired of the public's incessant appeal to what it perceives as the subject beyond the representations that constitute her work. A significant part of the book, however, requires her to deal with these appeals. Thus the problem of expression, of finding a way to formulate a concept of self that exists beyond the written work, becomes a thematic concern from the start. Most of the pieces are situated around the event of a public lecture. In half of them, Elizabeth herself delivers a lecture that forms the structural core of the chapter. In most of the others (all except the piece entitled “Eros”) she must defend her position in a less academic, but equally public setting. In short, she constantly finds herself on the spot, where she is forced to take up in public an ethical stance regarding a particular intellectual concern and is frankly unwilling to do so.

The intellectual concern in question constitutes the speculative domain of each “lesson”. The first piece deals with literary realism, which is important because it signals the narrative's preoccupation with forms of fictional representation. In it, Elizabeth Costello travels to Pennsylvania to accept a literary prize and to make an acceptance speech in the form of a lecture. The fact that she chooses to speak about realism is met with some surprise by those attending the lecture, which contributes to the idea that there is a disjunction between Elizabeth's notion of subjective reality and the way in which she is perceived by her readers. The literary journalists and intellectuals who feature in the chapter seem determined to pigeonhole her as a sort of feminist or postcolonial icon: “Is that what you are saying: that until men have worked out a new, post-patriarchal identity, women should hold themselves apart?” asks one young interviewer (11); “Is that part of your consciousness as you write: that you are reporting from the far edges?” asks another about her Australian identity (15). “Realism: no one in this place wanted to hear about realism” (31), says her son in the concluding pages of the chapter. It becomes apparent that Elizabeth's concern resides with the dynamics of representation – with the effects of representation on the perceived reality of the subject – rather than the application of her work to popular cultural theories.

There are a number of asides in which the narrator intrudes on the text to accentuate the “constructedness of the story” (16), as on pages 1, 2, 4, 7, 9, 15 and 16. Some of these asides, or interjections, pertain directly to the nature of literary realism (4, 9, 16); all of them take up a vaguely derisive, or dismissive, or curt tone towards the process of fiction making that actually takes place in the chapter. One can derive from these remarks that the author is concerned with the nature of representation. The invocations of realism indicate that the author is exploring the way in which the protagonist of his novel finds actuality in the text, rather than the implications of her formal ethical or philosophical alignment. Elizabeth is led through a series of events where she is forced to confront her attitudes about certain philosophical, or ethical, questions: the role of the writer, the concept of being, the purpose of art, the limits of art, the comforts of art, the nature of belief, and so forth. Most of Coetzee's readers will be familiar with his tendency to invoke the big questions around the margins of his fiction (one thinks of the ethical responsibility hovering all over *Disgrace*). In *Elizabeth Costello* he brings these questions to the fore by using them directly as the material for his fictional construction. However, as in Michael K’s uncompromising outsidership, as in Lurie’s refusal to confess before the rape inquiry, Elizabeth stubbornly refuses to be subsumed into the matrixes presented by these theoretical frameworks. They constitute a part of her mental makeup, but they do not limit the manifestation of her being in the text.

In this respect it is curious to consider a number of tangential similarities between the author and his protagonist, Elizabeth Costello. They are both writers from the outskirts of the former British Empire; they share a distaste for public appearance; their surnames start with the letter 'C'. If one is to believe Elizabeth's son, John (which is also Coetzee's first name), her work is written with an “insight” that has the ability to “shake” people (5); she is “even cruel” (5) in her work, by which one presumes that she does not flinch before describing the more uncomfortable aspects of human existence, aspects from which most people prefer to divert their attention. These are certainly traits of Coetzee's own work, not only in his gruesome attention to visceral detail, but even more so in his penchant for portraying the base, unidealized movements of his characters' minds. In both writers, Costello and Coetzee, this approach has given birth to a body of work around which a “small critical industry” has grown (1); they are both, in a sense, at the top of their game. By invoking facets

of his own life in his leading character, Coetzee seems once again to be involving the notion of subjective experience as it manifests in fictional exploration.

These are certainly not materials for a conventional modern novel, and indeed it seems misleading to attach the word “novel” to Coetzee's book. David Lodge describes its admixture of elements as “more like a Renaissance prose work than the average modern novel” (11). It is a work of fiction, with a rounded central character who undergoes certain developments as the book travels its course. It also bears comparison to the traditional essay or lecture form, a notion that is emphasized by the genesis of the different chapters of the book, as well as the conceptual thrust of each chapter. Furthermore, there is evidence of an oblique and self-aware autobiographical involvement, understood in the general sense of self-disclosure. However, these manifestations of genre are compromised as much as they are involved. If it is fiction, it is a curiously static sort of fiction; if it is essay, it is essay without obvious didactic aim; if it is autobiography, it is unlike conventional autobiography, which tends to be written in the first person and generally engages with the economics of confession. Rather, it seems to fuse aspects of these different genres into something new, something that is driven by an allegiance to ethical existence and attempts to surpass the categorical imperative of genre.

The first chapter, which deals with an influential and pervasive tradition in the history of the novel, namely realism[8], opens with a seemingly negligent remark about the necessity of form:

> There is first of all the problem of the opening, namely, how to get us from where we are, which is, as yet, nowhere, to the far bank. It is a simple bridging problem, a problem of knocking together a bridge. People solve such problems every day. They solve them, and having solved them push on. (1)

8 Early novels like *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* display a level of self-awareness that contradicts the facade of objectivity required by realism. Realism seems to have gained a foothold at an early stage (perhaps as a literary homage to the supremacy of reason in the age of enlightenment), grown in popularity during the 18th century and peaked during the 19th century in the work of authors like Austin, Dickens and Eliot.

The narrator opens his story by conceding the existence of a "problem", a problem that has to do with transportation. This particular problem affects "us", implying both the reader and the narrator, which is significant because it strips the narrator of his authoritative omnipotence. He is, like the reader, "nowhere": neither of them has privileged access to "the far bank". Furthermore, the problem of crossing over to the other side is described in mechanical terms. It requires a simple structure, a "bridge". There is nothing mysterious or veiled in the basic, humdrum procedure of "knocking together a bridge". It is quite simply a requirement, a prerequisite for the desired movement to "the far bank". Significantly, however, the narrator does not reveal how it is done:

> Let us assume that, however it may have been done, it is done. Let us take it that the bridge is built and crossed, that we can put it out of our mind. We have left behind the territory in which we were. We are in the far territory, where we want to be. (1)

Now it appears that the bridge has already been built, of itself. The passive voice in the first two sentences successfully diverts the attention from the question of agency, the question of who actually built it. We do not know who did it; we do not know how it was done. What we have done, it seems, is simply assume its existence. We have imagined it into being. The reasons for doing this are equally dim. There is a "want" to move from familiar territory into "far" territory, which one assumes to be the terrain of fictional involvement, the constellation of ideas and feelings which comes into existence when one engages in the act of reading. The "want", the basic reason for movement, is not explained. It is notable that desire seems to be one force beyond which this analysis cannot penetrate. In the text under scrutiny, it functions as a sort of premise for the activity in which the reader is about to engage. By asserting itself as a given, an origin for the movement of the text, a force that defies subsumation, desire becomes the *raison d'être* for the formulation – it constitutes the potency upholding the complication of form in the book.

If one looks carefully at what happens in the passage cited above, one sees that the narrator posits the requirement of structure to move the reader into the space of fictional discourse, and then promptly ignores his own requirement by transferring the

responsibility to the imagination. The actual step that needs to be taken, the action of conscious movement, remains unarticulated, for the reader as well as for the narrator. In what seems to be a simple exposition on the requirements of structure, a gap appears. The necessity is articulated while the impossibility is demonstrated. In other words, there is a desire for movement; this desire is ratified by the possibility of achieving it, by making use of a structure, or form, or genre, and then is shown to be impossible, at the exact moment when it has already been achieved. Thus one jumps from desire to performance without passing through a conscious experience of connection between the two. This leads one to an awareness that the kernel of subjective desire is somehow embedded in the text without becoming explicit through representation.

The experience hinges on the word “assume”, and its exposition in the next sentence, “take it”. “Assume” does not mean simply to take for granted. It also implies the taking up of something; it indicates the shouldering of responsibility. Furthermore, it has its root in the Latin *sumere*, “to take”. The gist seems to be that the gratification of the desire for movement, the solution of the “problem” of structure, is something which is given us, something which does not come about on account of our own agency, other than that we must accept it. It is not something we create, but something for which we share the responsibility. As a prelude, I am going to say here that this points us in the direction of shared subjectivity, by which I mean that the reader and the writer reach a point of contact in that they both have to vest themselves in the discourse of desire.

These opening paragraphs are unwarranted by the progress of the narrative. The chapter could just as well have started: “Elizabeth Costello is a writer, born in 1928…” (1). They are one of the interruptions, the asides delivered by the narrator at certain turns of the story, which move it beyond the sphere of conventional narrative fiction and alert the reader to the dynamics of subjective identification. It gives one a sense that there is more going on here than meets the eye and legitimizes the text as a medium for intellectual exploration, by which I mean that it seems to be concerned with teaching, with an expansion of ethical understanding.

The notion of realism is evoked directly on page 4:

> The blue costume, the greasy hair, are details, signs of a moderate realism. Supply the particulars, allow the significations to emerge of themselves. A procedure pioneered by Daniel Defoe. Robinson Crusoe, cast up on the beach, looks around for his shipmates. But there are none. 'I never saw them afterwards, or any sign of them,' says he, 'except three of their hats, one cap, and two shoes that were not fellows.' Two shoes, not fellows: by not being fellows, the shoes have ceased to be footwear and become proofs of death, torn by the foaming seas off the feet of drowning men and tossed ashore. No large words, no despair, just hats and caps and shoes.

In the first place, the author lampoons the integrity of his fictional construction by alerting the reader to the tricks of his trade. Then he situates his chosen technique, realism, in the sphere of literary history by elaborating on its origin and method. He also demonstrates quite literally how it works by describing the story that the mind tells itself when it encounters these "signs of a moderate realism". The formulation, "allow the significations to emerge of themselves", echoes the magical appearance of the "bridge" (1) in the opening paragraph. The author explains himself at the cost of what he hopes to achieve, namely a signification process in the mind of his reader. Instead of sustaining the reality of his character, Elizabeth Costello, for whom the reader is supposed to supply enriching significations, he alerts us to her fictional origin.

The author thwarts himself by explaining himself. He alerts the reader to the limitations inherent in the process of representation. This is rather surprising, as the significations do not emerge so readily when they have to serve an obviously non-real person. This, at least, is the premise of realism, for which we look to *Robinson Crusoe*, which contains an inscription by a supposed editor asserting the verity of its tale, that readers might attach more value to it[9]. In other words, the author does not intend for the reader to suspend his disbelief. Instead, he drives home the fact that Elizabeth is not of the same order of being as us. She is not flesh and blood, but

9 "The editor believes the thing to be a just history of fact; neither is there any appearance of fiction in it. And however thinks, because all such things are disputed, that the improvement of it, as well to the diversion, as to the instruction of the reader, will be the same; and as such, he thinks, without further compliment to the world, he does them a great service in the publication." (7)

something else. One could conceive of the type of writing Coetzee engages in here as a departure from realism. Instead of prompting the reader to recreate the *objective* reality of the environment ("Supply the particulars, allow the significations to emerge of themselves", 4), which would be the purpose of realism, the text now prompts the reader to acknowledge the primacy of the discursive space that constitutes the text. Hence the reader acquires a sense that he is about to engage with mediated reality, and that this mediated reality constitutes the experience of meaning, which is central to the experience of subjective reality itself.

In the context of these ruminations, it becomes appropriate to discuss the collapse of realism, which emerges in Elizabeth's lecture:

> The bottom has dropped out. We could think of this as a tragic turn of events, were it not that it is hard to have respect for whatever was the bottom that dropped out – it looks to us like an illusion now, one of those illusions sustained only by the concentrated gaze of everyone in the room. Remove your gaze for but an instant, and the mirror falls to the floor and shatters. (19)

The "mirror" of which she speaks is the "word-mirror" (19) of realism: an objective symbolic representation of the world as it is. In order to sustain this ideal, it is necessary to believe that the substance of the world is ordered according to a decipherable code, a code which can be replicated in a symbolic structure (a "bridge"), which in this case is the symbolism of words on a page. This entails that each word has a definite, finite symbolic value, a value which can be ascertained with a reasonable degree of certainty. However, if there can be no certainty about the objective referential status of the symbols on the page, if "[t]he bottom has dropped out", how does one justify their appearance? Or, to put it differently, what is at stake in the act of reading and writing if there is no clear code on which to base a mutual understanding?

Elizabeth calls the notion of mutual understanding, of the shared experience of objective reality on which realism is premised, an "illusion". This "illusion" is not some apparition that bubbles up from a netherworld of ideal forms to give us a

glimpse of reality. It does not come from elsewhere: it is "sustained *only* by the concentrated gaze of *everyone* in the room" (my italics). In the first place, this calls up the notion of complicity, of shared responsibility for the process of signification. Everyone, or at least "everyone in the room", everyone in proximity to the same *other thing*, has to be looking at the same *other thing* for its existence to be legitimate. It is not often that the emperor is defrauded of his clothes by a single voice piping from the back row. Furthermore, it is not just any kind of looking that is required: it is a "concentrated gaze". There is some effort involved here; there is willpower involved. If enough people will hard enough, Elizabeth seems to be saying, they can convince themselves that their version of reality is sanctioned, sacred, ultimately and undoubtedly real. The necessity for an exploration of subjective reality diminishes as desire subjugates itself to an accepted form of validation.

Thus it is with genre. Certain forms, like realism, become so entrenched that one does not question them, or even notice them. The form becomes rigid, totalitarian: it seeks to propagate itself without regard for the consequences of its reception. This has drastic implications for the experience of subjective awareness that emerges from a reading of the text. A form which claims for itself the status of truth, of being a true representation of reality, implies that the subjective awareness embedded in such a text is itself an instance of truth, because the symbols of its consciousness emerge from the stock of truth. Hence the reader finds held out toward him, not an appeal toward mutual understanding, or an invitation to discursive exploration, but a standard of usurpation. The limitation of authentic desire becomes paramount. The process of reading, during which the range of phenomena – one set emerging from the subjective experience of the reader, the other from the embedded subjectivity of the text – coincide, becomes a process of contestation rather than a process of simultaneity. A text that dresses itself in the garments of truth necessarily denies the possibility of any authentic yearning that lies outside the scope of its symbolic system. The question at stake in this chapter, therefore, is the implications for subjective authenticity of the limits imposed by the structural necessities of representation, and how Coetzee deals with the totalitarian propensities of form by embedding in his text a self-reflexive awareness of these propensities.

In the first place, there is the character of Elizabeth Costello. She complies with the reader's expectations of a fictional persona: historical background, physical attributes, inner monologue, development through conflict, and so forth. However, there is an air of insecurity about her, an intuition of contingency, an awareness that her position is in some way tenuous and undefined. This comes out clearly in her appearance before the panel of judges in the last chapter of the book:

> Her interrogator waves impatiently. "I am not asking to see your passport. Passports have no force here, as I am sure you are aware. The question I ask is: *you*, by whom I mean this person before our eyes, this person petitioning for passage, this person here and nowhere else – do you speak for yourself?
>
> "Yes. No, emphatically no. Yes and no. Both." (221)

One recalls from the first chapter that Elizabeth does not wish to be known merely as an "Australian" writer, a discomfort which is exposed and summarily brushed aside by the interrogator's dismissal of passports. It emerges that there is a different level of self-justification at stake here. Elizabeth is forced to define her humanity, rather than simply calling on "humanity" as a defence against categorization, as she does in the letter she writes to her sister, but does not send: "The humanities teach us humanity" (151). Or, to put it differently, she is forced to define the essence of her being, to assert the identity of the voice that speaks from within her. To this demand, to the question of whether it is for herself that she is speaking, she offers an ambiguous answer: "Yes. No, emphatically no. Yes and no. Both." In other words, she is herself and she is not herself. She is Elizabeth Costello, the writer from Australia, and she is someone else. There is a host of possibilities at stake here. For the moment I make use of the obvious one: Elizabeth Costello speaks the words that her author writes for her.

She conceives of herself as a "secretary of the invisible" (199), one whose purpose is to "merely write down the words and then test them, test their soundness, to make sure [she] has heard right" (199). From this the judges infer that she wishes to deflect the responsibility of having allegiance to any specific belief (200). However, Elizabeth has her own conception, albeit vague, of what the "invisible" is. She has a

reply at hand should the judges demand edification, a reply that does not satisfy the requirement of edification: the invisible is the "*powers beyond us*" (200). The irony is palpable. She is a writer, in her fictional world, who channels voices; she is also a voice being channeled through another writer, namely J.M. Coetzee. One can read her intuition of this duality, this infringement on her subjectivity, as a reason for her feelings of confusion and frustration. She feels stuck in a clichéd, constructed world: "She cannot stand the literariness of it all" (204). It seems as if she is on the verge of realizing her status as a fictional creation. Does she speak for herself? "Yes. No, emphatically no. Yes and no. Both" (221). She is aware of a voice speaking through her, but she cannot pinpoint the origin or nature of that voice, which the reader might construe as the voice of her author. Regardless, Elizabeth's obstinate clinging to the legitimacy of her mode of being points one toward the notion that representation is what matters – specifically the mode of representation at stake in the book.

Elizabeth conceives of her surroundings, and specifically of her judges, as a manifestation of a weak and stilted attempt at literariness. The judges are "of her kind, of her phylum" (198). In the context of this reading, one might see this as an indication that they come from fictional stock. They are made of fictional fibre, like her. However, it is made clear that they are fictional characters of a different order: "*Excessively literary*, she thinks. *A caricaturist's idea of a bench of judges*." (200). The contrast between the different modes of fictional construction seems to reside in Elizabeth's awareness of the fundamental unrepresentability of her true subjective being, and with the way in which this doubt paradoxically informs the authenticity of her representation, whereas the judges seem confident and unwavering in their superficiality. Elizabeth Costello, the fictional creation, is forced to defend her character before a panel of caricatures. Even more: she is forced to assert her humanity, a notion on which the judges constantly fall back in their questioning ("And what effect do you think it has, this lack of belief, on your humanity?", 200). Before Elizabeth can move on, before she can "pass" (219) through the gate, she has to reduce her capacity for empathy to a code that can be grasped by these unsympathetic, two-dimensional characters (as in the opening paragraph, the desire for passage is not questioned or explained; it simply exists).

It is noteworthy that the characters who are more deeply rooted, or stuck, in literariness, i.e. the judges, wield the legislative power, the power of passage and action, the power over the movement of the body. Even though Elizabeth seems more vital, more human, she is powerless before the judges' lack of imagination. Her petitioning does not move them in the slightest. She finds it impossible to convince them of the legitimacy of her mode of being. Their system of adjudication, their hierarchy of values, their formalistic approach to belief, renders Elizabeth's pleas utterly foreign to their understanding. The judges' allegiance to a rigidity of form precludes the possibility of interaction with Elizabeth's subjectivity. They are blind to the way in which Elizabeth manifests in the material of their existence, namely structured language. This indicates the notion of form (or genre) as something that limits the potential for expression, but it also raises the unavoidability of form as a requirement for the embedding of subjectivity. Thus it becomes necessary for the writer, for Coetzee, to find a way for the two to co-exist, for form to contain the notion of subjectivity and for subjectivity to exist within the stricture of form.

It is tempting to interpret Elizabeth's confrontation with the judges as a dialogue between two dissimilar literary modes. On the one hand is Elizabeth, who shrinks from formal expostulation, who sounds words and arranges them according to an inner ear (199, 219), who is, in the end, aware of the necessity for limitation as a requirement for aesthetic value; on the other hand are the judges, who represent a literary tradition that has been worked into cliché, who care less for the weight of words and more for their barefaced conformity to prescriptive patterns, who guard form and disregard the nuance of personal voice – who seem unaware of their limitation, and therefore of the possibility for expansive being that underlies the limitation. In this analogy, the character of Elizabeth Costello becomes a standpoint from which the burden of historical obligation is interrogated. As I have already mentioned, she must convince the judges that she has met the requirements of ethical existence in their world, the literary world. She must pass their test before she can move on.

However, it is given her to understand that this movement will not culminate in a state of perfection, or transcendence, or completion of desire. The guard at the gate grants her a glimpse of what lies on the other side:

> What has she seen? Despite her unbelief, she had expected that what lay beyond this door fashioned of teak and brass but also no doubt of the tissue of allegory would be unimaginable: a light so blinding that earthly senses would be stunned by it. But the light is not unimaginable at all. It is merely brilliant, more brilliant perhaps than the varieties of light she has known hitherto, but not of another order, not more brilliant than, say, a magnesium flash sustained endlessly. (196)

And, after her failed petition before the judges:

> She has a vision of the gate, the far side of the gate, the side she is denied. At the foot of the gate, blocking the way, lies stretched out a dog, an old dog, his lion-coloured hide scarred from innumerable manglings. His eyes are closed, he is resting, snoozing. Beyond him is nothing but a desert of sand and stone, to infinity. It is her first vision in a long while, and she does not trust it, does not trust in particular the anagram GOD-DOG. *Too literary*, she thinks again. A curse on literature! (224)

From the first passage it is enough to highlight that what lies behind the gate is made of the same stuff as what lies before the gate. It is not of "another order". It does not surpass the limits of the imagination. Elizabeth will not arrive at a place that sets her free from the limitations of the medium in which she exists, namely fiction. Thus the reader discerns that even though her "fidelities" (224) – that to which she has applied her life, the construction of sound textual fabrics – lie elsewhere than the fidelities of the judges, she is of necessity a part of their world, and will forever be so. She will never transcend the requirements of fictional form; she will never be able to transmit her subjective existence, the raw fibre of her desire, as a pure presence into the world.

At the other side of the gate (or so she imagines) we have a dog. This dog has obviously suffered much: his hide has been "scarred from innumerable manglings". Yet it is not exclusively a pitiable figure. His hide is "lion-coloured", which calls up shadows of nobility. The dog is not a noble figure, but he has a perverse sort of family resemblance to nobility. He is the bastard cousin of the canine Cerberus (with

his mane) that guards the passage to Hades in classical mythology (Hanfmann 223). He is what is left, and he does not seem discontent: he is “resting, snoozing”, a condition which would be hard to attain in situations of immediate agitation. For the time being, at least, the dog is granted respite from suffering and ignobility. It is a meagre sort of consolation, but at least it contains an intimation of peace, a promise of better things to come. If not of better things, then at least of a calmness at the other side of the storm that has been engendered by an awareness of and sympathetic identification with suffering.

What is even more crucial, however, is that this dog, in Elizabeth's personal vision, lies at the very limit of the world that is known to her. It occupies the cusp between the discernible, interpretable world, the world of fiction, and the arid vastness beyond. The final point, it seems, the point beyond which Elizabeth can never go, is the presence of this dog and his eternal suffering, this codex of suffering. Suffering blocks the doorway to transcendence and freedom. Suffering is the force that propels (and limits) Elizabeth, the force that she cannot translate and package into a neat delivery for the judges: “'Do you think the guilty do not suffer too?' she says. 'Do you think they do not call out from their flames? *Do not forget me!* – that is what they cry. What kind of conscience is it that will disregard a cry of such moral agony?” (204). Suffering, it seems, necessitates the fiction, but it is uncertain whether fiction alleviates the suffering.

To the constellation of terms I have implicated in this chapter so far, namely subjectivity, desire and form, it now becomes possible to add another. That one is “suffering”. It seems as if suffering connects somehow with desire, not in the conventional sense of the word, but in the sense of an impulse, a yearning to satisfy that which cannot be satisfied. The notion of desire, which I described earlier as the driving force behind the formation of the language, acquires here the characteristic of suffering. The suffering at stake in the passage cited above is twofold in nature; rather, it is implicated in the discourse of the text in two distinct ways. Firstly, there is the undeniable “cry of... moral agony” which makes its appeal to the subjective dimension of the text – it demands to be expressed, to form a part of the referential symbolism that constitutes the embedded subjective reality of the text. Secondly, there is the “conscience” of the writing subject (one of the roles ascribed to Elizabeth

Costello), which experiences the ban on empathizing with the guilty imposed by the judges as an offence against its fullness and integrity, and suffers as a result. Hence the urgency of suffering, its demand to be heard and implicated in the discourse of reading and writing, becomes a facet of the desire toward authentic expression, which experiences the restriction of form as a culling of its potential scope.

However, even the certainty of suffering, and therefore the basis of the description given above, is undermined: Elizabeth does not "trust it". It does not ring true to her. The slanted reference to God puts her out. Calling on God – or a warped representation of God – as the ultimate culmination of human striving, she seems to be saying, is too facile. It participates in the clichéd mode from which she is struggling to escape. The form, or genre of the novel – which manifests in this specific instance as cliché – destabilizes the certainty achieved a moment ago regarding the motivation behind its existence. Instead of presenting the reader with a certainty regarding the desire of the subject, therefore, the representation foregrounds doubt as the primary indication of authenticity. That which is embedded in the text is the doubling back of the subject's sense of its own being. It is against the imposition on representing the full extent of this doubling back that Elizabeth rallies when she defends the authenticity of suffering – suffering as an element of consciousness that precipitates the experience of doubt and therefore cannot be excluded from the mode of representation that strives to incorporate the authentic motions of subjective awareness.

When Elizabeth realizes that she can never break through the limits imposed by the medium of her representation, she cries out: "A curse on literature!" The culmination of her frustration, her agitated rumination, is a solid and unambiguous exclamation against the soil from whence she came: literature. She does not like it, she hates it, but there it is: literature is unavoidably a part of who she is. It is, in fact, what she is – it constitutes the fabric of her subjective being. According to the narrative, she has devoted her life to it: "If I had my life again, she tells herself, not without bitterness, I would spend it otherwise. Have more fun. What good has it done me, this life of writing, now that it comes to the final proving?" (222). For Elizabeth, a "life of writing" implies a great deal: she has, on one level, the level of suspended disbelief, committed her life to writing; she is also, on another level, a figure of embedded

subjectivity – she performs, in the most crucial sense, the motions of subjective existence which she tries with limited success to explain to her contemporaries.

It becomes apparent that the book is saturated with a consciousness of fiction and its limits. It is, first of all, a fictional creation, but it also challenges and complicates the meaning of statements like: "it is a fictional creation". It is important to mark this in the mind before one considers some of the criticism that has been levelled at the book, and specifically the attitude of some critics towards the ethical implications of the didactic thrust of some of the chapters. David Lodge notes that "[t]here was a feeling, shared by some reviewers of the book, that he was putting forward an extreme, intolerant, and accusatory argument without taking full intellectual responsibility for it" (6). The brunt of these accusations are directed at "[w]hat gives most offense", namely "the analogy [Elizabeth] draws between the industrial production of meat and the extermination of the Jews by the Nazis" (6). Another surprising breach of literary protocol, one that could conceivably upset the alignment of a sensitive critic, is the appearance of a real novelist in the sixth chapter, namely Paul West. The tenor of the criticism against Coetzee in these cases seems to be that he is deliberately creating provocative situations without assuming ethical responsibility for their effects. In this case it will be just to cite some of the offensive passages and try to establish what is taking place.

The most incriminating passage is the comparison of animal slaughter to Nazi death camps:

> Let me say it openly: we are surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed dwarfs it, in that ours is an enterprise without end, self-regenerating, bringing rabbits, rats, poultry, livestock ceaselessly into the world for the purpose of killing them.
>
> And to split hairs, to claim that there is no comparison, that Treblinka was so to speak a metaphysical enterprise dedicated to nothing but death and annihilation while the meat industry is ultimately devoted to life (once its victims are dead, after all, it does not burn them to ash or bury them but on the contrary cuts them up and refrigerates and packs them so that

> they can be consumed in the comfort of our homes) is as little consolation to those victims as it would have been – pardon the tastelessness of the following – to ask the dead of Treblinka to excuse their killers because their body fat was needed to make soap and their hair to stuff mattresses with. (65)

And:

> I return one last time to the places of death all around us, the places of slaughter to which, in a huge communal effort, we close our hearts. Each day a fresh holocaust, yet, as far as I can see, our moral being is untouched. We do not feel tainted. We can do anything, it seems, and come away clean. (80)

In the first passage I have cited here, Elizabeth unequivocally condemns the meat-processing industry as one of the worst atrocities thus far committed by humans. It is even worse than the holocaust: it "dwarfs it". The entire purpose of bringing animals to life, is to give them death. It is the ultimate death enterprise, a horror beyond human understanding, a horror that surpasses the imagination. The next paragraph prefigures one avenue of protest, namely the practical purpose of the enterprise, the fact that it serves humanity. Costello rejects this defence because it ignores the agency of the animals at stake – it denies their value as sentient beings. The pertinent and uncomfortable question regarding this passage is why Elizabeth invokes precisely the holocaust – a dark monument of human suffering – to animate her description of animal slaughter. If one takes into account her assault on the arguments for meat processing, namely that they are based on formal ethical allegiances that ignore the potential beyond the limitations they impose on being, one could construe the comparison as an attempt to revitalize our understanding of the actual horrors perpetrated by the Third Reich. In other words, she seems to be saying that the same allegiance to ethical standards that allows the slaughter of animals also diminishes one's understanding of the authentic suffering experienced by the victims of the holocaust.

In the second passage, this denial of being, the refusal to identify, emerges as what is at stake: "we close our hearts". Much like the "concentrated gaze of everyone in the room" (19) that used to sustain the truth of realism, a "huge communal effort" sustains the legitimacy of animal slaughter. By a sort of unspoken agreement, humanity has chosen to hold one mode of being, the mode engendered by reason, as the only sanctioned mode of existence. This willed belief in the supremacy of reason allows humanity to occupy the moral high ground. It is this kind of belief that Elizabeth struggles to expose in the final chapter, when she is before the judges: belief as a self-serving device, belief as a prop for masquerading one mode of existence as the ultimate reality.

From this tirade against the treatment of animals the idea emerges that a concept of being overpowered by reason, a subject that makes itself the servant of abstract logic, or of rigid form, lacks a moral dimension. A person who bases his actions and opinions purely on didactic argument (for example the utilitarian idea that killing animals cannot be evil because it serves humanity) "can do anything, it seems, and come away clean", because such a person can always justify his actions according to the unquestionable authority of the rational system to which he has pledged allegiance. If one considers the way in which Coetzee couches these notions in fiction, or perhaps the way in which the fiction uses these moral dilemmas as its building matter, a picture starts to emerge of the ethical undercarriage of the book.

It becomes superfluous to accuse the author of not taking "full intellectual responsibility" (Lodge 6) for his arguments when he is in fact interrogating the conditions of intellectual (or ethical) responsibility as such. Instead, one could assert that Coetzee uses this slippery and uncategorizable way of writing because it "suits his complex purposes, which go beyond the advocacy of his views" (Lenta, 1998: 107), which is the opinion of Margaret Lenta, who formulated it before the publication of *Elizabeth Costello,* as a response to Coetzee's tendency for reading fictional accounts at lecturing events. The nature of these "complex purposes" remains obscure in the most fundamental sense, but it seems to have something to do with the persistence of empathy in the face of isolation, the representation of being, and the perpetual subversion of normative genre; neither can these formulations be separated from each other.

The book certainly implicates the tradition of didactics in its composition. As I have mentioned, the structure of most of the pieces is built around the event of a public lecture, in which someone is supposed to persuade someone else of their point of view on some intellectual or ethical matter. This mode of delivery is undermined by the open-endedness of each piece (or "lesson"): there is never a final word, a culmination of the argument, a point at which one can identify the kernel of the "lesson". Some of the pieces have passages which lean in this direction, like the unwritten part of Elizabeth's letter to her sister at the end of the chapter entitled "The Humanities in Africa" (154). However, these passages never transcend their matrixes of uncertainty, their fictional "embeddedness" (32); they leave the reader unsure as to what they declare. They undermine their likeness to epiphany by re-introducing desire as a force which exists beyond the activity of interrogation. For example, in the imaginary ending to the letter Elizabeth sends to her sister, the epiphanic moment appears in the single formulation "*caritas*" (154), but then, at the very end, Elizabeth reverts to an undiluted cry of loneliness: "*Sister of my youth, do not die in a foreign field and leave me without an answer!*" (155). This redirects the reader to the unarticulated heart of darkness that constitutes the inner being of the subject.

The essay (or lecture) form thus comprises part of the composition without becoming a strict model for it. Or, to put it differently, the didactic model does not satisfy the requirements of desire that lie at the base of the work. Or, to put it differently yet, the formal transactions demanded by a rational mode of being does not answer the human impulse rising from the subject, Elizabeth. There are many ways of putting it, all of which approximate the truth, as long as they acknowledge the existence of a yearning, of a "single authentic note of immortal longing" beating in the human heart, as David Lurie expresses the point of his operatic endeavour in *Disgrace* (214). What stands out, therefore, is that the different forms of expression, the fictional and the essayistic, are not sufficient in themselves to express the core of human yearning. They do not offer a direct channel into the heart of another being; they do not offer a solution to the unrelenting question of being. This allows us to trace another mode of writing in Coetzee's book, a mode for which the human subject and its desire is prerequisite, namely autobiography.

This is by no means a strange venture for Coetzee. He has already done some unorthodox work in the name of autobiography, specifically in the case of *Boyhood* and *Youth*. These books complicate the notion of an autobiographical subject by rendering it ultimately inaccessible for the reader. At no point can the reader say: "this is the *real* Coetzee speaking", simply because the real Coetzee, understood in the general sense of the first person confessional subject, is not present in the narrative. Instead, the reader is presented with a picture of the world as it exists in the consciousness of a third-person, present-tense focaliser, who shares certain biographical facts with his author, but is clearly not the exact same person. The author discards the pretense of privileged access to his inner being and writes a fictional account that uses the localities of his own life as its material, much as is the case with *Elizabeth Costello*, although that book lacks the historical similitudes of the autobiographical fabrications. And, of course, Elizabeth Costello is a woman, whereas her author is a man.

As I have mentioned, some critics read Elizabeth as an avatar of her author: a fictional mouthpiece through which he voices his own opinions without taking "full intellectual responsibility" (Lodge 6) for them. To my mind, this is a rather crude simplification of what actually happens. Elizabeth *can* be read as a personification of subjective experience, a figure that inhabits the discursive space constituted by the interpenetration of the reader's and the author's respective mediated realities; as can David Lurie, as can the protagonist of *Boyhood* and *Youth*, as can Paul Rayment, but this does not mean one can equate the author with his character. Instead, one could see the character as a construction made of the material that inhabits the mind of the author – she becomes, in a sense, an avatar of the motions of desire that constitute the deepest level of subjective awareness. She is born from a specific mental environment, but then develops of her own accord – the desire takes on a life of its own. Elizabeth becomes a figure for the subjective inclination toward authenticity in the face of limitation; however, to state that she is a direct personification of her author commits exactly that violence upon the primacy of subjective desire that the text wishes to thwart.

The tension that carries through *Elizabeth Costello*, if one looks at it from a certain angle, is a result of this obstinacy of character, which is exactly the character's refusal

to bend to the will of the author. *The character takes on a life of its own*. Of course, this has some serious implications for the process of autobiography: a character who has been vested with certain qualities of her author, who is, in one sense, an incarnation of certain aspects of the author, now becomes a being of her own, a being who has the ability to question the demands made of it by the author. More specifically, Elizabeth begins to express her dissatisfaction, her unwillingness to succumb to the bounds of the world in which her author has placed her.

This dissatisfaction is constantly alluded to throughout the text: "[A] limit has been reached, the limit of what can be achieved with a body of balanced, well-informed modern folk in a clean, well-lit lecture venue in a well-ordered, well-run European city in the dawn of the twenty-first century" (175), says Elizabeth after her lecture on evil at the conference in Amsterdam; the reader understands that Elizabeth wants to express something that exceeds the limits of the format in which she finds herself. What becomes apparent is the existence of a desire for disclosure. This word, "disclosure", warrants an exposition. Firstly and primarily, it means to make known, to open up that which is closed, to unlock the isolation of the subject. However, the prefix "dis-" has the ambiguous effect of negating "closure", in the sense of "unclosing" or "opening", while at the same time implicating and intensifying the force of the "closure" aspect. What this does, in effect, is to make known about the subject the fact that it is isolated. Thus the desire for disclosure negates itself; the subject cannot speak itself unto the other, other than announcing its inability to speak itself. Elizabeth feels herself stuck in this deadlock to the extent that she cannot access her own thoughts: "You cannot exchange thoughts when you do not know what you think" (181), she ruminates in the isolation of a cubicle in the ladies' room after the conference.

In a certain sense, the sense of being limited by the tyranny of form, Elizabeth's plight matches that of David Lurie before the committee of inquiry that is set up to investigate his amorous trespasses:

> Frankly, what you want from me is not a response but a confession. Well, I make no confession. I put forward a plea, as is my right. Guilty as

> charged. That is my plea. That is as far as I am prepared to go. (*Disgrace* 51)

In the context of the current reading, one can take this as the subject's refusal to define itself within the parameters of an imposed system or form. Lurie does not want to reduce himself to an object in the scheme that the world is trying to set up; Elizabeth cannot express herself within the limits of the conference. If one is willing to entertain the autobiographical tension in Coetzee's work, one could read a parallel situation in the author's propensity for disclosing himself through a fictional character, with the full import of the unresolved nature of that disclosure. Once again, therefore, one sees a literary form that is interrogated even as it is used, namely autobiography.

It is worth noting the way in which Elizabeth confronts this impasse of disclosure, an impasse that does not only exist between the self and the world, but within the self itself: "What has she conveyed to Amsterdam to display to these puzzled strangers but an obsession, an obsession that is hers alone and that she clearly does not understand?" (177) she asks herself in the aftermath of the conference. Then she replies to herself:

> *Obscene*. Go back to the talismanic word, hold fast to it. Hold fast to the word, then reach for the experience behind it: that has always been her rule for when she feels herself slipping into abstraction. What was her experience? What was it that happened as she sat reading the accursed book on the lawn that Saturday morning? What was it that upset her so much that a year later she is still grubbing after its roots? Can she find her way back? (177)

There is an echoing passage in one of Coetzee's other books, *Foe*, where the author-figure says:

> In a life of writing books, I have often, believe me, been lost in the maze of doubting. The trick I have learned is to plant a sign or marker in the ground where I stand, so that in my future wanderings I shall have something to return to, and not get worse lost than I am. Having planted

> it, I press on; the more often I come back to my mark (which is a sign to myself of my blindness and incapacity), the more certainly I know I am lost, yet the more I am heartened too, to have found my way back. (135)

In the first passage, one notices first of all the primacy of the word, its actual, fibrous existence, an existence that resonates with an almost magical, or "talismanic" protective power. The power contained in this word is the power of "experience", which implies that the word itself somehow contains a passage to reality. The supernatural, or at least superrational aspect of the word is emphasized by the epitaph connected to the book she has read, namely "accursed". In this aura of mysticism, Elizabeth conceives of herself as a base creature, someone who is "grubbing after [the] roots" of meaning. The thrust of the passage seems to be that she, Elizabeth, is a doubting, misguided creature who can do nothing but give herself to the word and its undeniable reality. The passage from *Foe* seems to emphasize this submission to a "sign", or word, or unit of meaning, as a method for retaining coherence in a world of doubt. Even if the signification of the sign is clouded and tenuous, fundamentally uncertain, it is at least something which can be felt, something which cannot be denied. It is not exactly present, but it is a vessel through which the actuality of subjective awareness can be experienced.

Now it becomes possible to formulate a proposition regarding the subject in Coetzee's work. What is at stake, in the context of this reading, is the persistence of subjective reality within the structural limitations imposed by the necessity of genre. There is no point at which the subject can sever itself from the form in which it appears. Even saying that amounts to a tautology. Subjective reality comes into play as that which the form of the language cannot approach. The presence of this reality, or rather, the suspicion of reality, emerges from the fabric of the language, and from the aura of resistance to formal assimilation. To speak of embedded subjectivity in the text, therefore, amounts to speaking of that which eludes the variations of genre introduced by the author, but persists in the tactile presence of the words. It is the experience of relation precipitated by the contextual referentiality of the text, the confluence of discourse in the mind of the reader, rather than a transcendental idea that can be employed as an abstract device.

This is the point I have been circling throughout these thoughts on the complexity of form in *Elizabeth Costello*. There is fiction; there is essay (or didactic exposition); there is autobiographical disclosure; but none of these constitute a traceable, definite model which gives the book its sense. Instead, these forms are interrogated to the point of satire. They are exposed as transitory; they are riddled with holes. Yet they are implicated. They are used to give shape to a collection of words that would otherwise be nonsensical. In this case, it is pertinent to note that the interrogations of literary form, the exposals and unmaskings, constitute the actual form which the book takes. It is not merely a negation of form, it is a form which integrates negation of absolute form in its makeup. "The skips are not part of the text, they are part of the performance" (16), says the narrator of his technique in the first chapter, the piece on realism. In other words, the lack of linear integrity, the fact that the book leaves us with more questions than answers, does not imply a lack in meaning, a paucity of content; instead, it furnishes us with a method for understanding the work. It gives us a new register for reading, a new code with which to approach the subject of the text. In the end, the reader shares Elizabeth's fate: we cannot transcend form, we cannot escape from the shapes through which we comprehend the world. What the form of *Elizabeth Costello* does, however, is alert us to the presence of real things beyond the shapes we have inherited from tradition – it gives primacy to the experience of reading, rather than the conclusions derived from reading.

CHAPTER 2

LURIE'S ROMANTICISM AND THE FAILURE OF REPRESENTATION

...A sordid solitary thing,
Mid countless brethren with a lonely heart
Through courts and cities the smooth Savage roams
Feeling himself, his own low Self the whole...

– Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Religious Musings*

According to Paul de Man, "[t]he main points around which contemporary methodological and ideological arguments circle can almost always be traced directly back to the romantic heritage" (*Wordsworth and Hölderlin* 48). This statement serves as an introductory remark in an essay that attempts to shed some light on the romantic poets' experience of "the temporal relation between the act and its interpretation" (65). Specifically, in Wordsworth, he sees in the "Boy of Winander" a connection between "the loss of the sense of correspondence [with nature] and the experience of death" (53):

> "The boy's surprise at standing perplexed before the sudden silence of nature was an anticipatory announcement of his death, a movement of his consciousness passing beyond the deceptive constancy of a world of correspondences into a world in which our mind knows itself to be in an endlessly precarious state of suspension: above an earth, the stability of which it cannot participate in, and beneath a heaven that has rejected it. The only hope is that the precariousness will be fully and wholly understood through the mediation of poetic language..." (53).

Thus “poetic language” is tasked with creating a discourse that can comprehend the subject's experience of isolation and unrootedness. Notably, if one bears in mind Wordsworth’s famous statement that poetry “takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity” (33), one notices that the poetic interpretation of experience takes place after the fact. The consolation of discourse is removed from the immediacy of subjective experience. However, the second part of Wordsworth’s statement claims that the original emotion is raised anew through the act of contemplation, so that it “does itself actually exist in the mind” (33). Thus it becomes possible to replicate the “precarious state of suspension” (De Man 53) through the act of poetic interpretation. Through the act of reading, then – which is understood as an interpenetration of the reader’s and the text’s discourse (Ricoeur, 377) – the emotion regains its sense of temporal urgency within the reader’s framework of representation.

The previous chapter aimed to raise the question of the effect of representation on the authenticity of subjective experience. One of the pertinent points raised in that chapter is the necessity of limitation imposed by the requirement of structural representation. In order to convey a sense of authenticity into the mind of the reader, the writing subject has to acquiesce to the activity of displacement inherent in the project of textualization. Instead of presenting its transcendental reality in the text, the subject has to present its embeddedness in the materiality of language. This chapter explores a specific instance of the way in which subjective experience embeds itself in the discourse of fiction. That is to say, I attempt to demonstrate the way in which Coetzee gives body to a specific instance of subjective being by inscribing that being into a discourse that takes its boundaries from an important movement in the tradition of literary representation, namely romanticism.[10]

Enter David Lurie, age 52, one-time romantic scholar and protagonist of *Disgrace.* He appears to be a man who has learnt to content himself with moderation. His weekly encounter with a prostitute, which makes up the sum of his erotic life, furnishes him with “a moderate bliss, a moderated bliss” (6). We meet him as a man

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10 “There are works of literature whose influence is strong but indirect because it is mediated through the whole of the culture rather than immediately through imitation. Wordworth is the case that comes to mind. I see no marks of Wordsworth's style of writing or style of thinking in my own work, yet Wordsworth is a constant presence when I write about human beings and their relations to the natural world” (Atwell, “An Exclusive Interview with J.M. Coetzee”).

who has, “to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well” (1): he has managed to organize desire, the needs of the flesh, according to the transactions of practical society. He has postponed his appointment with old age and physical decay; he has circumvented his sell-by date. Yet in the midst of his apparent “contentedness” (5), the thought of what must soon happen looms over him. He imagines the way in which prostitutes react to their older clients: “Soon, daintily, maliciously, he will be shuddered over. It is a fate he cannot escape” (8); and, “He ought to give up, retire from the game” (9). These thoughts begin to crystallize after a chance encounter with Soraya (the prostitute whom he frequents) and her two sons in a shopping mall (6), a setting that is alien to his fantasies of mutual affection between them. At their next meeting, “he feels a growing coolness as she transforms herself into just another woman and him into just another client” (7). It emerges that Lurie's problem is not a simple “problem of sex”, a problem of finding someone to take care of his physical needs. Rather, it is a problem of establishing a discursive space that can accommodate his desire in a form that is recognizable – and hence interpretable – to an imagined other. The “ground bass of contentedness” (5) which characterizes his existence is interrupted by a note of discord – he experiences something akin to the boy of Winander's “loss of the sense of correspondence” (De Man 53).

Lurie's position as a teacher of Communications 101 and 201 at the Cape Technical University does not inspire him. He has no passion for what he teaches; he sees himself as a “[clerk] in a post-religious age” (4), a man who must earn his living like any other. His position as a teacher of uninteresting stuff, one who does not engage the hearts of his students, equips him with a degree of self-knowledge: “[I]t teaches him humility, brings it home to him who he is in the world” (5). In other words, he has an accurate perception of how he slots into society. He knows what to expect from the world, and what the world expects of him: “[H]e fulfils to the letter his obligations toward [his students], their parents, and the state” (4). There is an air of resolution about him, rising from the obstinate conviction that he is too old for change, that his “temperament is fixed, set” (2). It is important to note that this state of fixity does not bear upon his public position (a position which he abandons without misgiving), but rather upon his concept of self-worth, of what he feels himself to be, of the forces that propel him through the world. The isolation of the inner self from the outer world – that condition which De Man describes as “an endlessly precarious

state of suspension" (53) – and the incessant desire to transgress the boundaries between the two without compromising the integrity of the self, forms the basis of the tension that runs throughout the book.

The make-up of Lurie's character, his inner being, is rooted in a world view that traces its way back to the romantics. The special course he is offering, of which "rationalized personnel" (3) at the Cape Technical University are allowed one each as a concession to their golden years, is on the romantic poets. He sees himself as a "disciple" of Wordsworth (46): "For as long as he can remember, the harmonies of *The Prelude* have echoed within him" (13). He named his daughter Lucy, which may or may not be a product of the Wordsworthian echoes resounding in his head. More pointedly, he conceives of his erotic impulses in a tone that derives from the poetry of the romantics. When he is pressured to explain his personal motives, his inner justification, for pursuing a love affair with a student, he calls on the figures of poetry:

> I was walking through the old college gardens and so, it happened, was the young woman in question, Ms Isaacs. Our paths crossed. Words passed between us, and at that moment something happened which, not being a poet, I will not try to describe. Suffice it to say that Eros entered. After that I was not the same.
>
> ...
>
> I was not myself. I was no longer a fifty-year-old divorcé at a loose end. I became a servant of Eros. (52)

Lurie makes this declaration before the commission of inquiry as a formal "confession" (52). One imagines it being spoken tight-lipped and with overtones of irony. However, it does not seem to be dishonest. Even though Lurie does not plunge into the confessional mode of debasement and regret, one suspects that he believes in the truth of his own justification, the advent of an erotic "impulse" (52). In this case, it is pertinent to note that he explains the erotic impulse as coming from elsewhere, from outside himself. It is not born in his own body, it is not merely an itch of his flesh, it is not a sense-driven instinct. Lurie the man passes words with the young Ms Isaacs. All of a sudden, he is not himself any more. He is a servant of Eros; he becomes a man possessed by the erotic impulse. If one reads closely, one sees that

the exchange of words is the gateway through which Eros enters and takes hold of him. What he presents to the commission, therefore, is the idea of a man under the sway of an erotic impulse, one which he, David Lurie, chose to act upon, because it felt right. The two of them (David and Melanie) created a (linguistic) space that was filled by the idea of the erotic, and he entered into it. Thus he became someone else: he left himself (his self) behind by knitting the "loose end" of his existence into a purposeful idea.

However, if one looks at the actual passage in which Lurie bumps into Melanie in the garden, Eros does not seem to be around, and if he is, he is well-hidden:

> She smiles back, bobbing her head, her smile sly rather than shy. She is small and thin, with close-cropped black hair, wide, almost Chinese cheekbones, large, dark eyes. Her outfits are always striking. Today she wears a maroon miniskirt with a mustard-coloured sweater and black tights; the gold baubles on her belt match the gold balls of her earrings.
>
> He is mildly smitten with her. It is no great matter: barely a term passes when he does not fall for one or other of his charges.
>
> ...
>
> Does she know he has an eye on her? Probably. Women are sensitive to it, to the weight of the desiring gaze. (11)

They commence talking about the weather, home, nothing unusual. Eros peeks at us from behind his camouflage in the first sentence, in the word "sly", a word that Lurie settles on after abandoning the more chaste "shy". Other than that, Eros does not seem particularly aroused. One will be surprised at this point to read Lurie's invocation of erotic love as a powerful force that grabbed hold of him and took him out of himself. There does not seem to be an intensity of purpose, at least not yet: "He is mildly smitten with her. It is no great matter...." Instead, the focus is on the visual detail of Melanie's appearance. She is described more directly and in more precise anatomical detail than one is used to in Coetzee's work. How, for example, does David Lurie look? We know he has "height", "good bones", "olive skin" and "flowing hair" (7), but the portrait remains vague. One also gathers that Lurie has noticed her appearance before: "Her outfits are always striking." At this moment it

would be wise to recall that Lurie has written a scholarly work on "vision as eros" (4). The "eye" which he has "on her" is perhaps not as innocent as it might appear at first. For a person who knows about the path that leads from concentrated looking to wanting, it is perhaps unwise to look too much. In the next sentence, the eye he has on her becomes a "desiring gaze"; it is something with "weight", something that is pressed upon the girl, as if she were a passive receptacle waiting to be given form by the male erotic purpose. The reader notices that Lurie's desire has found a foothold in the close attention he pays to the details of Melanie's physical appearance.

There is a discrepancy between the explanation he gives before the commission of inquiry and the scene as it is described in the book when it actually occurs. In the one case, before the commission, he claims that something, an idea, was activated by the occasion of their talking to each other, as if they were creating a mutual space for desire to take root. Lurie does not claim Eros for himself alone. He leaves it hanging: "Eros entered" (52). In this scenario, both he and Melanie play second fiddle to a greater idea that has taken over the situation of its own accord. In the other case, when the scene occurs in the book, Lurie is the active party. He notices one of his students walking in the garden, a girl whom he has noticed before, but of whom there is no mention in the book prior to that moment. The narrator does not bother to make mention of her while Lurie is still living in a state of "moderated bliss" (6), nor directly after, when he is trying to cope with the loss of his prostitute by having sex with the new secretary (9). It is only when he meets the girl by accident and turns the "weight of the desiring gaze" upon her that she begins to inhabit his mind as a serious erotic prospect: "A week ago she was just another pretty face in class. Now she is a presence in his life, a breathing presence" (23).

If one considers Lurie's mortal anxiety as he wanders through the grey years of his erotic life, it is tempting to read his response to Melanie as a sort of hysterical wish-fulfilment, an attempt to embody an idea before it withers and crumbles with the ageing body. In this case, the idea comes first. It peers out through the sockets of the carrier in search of a suitable target. In the picture sketched before the commission, the material prefigures the disembodied idea; a spontaneous meeting lures Eros from the ether. In the actual meeting, the idea exists first and the sensory detail is filled out later. Eros is on the prowl, and Lurie channels him into the situation by providing

physical material, the object of his concentrated gaze. There is a conflict of priority between the idea and the sense-perception. This conflict between the inside and the outside, the imagined and the real, appears to cause Lurie no end of trouble. He alternates his allegiance haphazardly between “the earth”, which is the realm of sensory perception, and “heaven” (De Man 53), which is the realm of the idea.

Compare a passage from one of Lurie's classes on Wordsworth:

> “Look at line 599. Wordsworth is writing about the limits of sense-perception. It is a theme we have touched on before. As the sense-organs reach the limit of their powers, their light begins to go out. Yet at the moment of expiry that light leaps up one last time like a candle-flame, giving us a glimpse of the invisible. The passage is difficult; perhaps it even contradicts the Mont Blanc moment. Nevertheless, Wordsworth seems to be feeling his way toward a balance: not the pure idea, wreathed in clouds, nor the visual image burned on the retina, overwhelming and disappointing us with its matter-of-fact clarity, but the *sense-image*, kept as fleeting as possible, as a means toward stirring or activating the idea that lies buried more deeply in the soil of memory.”
> He pauses. Blank incomprehension. He has gone too far too fast. How to bring them to him? How to bring her? (Coetzee, 2000: 22, my italics)

At the end of this aesthetic exposition (“How to bring her?”), the reader sees that Lurie's intentions are amorous, based in his real-life infatuation with Melanie Isaacs. One the one hand, this seems to indicate the supremacy of the real over the literary, or at least the rootedness of the literary in the real; on the other, it indicates the extent to which Lurie's character, his very concept of what is going on around him, his understanding of himself and his own desire, has been shaped by a view that is essentially romantic, namely the attempt to reconcile the sanctity of the imagined with the arbitrariness of the real world[11]. In other words, Lurie's conception of the real is

11 Schiller describes this as an antagonism between the “sense impulse” and the “formal impulse”. The sense impulse “proceeds from the physical existence of Man or from his sensuous nature, and is concerned with setting him within the bounds of time and turning him into matter” (64). The formal impulse, on the other hand, “strives to set him at liberty, to bring harmony into the diversity of his manifestation, and to maintain his person throughout every change of circumstance” (66).

experienced through a prism that has been shaped by exposure to literary ideas. The effect of this dynamic between the idea and the real is quite perplexing, especially in Lurie's situation, where the interplay between the two already exists as a theoretical idea in his head. It seems safe to say that Lurie is under the sway of an idea, the idea of Eros. Even his attempts at transgressing the boundaries of the idea, of trying to root it in the real world, are informed by the theoretical framework which helped him formulate it in the first place, namely the language of the romantics. In this quagmire of abstraction the real becomes ever more deeply buried and inaccessible, even as the desire for it flourishes.

The passage also contains a pointer to the origin of Lurie's refusal to relinquish his erotic claims and go peacefully to his old age: "[A]t the moment of expiry that light leaps up one last time like a candle-flame, giving us a glimpse of the invisible." Lurie feels himself to be approaching the "limit of [his] powers". He feels the gathering darkness, but he is determined to postpone his appointment with flaccid old age. What he wants is "[a] last leap of the flame of sense before it goes out" (27). However, and this is the problem, the idea is his alone. It does not exist outside his mental space. He is met with "[b]lank incomprehension" when he tries to send it into the world. His students have no idea what he is talking about. Soraya is unsympathetic toward his yearning. Dawn's ecstasies repel him. Melanie experiences their copulation as "undesired to the core" (25). The commission of inquiry, the protestors against rape, the media, his ex-wife, no-one has any sympathy for his erotic sensibility.

Like Byron's Lucifer, he is "condemned to solitude" (34): he walks the earth, acting on strange and dark impulses, unable to evoke the sympathy of other people. After the hearing before the commission, he is assailed by a student reporter. A crowd gathers: "They circle around him like hunters who have cornered a strange beast and do not know how to finish it off" (56). Lurie is finely attuned to the theory of his idea, its truth, but he is badly out of touch with the exigencies of the world around him. He lacks the capacity for sympathy with the people around him; he cannot

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Thus the sense impulse connects with the arbitrary, changing world of sense perception, whereas the formal impulse strives to hold back the ravage of time and to imbue actuality with necessity (66).

connect. His “mind knows itself to be in an endlessly precarious state of suspension: above an earth, the stability of which it cannot participate in, and beneath a heaven that has rejected it” (De Man, 53). Thus Lurie is tasked with finding a poetic response to his dilemma. He must a find a mode of representation that is capable of communicating his desire without severing it from the root idea. Rather, he must establish a common ground, a discursive space, where his ideas on desire and the exigencies of his environment both gain reality as a result of their symbolic interrelation.

Lurie's ineptitude for compromise, his slavish devotion to the idea in his head, gets him banished from society. He flees to his daughter in the country, where he plans to work on his Byronic opera. His return to the soil reflects the romantic notion of finding a charitable companion for the poetic impulse in nature. To quote Wordsworth, his mentor, “in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated” (9). Lurie's arrival on his daughter's smallholding is indeed coloured by a refreshing simplicity. It is a simplicity that reminds one of how the rustic life is supposed to be. It matches the ideal version of life on a South African farm, but in an ironic, toned-down, post-urban fashion. There are animals, there are vegetables; there is a sturdy “*boervrou*” (60) living in a “sprawling farmhouse... with a galvanized-iron roof and a covered stoep” (59).

The version of the country in which Lurie finds himself, however, is characterized by a few unconventional elements, which already point to the full-scale disillusionment that takes place later. Firstly, the notion of a homecoming to a family farm has been turned on its head: it is not the child, but the father who leaves the city to find refuge in the home of his daughter. Lucy came to the farm to live among a tribe of hippies. Now that communal tribe, the postmodern throwback to the family, has been reduced to one. She is not the traditional matriarch of an abundant family, but the lesbian survivor of a community in decline. Secondly, the proliferation of robust life one would expect on a farm is not there. The animals are abandoned dogs; the land is poor, suitable only for goats (64). Thirdly, the traditional hierarchy between the owner and the farm-hand, the aristocratic landowner and the faithful worker who dumbly ploughs the field, is disturbed: Lucy walks around barefoot, looking after the

animals, while Petrus with the "shrewd eyes" (64) has become "co-proprietor" (62) and seems to be pulling invisible strings to advance his position. This process of reversal is completed at the end of the book, when Petrus becomes owner of the land, and Lucy becomes his "*bywoner*" (204).[12]

Nevertheless, Lurie finds enough to satisfy him:

> They walk back along an irrigation furrow. Lucy's bare toes grip the red earth, leaving clear prints. A solid woman, embedded in her new life. Good! If this is to be what he leaves behind – this daughter, this woman – then he does not have to be ashamed. (62)

The ground on which they walk is an "irrigation furrow". It is an image that calls up the idea of tilled land, productive land. It is the undeniable soil of the earth, the primary source of life and nourishment. Lucy has managed to ingrain herself in this reality. She is in direct, sensual contact with her surroundings: her "bare toes grip the red earth". This is not a one-way relationship. Her surroundings accommodate her presence; her actions leave their imprint on the fabric of reality. She is not living in the throes of an abstract idea. Instead, she has become "embedded in her new life", a condition that meets with Lurie's enthusiastic approval. There is something here that suggests a development in his situation, a movement in the direction of reconciliation between impulse and consistency. It is as if this passage prefigures Lurie's eventual discovery of embeddedness as a means of actualizing a synthesis between the "sense impulse" (Schiller 64) and the "formal impulse" (65). At least he recognizes this condition of being a "solid woman" as something good, something which has the potential to counter his feelings of shame, his public disgrace. At the same time, however, it is only good because it points to an idea that he subscribes to, in theory, in his own life. He is at a distance, bestowing approval on his daughter because she manifests an ideal which he values as an ideal, but has not achieved.

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12 For an insightful discussion of the unsettling impact of Coetzee's subversion of the pastoral and its ramifications within the novel's linguistic consciousness, see Rita Barnard's article, "J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and the South African Pastoral."

The notion of embeddedness, raised pertinently in this passage, hints at the direction in which Lurie develops toward the end of the novel, namely towards an inscription of himself into a structure of representation (the music of the opera) that embodies both the conceptual and the real. Similarly, it provides the reader with a clue as to the kind of reading that unlocks the questions raised by Coetzee's work. In the previous chapter, Elizabeth Costello found herself despairing at the literariness of her situation; that predicament was resolved (for the reader, if not for her) by reading her as a figure for the motion of subjective awareness that comes into being as a result of the contextual resonance of her restricted linguistic environment. In Lurie's case, the challenge for the reader is to discover the motion of consciousness that is embedded in the text and is already characterized by a confluence of the conceptual and the real. The point at which Lurie arrives at the end of the novel thus provides a clue to the method of reading that simultaneously gives the reader a sense of Lurie's immediate predicament and enhances the reader's understanding of the conceptual issues at stake (namely the romantic imperative of poetic mediation between the arbitrary and the elevated). This simultaneity occurs when the reader notices, for example, that he is reading Lurie as Lurie is reading Lucy: in literary terms. When Lurie approves of Lucy's embeddedness, the reader acquires a sense of Lurie's character, as well as a sense of the conceptual issues at stake. The point of reading, then, is not to judge Lurie's humanity from an ethical point of view, or to ignore Lurie as merely a device for personifying an intellectual dissertation on the romantics, but to engage with the motion of consciousness that reveals itself through the confluence of discourses in the text, and in the process to acquire a sense of the overlapping layers that define subjective awareness on a textual level.

When Lurie approves of his daughter, his ideas have already started a process of change. The projected opera on Byron, that surfaces intermittently throughout the book and eventually "consumes him night and day" (214), provides the reader with a key to the inner workings of Lurie's mind. His musings on Byron and Teresa function as a sort of musical score to the narrative, like a projection that indicates the flow and tenor of his temperament, which turns out not to be as fossilized as he imagines it. The reason for writing an opera in the first place seems to emerge from Lurie's dissatisfaction with the stilted and mechanical state into which scholarship, the space of intellectual expression, has fallen. He is at odds with the university. His vocation

does not provide him with purpose: he is “tired of prose measured by the yard” (4). It does not “fill out with sound the overlarge and rather empty human soul” (4), which lies at the root of Lurie's predicament: the great oblivion, the end of meaning, the ultimate isolation. His plans for the opera are rather vague and non-committal at first, although he does provide a broad description of its thematic concerns, like a conductor tapping his baton before the orchestra comes to life: it is to be “a meditation on love between the sexes in the form of a chamber opera” (4).

The subject matter of the opera reflects Lurie's own situation. It is supposed to be about Byron's “last big love-affair” in Italy, where he “went... to escape a scandal” (15). Italians were supposed to be “[l]ess hemmed in by convention, more passionate” (15). That is to say, famous poets with unquenchable appetites could freely pursue Eros among the willing women of Italy. This would appeal to Lurie, who is not a poet, but a “disciple” (46) of poetry, and whose appetite is not of Byron's magnitude, but who is in ardent pursuer of Eros nonetheless, and who tries to escape from the normalizing conventions of the city into the less regulated space of nature. The projected opera becomes a vessel for Lurie to express his ideas on passion and “the rights of desire” (89), ideas which he believes “can no longer be heard” (89) in modern society. As such, it connects with the notion of Lurie as a man in the grips of an idea that he has trouble expressing. It is significant that the first real description one reads of the form the opera is supposed to take, the actual sound of the music, is when Lurie tells his daughter about it. This occurs when he is newly arrived on the smallholding, the space where “elementary feelings... may be more accurately contemplated” (Wordsworth 9):

> I'll borrow the music, for the most part. I have no qualms about borrowing. At the beginning I thought it was a subject that would call for quite lush orchestration. Like Strauss, say. Which would have been beyond my powers. Now I'm inclining the other way, toward a very meagre accompaniment – violin, cello, oboe or maybe bassoon. But it's all in the realm of ideas as yet. I haven't written a note – I've been distracted. You must have heard about my troubles. (63)

Here one reads that Lurie intends to express his feelings through borrowed music. His own lyrical powers are inadequate. He wants to make use of material that has already found its place in the world by negotiating the hazardous path from inspiration to execution: music that has shouldered its way into history and is accepted as a legitimate currency for conveying the intensity of personal experience. He has "no qualms about borrowing": he does not think it necessary to find his own passage between impulse and realization. Initially, he imagines the musical accompaniment to his meditation on adulterous love and erotic ecstasy to be "quite lush", a full chamber orchestra in all its glory. This indicates the intensity with which he used to consider erotic impulses, the richness with which he imbued the notion of the erotic in general. It reveals how Lurie used to see the shrine before which he worships, the temple of Eros: gushing and flowering, Corinthian rather than Doric. This music, however, does not truly match the tone of his inner voice. He is no Byron. His own erotic temperament is "rather abstract, rather dry, even at its hottest" (3), more suited to a "meagre accompaniment", not lacking in intensity (perhaps even more intense, owing to its minimalistic flavour), but certainly not gushing with the swoops and crashes of a full orchestra. However, "it's all in the realm of ideas as yet." He is still not sure how to formulate the score that will put his idea on the map. He is still struggling to cross the boundary between the self and the world, the concept and the embodiment. Ironically, he has been too distracted by the actual consequences of his erotic endeavours to begin work on his erotic opus.

The cathartic moment in the book is Lucy's rape and its immediate aftermath. It is the pivotal experience that forces Lurie into a re-assessment of his self-image and his relations with other people. Notably, the actual scene is never described; Lurie is locked in the bathroom while it is taking place (93-97). He does not experience the reality of the rape, and his imagination baulks at the notion of constructing it: "A vision comes to him of Lucy struggling with the two in the blue overalls, struggling against them. He writhes, trying to blank it out" (97). His initial reaction is to shy away from the point-blank violence of the event and to rationalize it by fitting it into its "schematic aspect" (98), to see the bigger sociological picture and ignore the personal involvement, for fear of what it may do to his sanity. At the moment when he is trying to fit women "and what happens to them" (98) into this system of abstraction, however, Lucy comes up to him; he is overtaken by a surge of emotion.

Lurie loves his daughter unconditionally, but he is a chauvinist at heart, by which I mean that he conceives of a "woman" as the manifestation of an idea, a thing that is used to connect with the sanctity of a held notion, rather than a dynamic being with whom one interacts in the realm of actuality. Thus, when he is trying to seduce Melanie, he thinks: "She does not own herself. Beauty does not own itself" (16). Now, in a dark twist of irony, the one person with whom he does attempt to connect in a practical manner – Lucy – is violated beyond the reach of his ideas on women, on how they fit into the world. This has the effect of shattering his imaginative capacity, his talent for constructing idea-worlds in which to live, precisely because it is not something that happens to him, something from the outside that he can assimilate into his imagined world, but something which is born in his imagination, something that alters the sanctified fabric in which he constructs himself. It is important to bear this in mind when one considers the ways in which Lurie changes throughout the book: the capacity for change lies in the materials of the symbolic imagination itself. It is not simply a matter of things happening in the world that come in to change the mind; rather, it is a question of the way in which Lurie translates his own subjective experience into the fabric of representation that constitutes his perception of the world.

This notion is affirmed by Lucy's refusal to allow Lurie entrance to the actuality of the rape. When he wants to call in the police (the guardians of justice; the field agents of systematized retribution) after they spot one of the rapists at Petrus's celebration, she refuses and retaliates: "Stop it, David! I don't need to defend myself before you. *You don't know what happened*." (134). In other words, Lurie is stumped in his attempt to deal with the rape in a practical manner, to shutter it from his imaginative being by isolating it in the realm of outside, formalized experience. Lucy, his respect for Lucy, forces him to look for a way of integrating those two fields of existence, the vulgar and the ideal, which he has hitherto separated by focusing his energy on the lushness of his romantic vision. Later, when they are talking about the rape directly for the first time, she says: "Maybe, for men, hating the woman makes sex more exciting. You are a man, you ought to know" (158). This suggestion forces Lurie to take a step back and see himself, his sacred impulses, as another person might see him. It requires someone that he loves, truly and unselfishly, to take him outside himself to

the point of imaginative engagement with himself, in a kind of ironic reversal of the way in which he perceives women. What he finds is not very comforting:

> Lucy's intuition is right, after all: he does understand; he can, if he concentrates, if he loses himself, be there, be the men, inhabit them, fill them with the ghost of himself. The question is, does he have it in him to be the woman? (160)

From this point on, Lurie's musings about the opera begin to settle on Teresa, the abandoned lover, instead of Byron, the inflamed adulterer. "Can he find it in his heart to love this plain, ordinary woman?" he thinks, "Can he love her enough to write a music for her? If he cannot, what is left of him?" (182). It becomes apparent that "purloined songs will not be good enough" (183). The opera, that was first conceived "as a chamber-play about love and death, with a passionate young woman and a once passionate but now less than passionate older man" (180), has become a test of Lurie's ability to enter into the signifying reality of another being, a woman, to "fill [her] with the ghost of himself". To do this, he must "love" her, and without this ability he is nothing. Instead of pursuing the last great flaring up of the "candle-flame" (22), the last throes of ecstatic bliss, which would end in his being "burnt up" (166), he must keep the fire in him going at a rate that can generate enough warmth to animate the middle-aged Teresa. Instead of inhabiting the woman in a essential, ecstatic sense, Lurie must try to use the coordinates of her life to reconstruct her experience. Thus he is tasked with constructing a representation that will convince the reader of Teresa's embeddedness in her own reality. The completed work will not grant access to Lurie's inner being, in the sense of supplying the listener with biographical details of his psyche; nor will it provide Lurie with the intensity of emotion that premises itself on the possibility of essential identification. It will, however, give both the means of experiencing the subjective reality that comes into being through the discourse of embedded representation – the displaced authenticity that has the potential to reinscribe itself in the subjective representation that constitutes a personal experience of the world.

Lurie's passion is still a "moderate" passion, but the direction of the passion has changed. Lurie has ceased listening to the romantic imperative of ecstatic fulfilment,

and begun to listen to his heart. In this sense, he has begun to attune himself more closely to reality of his situation, a process that began when he attempted to imagine the actuality of another being's experience. He is still confined to his own mental space, and the terms in which he conceives of what he is doing are still, broadly speaking, the terms used by the old David Lurie, but he has begun to realize that there is something else at stake, something more than a perpetuation of his convoluted self-image:

> Six months ago he had thought his own ghostly place in *Byron in Italy* would be somewhere between Teresa's and Byron's: between a yearning to prolong the summer of the passionate body and a reluctant recall from the long sleep of oblivion. But he was wrong. It is not the erotic that is calling to him after all, nor the elegiac, but the comic. He is in the opera neither as Teresa nor as Byron nor even as some blending of the two: he is held in the music itself, in the flat, tinny slap of the banjo strings, the voice that strains to soar away from the ludicrous instrument but is continually reined back, like a fish on a line. (184)

Here, for the first time, one begins to read the direction in which Lurie is being carried. At the beginning of the narrative, Lurie conceives of himself as an ageing servant of Eros, an aficionado of “the passionate body”, a hopeless romantic with a sensibility cast in stone. As his quota of bliss begins to run out, as the candle burns shorter, he focuses his will on a final encounter with erotic ecstasy. Beyond that, there is nothing. He contemplates castration (9). He is too old to evade oblivion by immersing himself in passion and too young to escape passion by confronting oblivion; too old lose himself in the living, breathing world and too young to lose himself in the celestial heights of the abstract idea. He is “somewhere between” Teresa and Byron: he tries to mould himself in the trappings of long-dead personas, in the eroticism of an age gone past.

Now he knows, unequivocally, that “he was wrong”. His understanding of the erotic impulse derived from the abstraction of romantic theory. Wordsworth's “sense-image” (22) constituted a representative trope to which he attached the exigencies of his sensory existence. Up to this point, Lurie fails to contrive for himself a method of

formulating his own actualized "sense-image", which would consist of a synthesis between the formally held idea and the input from his physical, time-bound experience. He had been looking at the "erotic" and the "elegiac" as a kind of binary opposition, like the two ends of a stick on which he was trying to pinpoint his own position. In the context of the dynamic I have been trying to describe, this is equivalent to seeing the world as a diametric opposition between the potential and the actual, the unformed and the fixed, Eros and Thanatos, idea and representation. All of a sudden, in the midst of this tug-of-war, Lurie realizes that his reality comes into being through "the music itself". It is at this point that he comes to terms with the notion of embeddedness as the locus of subjective experience, and consequently with reality as a product of the materiality of discursive representation. Specifically, in this case, the music, the discourse in which he is "held", is characterized by "the comic".

What is this "comic"? What realities can be approached through this word, "comic"? What are the implications for Lurie of articulating himself, finding himself, embedding his self, in a mode that is circumscribed by the comical? At its most basic level, as I understand it, the comic has a certain kind of striking power. It elicits a particularly complex and pointed response. This response is characterized by surprise, by a certain startled attention that has the ability to stop the onlooker in his tracks and, for a moment, forget himself. The reason for the sudden stab of surprise is the way in which the comic recontextualizes the normal. It takes the everyday as its subject matter and reorganizes it in a distinctly alien environment. The observer regards the elements of the comic as a man with amnesia might puzzle over the contents of his desk-drawer, trying to discern its purpose. An object appears strangely meaningful because it has been plucked from its regular environment, its mundane purpose, and arranged alongside more of these objects. The purpose of the arrangement has to be obscure for the comic to come into play; the onlooker is lured into the dynamic by trying to ascertain the basis of the connection between the seemingly disparate elements. This necessitates an appraisal of the object and its particularity, its history, its colour and its voice, but also of its potential, specifically its potential for interaction with other objects. At this level, the level of interaction, the onlooker must draw on his own imaginative resources.

The agent of the comical, in Luries's case, is the banjo, the “flat, tinny slap of the banjo strings”. He feels the tug of the lyrical impulse, the call of extraterrestrial beauty, but he finds himself tied to the mundanity of the unprepossessing banjo. Surprisingly, however, it is the banjo that begins to give body to the impulse in his head and in his heart. Thus the banjo becomes imbued with a sort of potency by virtue of its connection with the lyrical drive, the will to lyricism, that is Lurie's purpose, and the lyrical becomes accessible through its embeddedness in the earthly, the mundane, the “plink-plonk of the toy banjo”. It is in this revelation of sorts, the fact of the lyrical expressing itself through the mundane and the mundane finding purpose through the lyrical, that the comic lies. For Lurie, it is completely unexpected; the compatibility of Teresa's poignant longing with the banjo's vulgarity takes him by “surprise” (184): “So this is art, he thinks, and this is how it does work! How strange! How fascinating!” (185)

Lurie's discovery of the “comic” as a relation between the mundane, the sensory objects of the contingent everyday, with the profound, the imperative of undisclosed longing, recalls the romantic ideal of merging the particular with the absolute. Schiller, theorizer of German romanticism, coins the “play impulse” as the dynamic which must accommodate these seemingly irreconcilable forces, the “sense impulse” and the “form impulse” (74). It is perhaps best to explain this rather abstract notion through reference to what it does. Thus Schiller explains the effect of a work of art that has been conceived and executed in the spirit of the play impulse:

> Irresistibly seized and attracted by the one quality, and held at a distance by the other, we find ourselves at the same time in the condition of utter rest and extreme movement, and the result is that wonderful emotion for which reason has no conception and language no name. (81)

Here we have an explicit muted reference to something that cannot be expressed, something that must be apprehended by the onlooker without the benefit of explication, if he is to have it at all. Lurie, who has invested much of his time in the study of aesthetic illumination, whose ideas on beauty, value and the erotic have been formed to the point of rigidity, seems now to experience for the first time an affinity between his ideas and the actual. The stylized aesthetic, the opera as it was first

conceived, has been broken into and impregnated by the force of the real. The new opera does not strike one as a likely candidate for profitable success, but it is vital because it engages the heart and mind of its creator. The realities of life, the presence of imagined other lives (channelled through the experience of his daughter), the tin-like palpability of the banjo, have found their way into his solitary tryst with the eternal to produce a plangent and acute sense of actuality, of living, of being.

This process is comparable with the romantic project, as De Man conceives of it, of understanding the "precariousness" of the isolated subject through the "mediation of poetic language" (53). "Understanding", in this context, does not seem to imply reduction to a system; rather, it is a sort of cogent activity that keeps alive the possibility of subjective authenticity by inscribing it into a representation. Specifically, the type of representation in question synthesizes the impulse of desire and the sensory image through the materiality of language. The text takes its theoretical material from the historical tradition of romanticism and the geographical setting of South Africa; it uses these contexts as the bedding for a narrative that is characterized by a quest for intersubjective identification. The desire for authentic expression gains the ability to interact with similar representations. The process of rearrangement, described above as a characteristic of the comic, but perhaps equally identifiable as an aspect of irony, thus becomes possible by virtue of the materiality granted to subjective yearning by virtue of its embeddedness in language.

On the surface Lurie has been transformed into a caricature of his former self. His well-ordered life of "moderated bliss" (6) has descended into poverty and ridicule. At the end of the book, he sees himself (he imagines himself being seen) as "a mad old man who sits among the dogs singing to himself" (212). His capacity for expression of his inner self is, if anything, more stunted than at the beginning of the book, when he finds it so hard to justify himself before the commission. There is still the problem of implicating the self and its yearning in the transactions of the public world: "How can he ever explain... what Teresa and her lover have done to deserve being brought back into the world?" (212) However, the actual content of his isolated self, the thing that he wants to express, has changed. He has entered into imaginative contact with a world that gives him a sense of the value of life. This value, the sense of awe at his own realizations, cannot be forced onto the world:

> His hopes must be more temperate: that somewhere from amidst the welter of sound there will dart up, like a bird, a single authentic note of immortal longing. As for recognizing it, he will leave that to the scholars of the future, if there are still scholars by then. For he will not hear the note himself, when it comes, if it comes – he knows too much about art and the ways of art to expect that. (214)

A revealing aspect of this passage is its tone, its tranquil acquiescence to the fact that one cannot control one's legacy. Lurie cannot force the world to acknowledge his worth. There is also a subtle resentment toward the sedative effect of aesthetic schooling on the artistic sensibility: Lurie cannot discern the lyrical note, because he "*knows* too much about art". Allegiance to factual standards, it seems, quenches the potency of imaginative identification. Lurie's yearning has become more acute; so has his concept of limitation, his knowledge of the boundaries of expression. The beauty of this lies in the startling realization that Lurie has become clearer, stronger in outline, as he has fallen deeper into the yearning of his soul.

In the opening pages, Lurie existed in a state of "moderate bliss" (6), which strikes the reader as a contradiction in terms, but which nevertheless gives an indication of the way in which Lurie attempted to organize his idea of the erotic – as a brief, regulated flaring up of the flame of passion. This occurs specifically during intercourse with Soraya; it is premised on the imaginary notion of identification between them. Now the bliss has been replaced by hope, and moderation has taken on a new guise: the less fastidious (but more gentle) "temperate". Hope indicates the relinquishing of false identification that characterized Lurie's experience of bliss and points to the inscription of authentic longing in embedded discourse, with the full realization that it is only at the point of discourse that authenticity will become manifest, as a result of the relation between the material elements of the representation. Lurie has come to realize that authenticity is not an aspect of his individual being. Rather, it depends on the methods of reading that will be employed by the "scholars of the future". Thus the process of reading becomes a necessary component of the experience of authenticity. Embedded representation comes to life once the reader brings his own representation of reality to the discursive relations of the text.

Starting with the awareness of the comic as a suitable mode of representation, therefore, Lurie is led to an awareness of the necessity of representation as a means of communicating the actuality of subjective experience. The urgency of desire has to be reinscribed in a symbolic structure of interpretation, or, according to Wordsworth, "recollected in tranquillity" (33). This does not imply a direct transmission of personal desire. Instead, it creates a system of representation that can be accessed by a reader, "the scholars of the future" (214). The interpenetration of Lurie's represented desire with the reader's own subjective constellation of representations creates a space for the emotion to "exist in the mind" (Wordsworth 33) once again. Thus the original impulse recreates for itself temporal urgency through the medium of representation.

At the beginning of the book, Lurie imagines himself being shuddered over by the prostitutes (8). Much later, after his return to Cape Town, he imagines Rosalind, his ex-wife, shuddering over his "misshapen ear" (187) which had been set alight by the rapists. Between these two experiences is the question Lurie asks himself at the animal clinic, when a dog tries to make friends with him, tries to express affection: "Why should a creature with the shadow of death upon it feel him flinch away as if its touch were abhorrent?" (143) At the end of the novel, Lurie has to lead the last dog to his death, the cripple dog "who likes music" (219). "The dog wags its crippled rear, sniffs his face, licks his cheeks, his lips, his ears. He does nothing to stop it" (219). These scenes, which bear traces of the same ghostly ideas (bodily decline, yearning, affection, death), are interlaced through the novel in a way that lies just this side of obvious significance. They appear strangely meaningful. Thus one would like to say that Lurie has entered into the imaginative space that he once ascribed to the prostitute, the one who must deal with the needs of those with the mark of death upon them, the elderly and the emotionally crippled; but this would not be entirely true. It is a meaning I have created by arranging the elements of the book in a pattern that has no legitimacy outside my own imagination. I am doing the work of the reader by creating a system of representations to interact with the fictional representation that is the book.

However, as such, it contains an element of truth. It strives in the direction of truth in a way that echoes the romantic ideal of unification[13]. Compare a moment in the passage in which Lurie is trying to captivate Melanie Isaacs by showing her a film of dancers on a stage:

> Recorded by stroboscopic camera, their images, ghosts of their movements, fan out behind them like wingbeats. It is a film he first saw a quarter of a century ago but is still captivated by: the instant of the present and the past of that instant, evanescent, caught in the same space. (15)

Instead of capturing the truth, the person in his finality, this passage seems to suggest a continuous action, a moment that holds the shadows of truth that have passed through it up to that instant. This is a process, an ongoing activity, a moment that passes over to the next moment, becomes the ghost of a new moment before it can be grasped. Effective representation has the ability to transplant the temporal instant, containing the shadows of all the instants that preceded it, into the mind of the reader. The reader, by perusing the materiality of the novel, the resonance of its significations, opens himself to its ghost; he also goes into the ghost and becomes a part of what it is. The representation, therefore, effects a perpetuation of the force that constitutes the authentic desire of the subject.[14]

Lurie's preoccupation with the perfective throughout the book seems to reflect this idea. "The perfective, signifying an action carried through to its conclusion" (71), he ruminates at one point. At the beginning of the novel, he is living in "a moderate bliss, a moderated bliss" (6): he is a man in the concluding stages of his life; he does

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13 Writing about the reason for his admiration of an early poem by Wordsworth, Coleridge states that what impressed him was "the union of deep feeling with profound thought; the fine balance of truth in observing with the imaginative faculty in modifying the objects observed; and above all the original gift of spreading the tone, the *atmosphere*, and with it the depth and height of the ideal world around forms, incidents and situations" (80). The notion of "modifying the objects observed", which is a result of applying the "imaginative faculty", seems to reflect the work of the reader with regard to the elements of the representation as I conceive of it in this dissertation.

14 Walter Benjamin, in an essay on translation, speaks of the "life" and "afterlife" of a work of art. The "afterlife" (of which translation is an agent, but not a cause) denotes the "ever-renewed... flowering" (72) of a work of art in consecutive epochs of history. "All purposeful manifestations of life, including their very purposiveness, in the final analysis have their end not in life, but in the expression of its nature, *in the representation of its significance*" (73, my italics). In the context of this thesis, this might be construed as an indication of the way in which representation becomes the vessel for an expression of authentic being without constituting the limit or totality of that being.

not partake of "the instant of the present". However, his final words, after the shifts caused by the trauma of imaginative identification, hint at a reconciliation with the present, with the notion of living in the truth of the moment: "I am giving him up" (220). Thus the present continuous replaces the perfective as Lurie's mode of being. Furthermore, the action signified by the present continuous in this case is an act of giving up, of releasing, of relinquishing control. Instead of trying to hold on to the truth, instead of trying to formalize it and hold within himself that which he values, a condition which causes him much strain at the outset of his banishment, he lets it go; he submits the truth of his experience to the unpredictable effects of representation. The banjo speaks, so he lets it speak; Teresa moans, so he lets her moan; he loves the crippled dog, so he lets him go.

Lurie may not have "listened" to the poets "well" (179), but his author has revitalized the romantic conception of truth by embedding the conceptual material in a narrative that performs the mediation of subjective reality through poetic language (poetic in scope, if not in form). The reader is not without sympathy for Lurie, who finds himself in a world that is hostile to his sensibilities, because the reader has been forced to invoke his own imaginative capabilities to create a sense of truth in the book, in a process that reflects Lurie's own development. The dilemma is not solved. On the contrary, it carries on relentlessly, but through the articulation of Lurie's plight Coetzee provides the reader with an intimation that he is pursuing the same problem, namely that of trying to find words that will convince the reader of their truth: the ghost of truth that flits through the moment without being captured, the truth that emerges as a resonance of the relation between signifiers that make up the text.

The reader and the writer (the writer that exists in the imagination of the reader, it should be added) find themselves on the same path. This path serves the purpose of establishing a common destination. The original impulse has been re-interpreted through a constructed representation, which allows for the *conditions* of the original experience to transmit into the reader's frame of reference and thus recreates the potential for a contemporary subjective experience. Contemporary in this case distinctly does not mean essential similarity – it is not a carbon copy of the original impulse that transplants itself into the mind of the reader. Rather, the layers of discourse embedded in the representation, which are the layers of subjective

consciousness, provide the reader with a structure of elements that facilitates his own experience of "precariousness", of estrangement from what is in this context called "an earth, the stability of which it cannot participate in, and... a heaven that has rejected it" (De Man 53), and which is roughly equivalent to the desire for authentic being that finds itself stranded in its place of birth, poetic language.

CHAPTER 3

THE CLASSIC AND THE ACTUALIZATION OF THE SUBJECT

In 2001 an eclectic collection of essays from the pen of J.M. Coetzee appeared under the title *Stranger Shores*. The first essay, "What Is a Classic? A Lecture" is an attempt by the author to articulate his position concerning the classic in art. The printed essay has not been purged of the rhetorical superfluities that characterize the spoken lecture. Oral devices, like "I say..." (2), "I would suspect...", "So one can see..." (3), "Of course..." (5) and "I would like..." (9), along with a reference to the audience ("a road that would culminate...with me on a platform in Europe addressing a cosmopolitan audience on Bach, T.S. Eliot and the question of the classic", 11) indicate, in a thorough craftsman like Coetzee, the intention of retaining the specifity of the original delivery. The essay itself uses a lecture by T.S. Eliot to construct an opposition between two modes of understanding the classic: one regards it as a manifestation of a larger-than-life artistic truth, based on a tradition that has little to do with political reality; the other sees it as a servant of a particular social and historical purpose. The self-reflexivity of this gesture, the way in which the structure of the essay complements the subject matter, and vice versa, indicates a particular sensitivity to the way in which the historical context and the actual linguistic performance (written or spoken) influence each other.

Once he has set up this opposition (the "transcendental-poetic" and the "socio-cultural", 9), he calls on an autobiographical figure as a method for further investigation, namely the moment of his first contact with that which is supposed to be classic: the fifteen-year-old Coetzee is seduced by the music of Bach drifting into his backyard (9). Furthermore, he admits to using "Eliot the provincial as a pattern and figure of myself" (10), thereby conceding the personal nature of the problematic he is describing. Thus it appears that Coetzee is adopting the autobiographical subject as the space in which the "transcendental-poetic" and the "socio-cultural" battle it out. On the other hand – it is a matter of precedence – he might be adopting the

philosophical domain characterized by an antagonism between the "aesthetic" and the "material" (11) as the area in which this specific subject, namely Coetzee, expresses himself. This is certainly a seductive and fertile, not to say classic, prospect: the notion of the human subject as a being that exists simultaneously in the godlike realm of form and in the animal world of competitive materialism, and the articulation of self as an attempt to merge these opposing forces. It is a notion that echoes the romantic imperative discussed in the previous chapter.

Coetzee's ambiguous verdict at the end of the essay is that the classic is that which survives the onslaught of what Zbigniew Herbert calls "barbarism" (19). The classic is not something with an inherent, transcendent, magical quality that raises it above materialism, but rather the product of the conflict between art and materialism (or art and criticism) – that which is not subsumed, in the end, by the political realities of history. In a characteristic turn, however, Coetzee finishes his essay by giving the reins back to history: "Criticism may in that sense be one of the instruments of the cunning of history" (19), thereby suggesting that even the classic, after all, might be a device of history, instead of standing in opposition to it. In the light of the subjective method described above, this seems to say something about the subject and its relation to materialism, specifically about the way in which the subject interrogates itself to ascertain what is of value, and what is not. To put it bluntly, that which the writer would like to erect as a standard of his independent value might be no more than a disguised method for advertising his work, as Coetzee seems to suggest about Eliot. The classic in this case becomes a position taken up by the author instead of an authentic aspect of his work. It is against this background that I will investigate one of Coetzee's forays into the world of classical appropriation, namely *The Master of Petersburg*.

The title character, as it turns out, is none other than Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, in life the author of numerous novels that may be named classic without awaking controversy. Of these, *Crime and Punishment* (1865-66), *The Idiot* (1869), *The Devils* (1871) and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) are probably the most famous; the historical setting of *The Master of Petersburg* coincides with the events that shaped *The Devils*. Coetzee traces the movements of the fictional Dostoevsky from his arrival in Petersburg, after the news of his stepson Pavel Alexandrovich

Isaev's death, through a series of crises that might have been lifted from a novel by Dostoevsky himself, up to the moment when he turns the turmoil of his circumstances into draft material for a new book.

These events are certainly not lifted directly from the vaults of historical fact. There was a conspiracy in Petersburg, organized by a young anarchist called Nechaev, and the members of the conspiracy did apparently murder one of their own, a student called Ivanov, because he refused to carry out orders (Magarshack x); Dostoevsky happened upon these circumstances when he had already published the first part of the *The Devils*, and worked it into his book (xii); but the death of Pavel and his implication in the student uprisings in *The Master of Petersburg* is an entirely fictional creation (Frank, *The Rebel* 53). So is the meeting between Dostoevsky and Nechaev. In fact, Dostoevsky did not return to Russia until 1871 (Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years* 413), more than a year after the "Nechaev-affair" (396). The entire clandestine visit to Petersburg has been made up.

The central dynamic of Coetzee's novel is Dostoevsky's struggle to come to terms with the death of his stepson. The dramatization of this struggle, which carries the stepfather to the utmost depths of bereavement, megalomania and intemperate behaviour, can also be read as an analogy for the processes and compromises of creating art. It is this process, which is simultaneously one of appropriating and letting go, that gives the reader an opening through which to explore the relationship between the classic, broadly understood as the tradition of literary value, and the actual, which in this context denotes the usurpation of political reality upon the individual subject[15]. It is significant to note that all the action of the analogy is focalized through the experience of a single subject, a fictional version of a classic author – one who has been tasked, in this case, with the work of transmutation (the term is Eliot's) that changes reality into art. As with *Disgrace* in the previous chapter,

15 Mike Marais notes about *The Master of Petersburg* "its thematization of the inevitable implication of literature in the relations of power which determine the social context in which it is produced"; however, he also describes "the desire which they evince to become a more human literature by transcending the stultifying politics of their social context" (83). Ultimately, Marais argues, the fictional Dostoevsky fails to escape these "stultifying politics" and indeed "endorses those very hegemonic strategies which caused his son's death" (93). The novel itself, despite the fact that it "generate[s] 'intimations' of an alternative to the *status quo*" (94), is "coloured by a "bleak pessimism" (93). My argument in this chapter does not see the invasion of the subject by the necessity of history in quite such a negative light.

the representation of consciousness in *The Master of Petersburg* already performs that which its central character strives to achieve, namely inscription into a unified textual structure of the plethora of demands that is made upon its subjective integrity. On this level, the level of integrity, the notion of the classic meets with the notion of the autobiographical, because both can be read as a figure of authenticity that emerges from the motion of textual interrelation. Integrity is equated with authenticity in the sense of subjective cohesion, accountability and resistance to reduction.

Structurally, *The Master of Petersburg* is something of an emotional maze, in which the reader recognizes from time to time a place in which he has been before, but often finds himself as lost as the main character, Dostoevsky. Or, to put it differently, the narrative is less like an ordered sequence of events and more like a cluster of spatially defined situations through which the beleaguered protagonist moves with feverish intensity. This dream-like quality is enhanced by the obscurity of motive behind the characters whom he encounters on his Orphean mission: the asexual ambiguity of Nechaev, who first appears in the guise of a woman (94); Ivanov, who is at once an object of charity and a spy (92); the innocent and provocative Matryona; Anna Sergeyevna, aloof and generous; and all of them figures through which Dostoevsky tries to reclaim Pavel, the most enigmatic presence of them all. Elsewhere, Coetzee has said, “Dostoevsky's novels are essentially scenic in construction, moving from one crisis to the next. Perhaps the same is true of his life” (“Joseph Frank” 147). *The Master of Petersburg* seems to follow this formula in both the thematic and the performative sense: thematically, in that the trajectory seems to lie on the path from personal tragedy through purgatory to action; performatively, in that the referentiality of the language does not seem to point to a fixed external symbolic, but rather echoes the fluctuations of a mind in turmoil as it passes from one setting to the next.

However, one should bear in mind that the very subjectivity of this experience has been constructed within a precise historical setting, namely that of Petersburg in 1869. That is to say, the actuality and the presence of the subject is discovered in a representation that has been built from the materiality of history[16]; but at the same

16 Sue Kossew has written about the intersection of fact and fiction in *The Master of Petersburg,* in an article that raises an awareness about the “problems in the writing process itself” (“The Anxiety of Authorship” 86). In the context of this thesis, which implicates the symbolic consciousness of the

time that history is only accessible through the actuality of the subjective experience. Dostoevsky immerses himself in the phenomena of his environment in order to find something – the true image of his stepson. However, it is not entirely clear (Dostoevsky has not yet figured out for himself) whether the truth of that image resides in the traces left by his son on his historical environment, or in the idea of his son that Dostoevsky carries within himself. In a certain sense, the novel can be read as a representation of relations between these vestiges of his son, the tangible and the impulsive, and Dostoevsky's attempt to articulate these relations in a way that satisfies his urge toward the truth about his son. The drive behind the subjective experience emerging from the representation thus appears to be a pursuit of authenticity, in the sense of the classic as well as the personal.

It is at this point that the situation of Pavel becomes an interesting figure for the collapse of the past into the present linguistic instant. Pavel is Dostoevsky's stepson. At a certain stage in the past, he has, if the reader will excuse such a blatant intellectualization of the drama, been appropriated as filial property by Dostoevsky. In other words, the lineage established between them is not sanctioned by the authority of blood, it is not automatically inherent in their relationship in a natural sense, but nevertheless it is a lineage in which Dostoevsky vests himself. The usurpation contained in this motion is enhanced when Dostoevsky travels to Petersburg under the name of Isaev, Pavel's real father. When Pavel dies, Dostoevsky finds himself cut loose from the temporal regularity of the lineage he has posited for himself:

> [H]e has been tugged out of human time. The stream that carries him still moves forward, still has direction, even purpose; but that purpose is no longer life. He is being carried by dead water, a dead stream. (20)

The conventional figure of water as a symbol for time has been called up, but it is no longer the fluid image of a running stream that informs the metaphor; rather, it is the

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reader as the space where the text comes to fruition – that is to say, which posits the interpenetration between the authorial representation that is the text and the reader's own representational framework as a dynamic space where isolated yearning finds its voice – it is interesting to note that Kossew concludes her article with the assertion that what is "[at] stake in this complex inter/textuality is not just the writing process but also the reading process, not just the writer but also the reader, who stands in as confessor, thus sharing some of the responsibility" (86).

static aspect of "dead water", like a frozen instant that goes on without changing. The eddies and cross-currents that determine the course of everyday life have been left behind. The subject now finds himself adrift in a different kind of stream, which still has, in a metaphorical sense, the dimensional properties of regular time ("direction"), but which is also somehow beyond that time. In a sense, he has sunk through the superficial manifestations of time, in its socio-historical sense, and reached a point where time has the character of a sluggish, encompassing mass. If time had depth, one would be able to say that Dostoevsky has now sunk to the bottom of it. Or, to redirect the image toward the classic, one might say that he has fallen into a subterranean river flowing through a cavernous space; lined up against the wall are Eliot's traditional monuments of art (*Tradition and the Individual Talent* 15), petrified and aloof, like sarcophagi.

When Eliot says,

> Th[e] historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity. (14)

what exactly does he mean? Specifically, what is the "timeless" and what is the "temporal", and in what sense is it possible for these entities to figure simultaneously? The "timeless" seems to be a name for the "ideal order" (15) of traditional artistic works, which Eliot sees as "complete" (15) in itself – something which is impervious to the intrusion of history. Temporality, on the other hand, seems to indicate an awareness of historical progress. It recognizes the fact that one's perception of events and phenomena is always, in some sense, exposed to the spirit of the times, however contingently that spirit might come into existence. The problem then would be to describe a discursive space in which both the "timeless" and the "temporal" have taken up residence, in order to gain a sense of their "contemporaneity". However, this leaves one with a hermeneutically circular problem of sorts – the only way to access the "existing order" (15) is by appropriating it, and any appropriation of it (according to Eliot) modifies the order itself. It seems impossible to grasp the essence of what constitutes the classic. Hence the struggle of coming to grips with the classic is

perhaps the most reliable indication of what the classic is all about – the representation of classical appropriation constitutes the actual motion of appropriation itself.

The image of water in *The Master of Petersburg* figures, in my reading, as a metaphor for this problematic of classical appropriation. It symbolizes the qualities of time, as mentioned above, but it also figures as an embodiment of the struggles of appropriation, a fleshing out of the motion of representation that constitutes the discursive space in which the "timeless" and the "temporal" come together in a relational sense. It is a remarkably complex image, and one which it is difficult to comprehend, precisely because it is a symbol for the discursive motion of appropriation while at the same time constituting the materiality of the motion itself. It represents the inescapability of symbolic mediation as the fabric of subjective experience – articulation as coming into being, rather than articulation as an elaboration of existing states. It is in this sense, when Dostoevsky attempts to articulate a syllable, that the water replaces the syllable he attempts to speak:

> During the night a dream comes to him. He is swimming underwater. The light is blue and dim. He banks and glides easily, gracefully; his hat seems to have gone, but in his black suit he feels like a turtle, a great old turtle in its natural element. Above him there is a ripple of movement, but here at the bottom the water is still. He swims through patches of weed; slack fingers of watergrass brush his fins, if that is what they are.
> He knows what he is in search of. As he swims he sometimes opens his mouth and gives what he thinks of as a cry or call. With each cry or call water enters his mouth; each syllable is replaced by a syllable of water. He grows more and more ponderous, till his breastbone is brushing the silt of the river-bed.
> Pavel is lying on his back. His eyes are closed. His hair, wafted by the current, is as soft as a baby's.
> From his turtle-throat he gives a last cry, which seems to him more like a bark, and plunges toward the boy. He wants to kiss the face; but when he touches his hard lips to it, he is not sure he is not biting. (17)

One is struck by the extent to which Dostoevsky (Dostoevsky the amphibian) feels at home in the medium: it is his “natural element”. His “hat seems to have gone”, but this indecorous state does not bother him; the trifles of everyday ritual do not belong in this submerged place. Presumably, as a writer of novels, Dostoevsky is accustomed to the dreamscape of imagination, the timeless realm of the classic. He knows his way around the depths where the routine passage of time does not penetrate. The “ripple of movement” belongs to the surface. Dostoevsky in his aquatic reptilian state feels entirely comfortable in the murky, sub-temporal deep; he even knows what he is doing there, what he is “in search of”.

However, the experiences of this place cannot be transmitted into a language of abstraction. It cannot be referred to in terms of something else, because it comes into being as a relation between the elements of the representation itself. When he tries to speak, “each syllable is replaced by a syllable of water”. The performance of classical appropriation swallows any attempt at a formulation of its dynamic. The notion of timelessness comes into being as a result of its embeddedness in the medium of representation – the image of Dostoevsky sinking through the water – and as such it is already subjected to the imperative of temporality. Hence the timeless realm of the classic, of which the submerged depth seems to be an intimation, cannot actualize in any pure sense – it is unthinkable beyond the scope of dreams, even though it appears to be the place where the stuff of art is born[17].

The imagery seems to suggest the necessity of linear time for the praxis of language, and indeed language cannot exist outside of time, but there is something else at stake here, namely the penetration of the subject, Dostoevsky, by the medium of water. The water fills him, makes him “ponderous”, slows him down, brings him closer to the brink of stasis, and there he finds his stepson. The paradox of classical appropriation – the paradox of the representation, the fact that the motion of relation between the elements of the representation constitutes the experience of appropriation – now comprises the medium of the classic, and that is why Dostoevsky finds access to his

17 Julia Kristeva has attempted to formulate this pre-symbolic condition in terms of what she calls the “*chora*”: “a non-expressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated” (93) This “non-expressive totality” is equivalent, in my reading of *The Master of Petersburg*, to Dostoevsky's submersion. To my mind, the fact that the submersion occurs during a dream explicitly connects it to the psychoanalytic theories of the unconscious in which Kristeva bases her theories.

adopted lineage in this submerged realm. Once he finds his stepson, however, he becomes aware of an ambiguity of emotion towards him. He professes love, he wants to "kiss" him, but it seems like a very hard-edged, selfish kind of love. Indeed, his "last cry", which is more like a "bark", gives the impression that he wants to chase Pavel away, like a surly dog patrolling his territory.

Implicit in my argument here is that Pavel figures as a personification of the classic and that Dostoevsky's search for Pavel figures as a representation of the author's search for authenticity. It is perhaps pertinent to note here that I employ the notion of the classic in a comprehensive sense, that is to say, in a sense that incorporates both the "socio-historical" and the "transcendental poetic" ("What Is a Classic?" 9), as well as the notion of the classic as something that can only come to life in the mediated consciousness of the subject. In order to explain precisely what I mean here, it is necessary to take a few steps back, and consider the dynamics of Coetzee's writing. As I have already stated, Coetzee departs from Eliot by explicitly (but not unambiguously) adopting the mediated experience of personal consciousness as the discursive space in which the "timeless" and the "temporal" (which I equate here with the "transcendental-poetic" and the "socio-cultural") find simultaneous existence. Coetzee acknowledges the validity of Eliot's argument, but at the same time reads in him a personal ambition to claim European heritage, and hence to posit himself as an inheritor of the literary tradition of the classic. In *The Master of Petersburg*, one sees a parallel, self-conscious and rather daring attempt by Coetzee to appropriate not so much the work of a classic author, as the conditions of consciousness that allowed for the production of that work.

At the same time, however, the conditions of consciousness belong to the subjective experience of the author himself, namely Coetzee. The representation of classical appropriation, which, as I have argued, is the experience of appropriation itself, thus becomes a figure of subjective consciousness in a contemporary sense. So far, in the course of this thesis, I have also argued that Coetzee's writing is characterized by a drive toward authenticity – that authenticity of expression constitutes the desire of subjective consciousness as it becomes manifest in a reading of Coetzee's work. Now, if one reads *The Master of Petersburg* as an instance of classical appropriation – a representation of what it means, in the fullest sense, to appropriate the classic – it

becomes possible to conceive of Dostoevsky's pursuit of Pavel as a figure of this dynamic. Dostoevsky pursues Pavel in the same spirit as Coetzee pursues Dostoevsky, namely as an attempt to posit for himself a lineage of authenticity, a composition of textual relations that resonate with the compulsion toward authenticity as that which constitutes the fabric of authenticity itself. As Coetzee rewrites the concept of what authenticity in the classic sense constitutes, so Dostoevsky rewrites the truth about his stepson in the course of appropriating him. Pavel is thus not a personification of the classic in a static sense; rather, he becomes a figure for the dynamic of appropriation of the classic. He is a tangible constituent of the directedness toward authenticity that initiates the motion of representation, which in this specific scenario benefits from a comparison with the classic.

At this point it becomes relevant to take a closer look at the symbolic significations of the relationship between Dostoevsky and Pavel. I do so in relation to an extensive passage from the book. In it, Dostoevsky contemplates whether he should answer the call of a dog in the night, even if his real desire is to answer Pavel's call:

> The dog howls again. No hint of empty plains and silver light: a dog, not a wolf; a dog, not his son. Therefore? Therefore he must throw off this lethargy! *Because* it is not his son he must not go back to bed but must get dressed and answer the call. If he expects his son to come as a thief in the night, and listens only for the call of the thief, he will never see him. If he expects his son to speak in the voice of the unexpected, he will never hear him. As long as he expects what he does not expect, what he does not expect will not come. Therefore – paradox within paradox, darkness swaddled in darkness – he must answer to what he does not expect.
>
> From the third floor it had seemed easy to find the dog. But when he reaches street level he is confused. Does the crying come from left or from right, from one of the buildings across the street or from behind the buildings or perhaps from a courtyard within one of the buildings? And which building? And what of the cries themselves, which now seem to be not only shorter and lower but of a different timbre altogether – almost not the same cries, in fact?

> He searches back and forth before he finds the alley used by the nightsoil carriers. In a branch of this alley he at last comes upon the dog. It is tethered to a drainpipe by a slim chain; the chain has become wrapped around a foreleg, jerking the leg up awkwardly whenever it tightens. At his approach the dog retreats as far as it can, whining. It flattens its ears, prostrates itself, rolls on its back. A bitch. He bends over it, unwinds the chain. Dogs smell fear, but even in the cold he can smell this dog's rank terror. He tickles it behind the ear. Still on its back, it timidly licks his wrist.
>
> Is this what I will be doing for the rest of my days, he wonders: peering into the eyes of dogs and beggars?
>
> The dog gives a heave and is on its feet. Though he is not fond of dogs, he does not draw back from this one but crouches as its warm, wet tongue licks his face, his ears, licks the salt from his beard.
>
> He gives it a last stroke and gets up. In the moonlight he cannot make out his watchface. The dog tugs at its chain, whining, eager. Who would chain a dog outdoors on a night like this? Nevertheless, he does not set it loose. Instead he turns abruptly and departs, pursued by forlorn howls. (80)

In this extract, as in the rest of the novel, Dostoevsky struggles to discern the voice of his stepson. It becomes apparent that each person, each object, each thing, the white suit, Matryona, Nechaev, and finally the voice of a dog howling in the night, is potentially a message from Pavel. Dostoevsky cannot leave Petersburg, which figures as a sort of spatial twilight zone of the subject, before he has received some indication of approval from the dead youth he carries around inside him. This youth, Pavel, has been an authentic living presence in the midst of the environment Dostoevsky purports to write about, specifically the political environment of the rebellious student movement in Petersburg, but in a more general sense, Russia itself. Pavel used to be inside the routine of everyday motion, the tick-tock of the clock in the living room, but after he broke the surface of the water and sank to the bottom of the river, he became an ephemeral weight in Dostoevsky's mind. It appears that the dead Pavel, who has become a figure for the directiveness of subjective experience, a part of its conscience, is closer to Dostoevsky than the living Pavel, the adopted Pavel, ever was.

Dostoevsky is searching for the evidence of Pavel's embeddedness in historical reality. In the interest of this pursuit, he enters various situations, some of which are unpleasant, like the meetings with Nechaev and his crowd, and sometimes less unpleasant, like the erotic encounters with Anna Sergeyevna. What these encounters have in common, however, is that they forcefully penetrate the fabric of his consciousness and eventually usurp his original intentions. Instead of gaining a formal sense of Pavel's embeddedness in historical reality, he gains a sense of the dynamic of that embeddedness. What Dostoevsky appropriates, therefore, is not simply a silhouette of Pavel put together from the evidence of his embeddedness in historical reality, but rather the relational dynamic of the embeddedness, a sense of the effect of Pavel's historical embeddedness on the subjective consciousness. The difficulty of the novel resides in the fact that Dostoevsky cannot explain this to himself in terms outside the materiality of the representation. Instead, the relation of elements within his mediated experience, which is very much a personal experience, combines to form the materials of a new representation, the book he starts writing at the end of the novel. The process is conceivably analogous to the appropriation of classic material that precipitated the writing of *The Master of Petersburg*.

In the passage, descent is the motion which characterizes Dostoevsky's movement in search of Pavel's trace: he goes down from “the third floor”. This motion echoes the sinking that characterized his earlier submersion in water, but the relation of elements in the current representation has a character that is distinct from the previous passage. Notably, this time Dostoevsky is awake, and he does not find any trace of his son, does not expect to find his son. Instead, he expects to find (and finds) a dog: “No hint of empty plains and silver light: a dog, not a wolf; a dog, not his son.” A wolf crossing the plains in the silver light of the moon – this is the tenor of the image Dostoevsky would like to associate with the notion of Pavel, and by association with the redemptive power of authentic expression. Suffice to say that he used to have certain expectations about what he would find at the end of his search, but that these expectations are now being altered by an awareness of the contingent, the arbitrary manifestations of historical reality.

After a repetitive search, he finds the dog "tethered to a drainpipe". This image bears a trace of the notion of water that pervaded the previous passage, but in a way that is distinctly ironic – a drainpipe is the carrier of human effluence and not, as the previous passage would have it, the pure medium of classic representation. At least, Dostoevsky seems to have overcompensated for his lofty hopes of silver wolves in the moonlight by descending all the way to the dark underbelly of expectation. Along with the image of the "alley used by the nightsoil carriers", which is the tangible representation in this scenario from which the voice of Pavel is supposed to speak (or so Dostoevsky hopes), these factors contribute to the idea that Dostoevsky has all but abandoned his preconceived ideas about the specific symbolic material of the representation that would effect his redemption from loss by giving him an authentic sense of his son. He is now willing to immerse himself in base materials, so to speak. This gives the reader an intimation that for Dostoevsky, the spirit of what he seeks is still conceived of as something that transcends the materiality of the representation.

Another important similarity between the dog-passage and the passages concerning water is the recurring absence of temporality. In the first passage, "he has been tugged out of human time" (20); in the second passage, he "cannot make out his watchface" (80). In the context of the dialectic between the timeless and the temporal discussed previously, it would seem as if both these passages fall in the category of the timeless. However, the absence of temporality seems to emphasize the extent to which Dostoevsky still conceives of the material aspect of his pursuit as insignificant. He appears to be overconfident in his allegiance to the timeless, an allegiance which will not suffice because it fails to bring Pavel to life. It fails as a means for recreating the vitality that characterizes the classic, a vitality that requires, it would seem, the giving up of allegiance[18] in the service of the representation, in order that the conditions of subjective authenticity might find textual reality. Ultimately, the dog is for Dostoevsky a figure of suffering that might lead him to an authentic sense of Pavel. It is not granted historical reality in Dostoevsky's vision; for him it only functions as a possible doorway to Pavel.

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18 Compare Elizabeth Costello's rejection of belief in the service of writing. (200)

Dogs occur quite frequently in Coetzee's work. One thinks of the dog that lies on the other side of the gate in Elizabeth Costello's afterlife. This dog blocks her passage to the great beyond. She cannot leave the excessively literary environment in which she has existed all her life. To her, even the dog seems to be the product of cliché: “she does not trust the anagram GOD-DOG” (*Elizabeth Costello* 224). Similarly, Dostoevsky, who is also a writer and therefore a co-inhabitor of the literary world – the world that is built from words; the architecture of syntax – cannot find a route through the dog into the world beyond symbolic mediation. In a sense, the dog blocks his way; not through a deliberate act, but precisely because it does not act: it requires action from him, and he baulks at the prospect of engaging with the dog on its own terms. Perhaps the most famous (the most widely read) of Coetzee's novels is *Disgrace*, and it ends with a dog-scene that strongly reminds one of the scene in *The Master of Petersburg*: “The dog wags its crippled rear, sniffs his face, licks his cheeks, his lips, his ears. He does nothing to stop it” (*Disgrace* 219). Lurie, however, does not retreat from the action that is required of him. He engages with the dog on the most personal, the most ethically involved level: he gives it to death. In a sense, therefore, he takes the dog out of its literary environment and carries it into the realm where time regulates the course of life, where it does not exist as a subjective figuration, but determines the lot of the body with impersonal finality. Lurie acknowledges the historical reality, the temporality, of the dog in a way that Dostoevsky fails to do. It is not a coincidence that Lurie's “giving up” of the dog signals the end of the book, because literature, in the sense I have been describing here, comes to life as a relational dynamic between the temporal and the timeless, a notion which Lurie seems to have figured out for himself by the end of *Disgrace*, albeit in different terms from those which inform the current discussion.

Dostoevsky's fierce interrogation of Pavel's legacy culminates in the act of writing. Preceding this act, his thoughts are given, “Ultimately it will not be given him to bring the dead boy back to life. Ultimately, if he wants to meet him, he will have to meet him in death” (237). This realization is the point at which Dostoevsky concedes that the idea of “being faithful” (235) to Pavel has been a pretence all along. That is to say, Dostoevsky abandons the notion of allegiance to the standard of authenticity that he brought with him to Petersburg. The figure of Pavel to which Dostoevsky has clung by a sheer effort of will, informed by a type of nostalgia, cannot be

superimposed on historical reality. Bringing the “dead” back to life, adhering to a static notion of the classic, would be equivalent to a necromantic act: the image of Pavel stalking about the historical symbols of the representation would be as alive as a zombie, so to speak. However, it is the adherence to Pavel's pure image that brought Dostoevsky into contact with the materiality of his (Pavel's) historical embeddedness, and hence to the notion of embeddedness as the discursive space in which Dostoevsky can establish the reality of his yearning for Pavel. If he cannot access the pure image of Pavel, he can at least recreate the conditions of subjective reality from which emerges the authenticity of his allegiance to Pavel. Thus he inscribes the futility of his desire into the symbols of representation. That which is behind the subjectivity of this experience, the potency and the destination of his yearning for authenticity, remains obscure, like the figure that is in the room with the author:

> From the figure he feels nothing, nothing at all. Or rather, he feels around it a field of indifference tremendous in its force, like a cloak of darkness. Is that why he cannot find the name – not because the name is hidden but because the figure is indifferent to all names, all words, anything that might be said about it? (238)

When Dostoevsky eventually picks up the pen and starts writing, one is struck by the way in which the narrative employs the symbols of his consciousness in new combinations. The white suit, the late sleeping, the nihilism of youth, the perversion of sex, all these things have permeated Dostoevsky's consciousness, to a greater or lesser extent, since his arrival in Petersburg. Before he could actually write about it, it was necessary to betray his pursuit of “reformation” (81), which at first he thought would be found in an apprehension of the pure image of Pavel. This motion of betrayal echoes a passage in Eliot's *Tradition and the Individual Talent*:

> Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things. (21)

The betrayal of emotion, which in Dostoevsky's case is the betrayal of his nostalgic allegiance to the pure image of Pavel, and in the context of this chapter is an adherence to the timeless, "transcendental-poetic" (Coetzee, "What Is a Classic?" 9) notion of the classic, appears to be a necessary condition for the creation of art. However, just as the actual existence of emotion is a prerequisite for its betrayal, so the notion of the timeless as a trope of authenticity persists in the formulation of art that emerges from an interrogation of the classic. It emerges as the directiveness of the sense of yearning that resonates as a function of the materiality of the representation. When Dostoevsky leaves the written pages on the table for Matryosha to find, its projected impact upon her reveals something of the effect of this kind of representation on the reader: "It is an assault upon the innocence of the child" (249). Matryosha is one of the figures whence Dostoevsky attempted to find a trace of Pavel's historical embeddedness; now, as a result of his inscription of the dynamic of appropriation that concludes his search for Pavel, she will, in turn, be affected by Dostoevsky's subjective experience of yearning. Her "innocence", which can be read as an intimation of unmediated existence, will from the moment of her reading become infected by a notion of authenticity as something which cannot be attained. Dostoevsky's betrayed emotion re-enters the stream of historical time as a sense of absence in the symbolic consciousness of his reader.

At the end of the novel, one is left with the suggestion that Dostoevsky's betrayal of emotion, along with the betrayal of Pavel's legacy in the guise of the figures that populate his historical reality, the sublimation of everything into the creation of art, enables a sort of existential rebirth. The final words of the novel describe the taste of betrayal: "It tastes like gall." One is immediately struck by the brashness of this ending. It is a blatant statement of fact. It does not point in any way to a notion of authenticity. Instead, it reads like a discovery. Dostoevsky has become a blank slate that is susceptible to the input of first-hand sensory experience. The experience describes the taste of betrayal, but beyond that it points to the death of his stepson. Dostoevsky's intense preoccupation with Pavel's legacy, interior and exterior, the intense process of digestion and transmutation (Eliot 18) that led to the creation of art, has, ironically, brought him to a point of confrontation with the real. This seems to contradict the primacy of intense interiority that characterized his frantic moving through Petersburg. It seems as if at one moment the classic, the allegiance to the

“transcendental-poetic” domain of the classic, holds sway, and at the next, it all seems to be an attempt to reach reality, the “socio-political” world in which the classic figures only as a device. At this impasse, the deadlock of “either-or”, the focus moves back to the autobiographical subject as a space for further investigation.

It is now required of the reader to take a step back from the novel, to pick it up and look at it as if for the first time. First, one will probably notice the title, *The Master of Petersburg*. Or, if one has acquired a taste for Coetzee's work, the name of the author will be the first to rise from the cover: “J.M. Coetzee”. Next, one will turn it around and read the synopsis on the back, or, as is often the case, try to sift through the laudatory press recommendations in search of what the story is about. One will read that it is about Dostoevsky, and that he has lost a son. One might have heard a rumour that Coetzee has also lost a son. What kind of book is this? Why have I not seen this before? After cracking the spine and flipping to the first page, one reads: “October, 1869. A droshky passes slowly down a street in the Haymarket district of St Petersburg” (1). Immediately, without ado, a specific historical setting is evoked. That is to say, the reader finds himself shuttled into the middle of the nineteenth century, straight into a city where they do not even speak English.

This is entirely true, just as it is true that the reader finds himself in a linguistic fabrication that has sprung from the mind of an author. This specific fabrication has been constructed to resemble the subjective environment of the protagonist, Dostoevsky, and it has been done with a remarkable degree of success. The lexical paradigm accords with what is known about Dostoevsky's life: epilepsy, gambling addiction, religious adherence, fulmination against revolutionary nihilism. Furthermore, the lexical and metaphorical range has been manipulated into a pattern that seems to match the inclination of the subject which it is supposed to concretize, at least as far as one is able to discern from Dostoevsky's fiction. In that sense, the novel might be read as a sort of fictional biography: an imagined episode in the life of a great writer. However, there is also a sense in which the issues at stake transcend the concern of the biographical subject and approach the realm of autobiography. The dog is a fitting example, on a purely superficial level, of a figure that frequently crops up in Coetzee's work. Similarly, the thematic concerns, namely the ethics of fictional creation, are never far from the surface in any of Coetzee's books, if that is the kind of

thing one is looking for. To the extent that the words have been selected and ordered according to an underlying impulse, and to the extent that that impulse is traceable from book to book, one can start discerning an intimation of the autobiographical. The following extract from an essay by Paul de Man which argues that all writing is autobiographical gives this idea theoretical backing:

> But just as we seem to assert that all texts are autobiographical, we should say that, by the same token, none of them is or can be. The difficulties of generic definition that affect the study of autobiography repeat an inherent instability that undoes the model as soon as it is established. Genette's metaphor of the revolving door helps us to understand why this is so: it aptly connotes the turning motion of tropes and confirms that the specular moment is not primarily a situation or an event that can be located in history, but that it is the manifestation, on the level of the referent, of a linguistic structure[19]. ("Autobiography As De-Facement" 70)

Thus the autobiographical subject becomes as elusive as the biographical subject. In this negative sense Dostoevsky's crisis is the same as Coetzee's crisis, because it does not exist outside the referentiality of the words on the page. In other words, that which is signified pertains as much to Dostoevsky as it does to Coetzee, and it comes alive only when it is read. Dostoevsky struggles to establish a synthesis between the timeless and the temporal. His frustrated attempts lead him to the discovery that neither will be the servant of the other: the classic cannot contain history, just as history cannot contain the classic. Only when he writes (or perhaps one should say, when the reader reads what he has written) do the two find themselves maintaining an antagonistic sort of co-existence, within the bounds of representation. Similarly, Coetzee has written an account that incorporates, on the one hand, the historical background of a classic, Dostoevsky's *The Devils*, and the acute, immediately tangible

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19 Compare with a passage from Kristeva: "We view the subject in language as decentring the transcendental ego, cutting through it and opening it up to a dialectic in which its syntactic and categorical understanding is merely *the liminary moment of the process*, which is itself acted upon by the relation to the other dominated by the death drive and its productive reiteration of the 'signifier'" (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 98, my italics). The "syntactic and categorical understanding" seems analogous to the reading of a text; it echoes De Man's assertion that this process of reading does not imply a circumscribed knowledge of the subject, but rather an interpenetration with a frozen instant of the movements of the symbolic awareness of that subjectivity.

emotion of filial loss. The living presence of the emotion breathes life into the history, and the history gives credence to the emotion. Coetzee has "betrayed" the living emotion into his historically researched narrative. It is precisely this betrayal that gives birth to the spirit of immediacy one encounters in the novel. The classic and the strictly historical can only revitalize each other through the resonance of embedded subjectivity.

At the same time, this has the effect of making the subjective experience more acute. By incorporating the historical and the living emotional – by transposing subjective reality into the language of history, by choosing words from history that best evoke the emotive content of present experience – the linguistic fabrication secures for itself a commanding presence in the progress of history. That is to say, it equips itself to withstand the onslaught of the present in all its future guises. A subjective dramatization of the contest between the "transcendental-poetic" and the "socio-cultural" ("What Is a Classic?" 9), it seems, has a lot of buying power in the world of social reality. "*They pay him lots of money for writing books*" (Coetzee, 1999: 250) is the line that reverberates through Dostoevsky's mind, and this statement is quite irrefutable; but it need not be seen as a condemnation. What it means is something to the effect that the true classic has a powerful impact on the politics of reality. However, this would not be the case if the classic did not provide access to a space that has the potential of transcending the ravages of temporal necessity. In other words, the classic legitimizes its potency by opening doors from the everyday into a transcendent realm where man is not the slave of time.

In his essay on Eliot and the classic, Coetzee sketches a history of Bach's public reputation through the years. This is the same Bach that spoke to the young Coetzee, in "a moment of revelation" ("What Is a Classic?" 10), as a voice from another time, another place: the realm of the classic. As he describes Bach's historical reception, he mentions that Bach never actually left the sphere of performance, as the popular conception will have it (16). A small group of musicians kept his music alive through private performance and appreciation. Thus it appears that Bach was never outside history. Someone did not come across his musical scores, out of the blue, and decide that here was a true classic, one that should be reintroduced into the concert hall, a dead voice resuscitated; instead, he kept on influencing history, in however minute

ways, and the performance of his music kept on being influenced by historical purpose. The "transcendental-poetic" and the "socio-cultural" (9) engaged each other without pause.

Similarly, in *The Master of Petersburg*, there is no identifiable point where the impulse of the classic wipes out historical necessity, just as historical necessity never manages to wipe out the classic. The beauty lies in the exquisite realization that this will never be the case, at least not until death. The subject will never be able to transcend the conflict between the eternal and the contingent, because this struggle is ultimately what constitutes the subject. In this sense, the autobiographical is the mode in which the realities of time can best be conveyed. I do not mean autobiographical in the sense of pure access to the consciousness bearing the proper name of the author; I mean the autobiographical as the impulse one suspects beneath the linguistic structure on the page, the yearning for authentic connection more than connection itself. This impulse might not necessarily correspond to the impulse of the invisible other, the subject of enunciation. Its nature is more that of a correspondence between the words and the subject: it is an action instead of a describable environment, a state of perpetual motion, and not a static mode of being:

> Autobiography, then, is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts. The autobiographical moment happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution. The structure implies differentiation as well as similarity, since both depend on a substitutive exchange that constitutes the subject. ("Autobiography as De-Facement" 70)

As with Lurie's discovery of himself, his subjective reality, in the music of his opera, therefore, Dostoevsky discovers the authenticity of his yearning for Pavel in the relation of the significations that constitute the materiality of his writing. Similarly, the actuality of the classic emerges from the reader's awareness that he is himself participating in the constitution of that classic by virtue of his inscription into the material which he is reading. Embeddedness does not limit itself to an awareness of

the distinction between the “socio-historical” and the “transcendental-poetic”, or any of the pairs of binaries that have been called upon in the course of this discussion. Rather, it implies the inscription of these binaries into a fabric that allows the reader to gain a sense of their simultaneity. It is a sense that comes from the implication of the reader's own symbolic awareness in the materiality of representation. The classic comes into existence only to the extent that it begins to characterize the motion of the reader's consciousness.

CHAPTER 4

THE BODY

In the introduction of this thesis, I stated that what is at stake is the subject's desire for truthful expression, without compromising the integrity of the truth it wants to express. In my reading of Coetzee, this notion of truth has the character of an impulse. It exists as an appeal rather than as an essence with defining characteristics. That is to say, the notion of truth comes to life by virtue of the fact that it is called upon. It is a perpetually displaced mode of being, like a shadow at the limits of awareness, which activates and directs the movement of expression, but is never encapsulated by it. I have read Coetzee's work as the representation of a subjectivity in the throes of movement towards this truth. His texts seem to occupy a space that is opened by an agonizing desire to transcend the limitations of representation[20] while remaining steadfastly aware of its rootedness in symbolic reality. This desire of the subject is what embeds itself in the materiality of representation. Hence the field of signification is consciously left open – the subject resists the closure of the ideal. This refusal to describe the completeness of meaning is what enables the authenticity of desire to emerge in the reader's symbolic consciousness.

Citing Ricoeur, I stated that the implication of this movement towards truth is that it functions as "a requirement addressed to the reader" rather than "something hidden behind the text" (377). The fruition of the impulse thus emerges from a reading of the text, when the reader allows the embedded movement towards truth to interpenetrate with his own subjective representation of the world. However, fruition does not imply realization, in the sense of attainment. Rather, in the words of Mike Marais, it gives the reader a sense of "the inspiration that may derive from the sense the imagination imparts of that over which it has no power" ("J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and the Task of the Imagination" 89). My reading of Coetzee's work has been

20 See, for example, Elizabeth Costello's frustrated attempts at passing through the gate in the last chapter of the novel that bears her name, or the protagonist's belated notion of himself being trapped in a deadlock at the end of *Youth*.

informed by this dynamic to the extent that I have been loathe to ascribe specific truth-values to certain aspects of the work. It has been a matter of describing the dynamics of reading rather than distilling essential qualities to inform the postulation of an authoritative stance. Hence each chapter has attempted to give evidence of the process of interpenetration between the reader's symbolic consciousness and the representation of the text, in the hope that this might demonstrate the strategy of reading that opens a discursive space in which subjective desire embeds itself.

This chapter attempts to describe the same process as it pertains to the characterization of the impulse toward truth. It demarcates as its area of expression the figure of the body in Coetzee's work in three primary texts: *Foe*, *Life & Times of Michael K*, *Slow Man* and, to a lesser extent, *Dusklands*. The body is read as a figure for the enigmatic origin of the movement towards truth, or that which activates and directs the representation of subjective desire without being encapsulated by the representation. It is important to note in this regard that the body itself is no more than a figure within the representation. As such it accommodates the notion of truth as a directedness, or an appeal made to the reader, a movement enacted in the material of the representation, rather than a final solution to the locality of truth. The notion of the body serves as an appropriate culmination of a discussion of embeddedness – it figures as an indication of the subjective reality that comes into existence as a result of the resonance of textual materiality, while at the same time representing that which resists textual inscription.

It seems as if Coetzee is increasingly read as astringent and dour[21]. However, his work evinces a keen awareness of the desire of the body to surpass the restraints imposed on it by historical and material reality – an intimation of freedom that counters the bleakness of the worlds depicted in his books. The body and its yearning for spontaneous being persists as a trope in the constellation of deadlocks that seems to constitute the formal allegiance of the fiction. The origin of this allegiance can be found in Coetzee's acquaintance with the tradition of modernism, specifically the works of Beckett, Nabokov and Kafka, but also with Defoe, whose realist opus (*Robinson Crusoe*) recurs as a figure for the isolation of the subject.

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21 See, for example, John Banville's reading of *Elizabeth Costello* as a "suicide note" (30), with its "cold and bitter ending to a singularly comfortless book" (34).

“That art is radical which, facing the abyss between language and the world, turns toward silence and the end of art”, says Coetzee in an essay on Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (5). Nabokov turns out to be only halfway as radical as Beckett, who embodies radicalism by performing his silence (5). About this, not much can be said, because it is after all no more than the continuation of a void. More can be said about *Pale Fire*, because it engages with, incorporates, *plays* with the notion of interpretation and assimilation that is the historical project of criticism:

> The ideal of *Pale Fire* is a Symbolist ideal: a state of being in which, having incorporated into itself all possible interpretations of itself, the work of art has, like a closed system of mirrors, shut itself off forever from interpretation and become a monument of unageing intellect.” (6)

As far as one is able to surmise without the benefit of historical perspective, Coetzee's own fiction seems to be concerned with the same challenge, namely the pressure of surviving and outliving historical assimilation. However, he does not write about nothing, like Beckett, or engage in wild theatrical fantasy, like Nabokov. Instead, he seems through discipline and concentrated effort to construct environments which strive to incorporate the world in language and language in the world.

It is in this context that the body and its autonomous existence can be read as a figuration of Coetzee's refusal to succumb to the mirror-world of language. By this I mean that his language sustains the idea that the subject of each novel operates at the bidding of a secret impulse, without exposing that secret. There are no easy codes by which to discover the secret heartbeats of the characters. Even though the reader is usually in touch with the movement of a given character's mind, the rhythm of his cognition and impulse, there are various allusions to an underlying desire that is rooted in the body and as such cannot be performed in language. Often the characters themselves experience moments of obfuscation, during which they feel the pressure of a conflict between an impulse from somewhere in the body and the desire for explication which comes from the outside. This is a central dynamic in Coetzee's fiction from the very start. Eugene Dawn, perpetrator and victim of “the New Life

Project" in *Dusklands* (1974), observes the doctors who treat him after his nervous breakdown:

> I watch their eyes and think: you want to know what makes me tick, and when you discover it you will rip it out and discard me. My secret is what makes me desirable to you, my secret is what makes me strong. But will you ever win it? When I think of the heart that holds my secret I think of something closed and wet and black, like, say, the ball in the toilet cistern. Sealed in my chest of treasures, lapped in dark blood, it tramps its blind round and will not die. (50)

Beyond the bleakness of this passage is an exultant, and even triumphant, note of survival. It sets up an opposition between the elusive animating force of the subject and its exposition, or reduction into a set of codes. The imagery which is used to refer to this essential, private aspect of the individual being, namely the "heart", is quite sordid: "something closed and wet and black, like... the ball in the toilet cistern". This is a far cry from the religious reverence which is traditionally associated with the secret depths of being – in former times one would have been able to speak of a man's soul as that part of him which remains untouchable and communes with the invisible. Suffice to say here that Coetzee is speaking of that part of existence which cannot be reduced to the arbitrary play of language.

In this passage, it shares with the soul the attribute of immortality: it "will not die". At the outset of his literary career, therefore, Coetzee signals his allegiance to something that lies beyond the parameters of language. By virtue of its unknowability, the reader cannot ascertain the status of what it is that lies beyond the language. Furthermore, the reader only acquires this sense of the unknown because it is represented in the text as a "secret". It remains unnamed, and therefore the reader experiences it as an impulse towards truth, rather than the essence of truth itself. The representation of subjectivity has now constructed itself around a void. Regardless of the nature of that void, the reader finds himself directed towards it and is compelled to incorporate its mystery into his own subjective framework. In as much as this enigmatic compelling force is characterized in the passage above, it takes its attributes from a metaphorical alignment with the "heart". Analogous to the role of the heart in

the body, therefore, one could see the enigma of the impulse towards truth as that which animates the representation.

Coetzee's treatment of the body reflects the negative (in the sense that it figures as an absence, or void) incarnation of the impulse towards truth in his work. There is a recurrence of deformity, or if not deformity, then some inadequacy of constitution. A prominent example is the mute manservant Friday in Coetzee's reworking of *Robinson Crusoe*, namely *Foe* (1986). Someone has cut out Friday's tongue – the Moorish slavers, according to Cruso (23). However, the nature of his deformity means that he will never speak the origin of his condition. Susan Barton's repeated attempts at engaging Friday in some form of communication, like the pictures she draws to elicit a response from him (67-70), are to no avail. Notably, her revulsion at Friday's mutilation resides in the particularity of his deformity, rather than in the general fact of it:

> An aversion came over me that we feel for all the mutilated. Why is that so, do you think? Because they put us in mind of what we would rather forget: how easily, at the stroke of a sword or a knife, wholeness and beauty are forever undone? Perhaps. But toward you I felt a deeper revulsion. I could not put out of mind the softness of the tongue, its softness and wetness, and the fact that it does not live in the light; also how helpless it is before the knife, once the barrier of the teeth has been passed. The tongue is like the heart, in that way, is it not? Save that we do not die when a knife pierces the tongue. To that degree we may say the tongue belongs to the world of play, whereas the heart belongs to the world of earnest. (85)

There is a layered exposition of interpersonal identification in this passage, which is based on the transplantation of an impulse that resists inscription into the material of subjective representation. Firstly, there is the fact of aversion in the face of ugliness, whatever form it might take. The sympathy of the senses leans in the direction of aesthetic harmony, and it does not want to be reminded of the fragility of this pleasure. However, this is a superficial order of empathy: it exists as a general category – it resides in form – and does not concern itself with the specific content of

its object. The “deeper revulsion”, which indicates a more penetrating offence against aesthetic sensibility, is awakened by the particular texture of the mutilated object, namely “its softness and wetness”.

Once it has been awakened, the revulsion immediately seizes on the inaccessibility of this particular object, the tongue, which “does not live in the light”, but remains obscure. From there, the revulsion moves on to an image of the tongue's helplessness before the knife. It is an image which cannot be seen, because it resides in darkness, but which gains potency in its imagined reality. Thus the emotion moves from the superficiality of general aversion, through the deepened awareness of sensory particularity, to a heightened revulsion stemming from the alienness and unknowability of its object. The imagination of the observer (or reader) experiences a shadow lurking within the framework of emotive identification that has been triggered by the tactile description of the tongue; it baulks at this strange, negative presence. However, as soon as the observing subject realizes that this transplanted darkness is related to her own formless impulses, her emotion acquires a dimension of empathy. Thus Susan Barton identifies with Friday's inadequacy because she herself experiences a mounting anxiety that Foe's representation of her journey will not be able to contain her authentic impulses.

By comparing the tongue to the heart, Coetzee establishes a link (a link based on differentiation) between the world of language (“the world of play”) and the private life of the subject (“the world of earnest”). One notices the recurrence of the heart (“something closed and wet and black”, *Dusklands* 50) as a symbol of the essential truth behind the mystery of the text, and one sees the implication that the tongue will also die if the heart is pierced, in other words that the surface of the text, the language, is somehow based on the underlying emotion, even though it does not give direct access to that emotion. It requires the presence of an outside observer (Susan Barton, in this case, but the reader in general) to create a space in which they can meet, albeit tentatively. Thus it seems that Friday's mutilation, the fact that he cannot speak, alerts Susan to the primacy of his body, which in turn leads to a metaphor of the body – which is in this reading the primary manifestation of subjective yearning – as a space in which language and emotion, playfulness and earnestness, co-exist. The symbols of the tongue and the heart share the characteristic of vulnerability, and the passage

indicates that the empathy evoked by this vulnerability, even if it has to pass through a stage of revulsion, is a precondition for the synthesis of language and emotion.

After Susan arrives at a conscious awareness of Friday's physical presence, she finds him dancing in Cruso's robes and wig (92). This act of dancing, in which Susan sees more of Friday's body than she bargained for – in which Friday's body is impressed upon her in its full nakedness – leads to a revelatory moment for herself. On their way to Bristol, Susan and Friday are caught in a rainstorm. They seek refuge in an alehouse, but the innkeeper turns them out. Her redemption occurs in a barn (which, one might add, reflects the humble beginnings of the prototypical tale of redemption, the birth of Jesus of Nazareth). She starts dancing, like she has seen Friday do, as "a way of keeping warm", and she falls "into a kind of trance" (103):

> [W]hat I had seen in my trance, whatever it had been – I could summon back nothing distinct, yet felt a glow of after-memory, if you can understand that – had been a message (but from whom?) to tell me there were other lives open to me than this one in which I trudged with Friday across the English countryside, a life of which I was already heartily sick. (104)

It is possible to sketch a line from Susan's preliminary awareness of Friday's body, based on his disfigurement, through an identification with his naked, dancing form (the body in its full expression), to a moment in which she has her own transcendental experience by repeating Friday's dance, an experience that convinces her of the accessibility of other lives. Notably, she does not comprehend the origin of her desire to dance, other than that it has emerged from the depths of isolation and despair (103). Without the benefit of oral communication – or any form of codifiable communication – Susan has gained something from her observance of and emotional involvement with Friday's physical presence. The effect of Susan's body on Friday cannot be known, because Friday's silence is forced (122). He does not have the capacity for embedding his thoughts in a referential system. However, something of his effect on Susan can be surmised from that which she chooses to transmit to her projected author, Foe, through language. Specifically, she has become aware of the possibility of "other lives", and in a vague and indistinct way – that is to say, a way

that can only be approximated through formal communication – she has been granted a premonition of the elusive reality of other modes of subjective existence.

Thus it becomes possible to read the body as a figure for that which resists inscription. In *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), Coetzee dramatizes the body's stubborn persistence in the face of assimilation into a definable system. In the second part of that book, the doctor's frustrated attempts at reducing Michael (or "Michaels", as he calls him, 130) to an extractable essence prefigures Susan's similar attempts with Friday, and in both cases the attempt cannot pass beyond an empathy that does not know what to base itself upon, other than the lure of an underlying mystery. In the case of Michael K, it is significant that even the narrator, confined to his "limited omniscient point of view" (Penner 94), is not privy to the secrets behind a body that is the personification of deprivation and survival.

Michael K is introduced to the world, and the reader, with "a hare lip" (3) and a mind that is "not quick" (4). He is shirked from the very start by his mother because of his deformity: "Anna K did not like the mouth that would not close and the living pink flesh it bared to her. She shivered to think of what had been growing in her all these months" (3). Thus from the very start Michael must accustom himself to the estrangement arising from his constitutional inadequacy. His preferred mode is one of isolation, and throughout the book, with varying degrees of success, he tries to wean himself from the necessity of social interaction, even to the point of starving himself in a cave in the mountains (65). At that point, the point of ultimate isolation, Michael undergoes an extremity of turning in on himself which is a step on the way to the tenuous peace that he reaches at a later point in the narrative:

> It is no longer the green and the brown that I want but the yellow and the red; not the wet but the dry; not the dark but the light; not the soft but the hard. I am becoming a different kind of man, he thought, if there are two kinds of man. If I were cut, he thought, holding his wrists out, looking at his wrists, the blood would no longer gush from me but seep, and after a little seeping dry and heal. I am becoming smaller and harder and drier every day. (67)

A crucial aspect of this passage is the fact that Michael becomes more corporeal as he turns in on himself. His physical body increases in durability as he sinks deeper into his own core – into the subjective space that underlies the world of linguistic interaction – to the extent that it seems able to endure beyond the scope of the will. This endurance of his body, which I read, in this context, as a figure for the impulse towards truth, is suggested by the image of suicide contained in the imagined cutting of his wrists, which would "heal" of its own accord. In other words, the intrusion of the will, which would be the agent of suicide, is insufficient to destroy the impulse toward truth. However, this state of being, in which the subject gives itself entirely to the authenticity of the unrepresentable, contained in the image of the body, is not a tenable position: it leads to a sort of self-cannibalization ("His gums bled; he drank the blood", 68). Eventually he is driven from the mountain by sheer hunger and illness (69), but also by the belief that it would be best for his story not to end in this state of utter aloofness and isolation (69). This points one to the notion that the body and its undeniable personal experience still has to subject itself to some form of narrative, some form of accessible code, if it is to have meaning. Thus the desire for autonomy of the authentic impulses experienced by the body and the desire for meaningful experience struggle with each other in the linguistic performance of the book.

The moments of deepest satisfaction in the book occur after Michael has escaped from the camp, which functions as a sort of thematic counterweight to his experience on the mountain (forced social interaction, forced labour, regulated hours, rationed food). He returns to the farm, where he exists as a refugee from history:

> After the hardships of the mountains and the camp there was nothing but bone and muscle on his body. His clothes, tattered already, hung on him without shape. Yet as he moved about his field he felt a deep joy in his physical being. His step was so light that he barely touched the earth. It seemed possible to fly; it seemed possible to be both body and spirit. (102)

Here, on a farm which does not belong to him, Michael makes a compromise with the gods of existence: he builds a secret shelter, plants food, survives. The lesson

Michael has learned on the mountain, it seems, is that the body cannot survive of its own accord. Isolated suffering, suffering that removes itself entirely from codified experience, results in a stultified condition of being. Desire sputters out as soon as complete autonomy is achieved. The body needs the guidance of the will – not necessarily one's own will – to prolong its autonomy. Along with this, in the labour camp he learns that the spirit suffers if the body's autonomous existence depends on another's will. On the mountain, when he stops listening to his body, and listens instead "to the great silence about him" (66), the freedom of his body ("he was running as fast as the wind along an open road with the cart floating behind him", 66) is confined to dreams, which is the realm of the spirit. Now, on the farm, he experiences the tantalizing potential of body and spirit rejoicing in equal measure. He feels "deep joy in his physical being", as well as the freedom of spirit that is reminiscent of the dream of unburdened running. These experiences are confined to the present, in which "time flow[s] slowly like oil from horizon to horizon over the face of the world" (115), because he has chosen to extract himself from the dynamic of historical progress: "I am not building a house out here by the dam to pass on to other generations" (101). This realization leads one back to notion of the body, the primacy of its yearning – and the experience of time as a personal dimension – as opposed to the oppressive tendency of history, its violent reduction of the individual to a mere "term" in a "system" (166).

This tension between the body, understood as the persistence of yearning for truth, and the system, understood as any domain of formalized interaction, comes to the fore in various guises throughout the book. Beyond the tension lies the perplexity of the subject that knows it must pay its respects to the system if it wants to remain in control of its autonomy. Lying in his hole, Michael recalls his confusion before the mysteries of language:

> He remembered Huis Norenius and the classroom. Numb with terror he stared at the problem before him while the teacher stalked the rows counting off the minutes till it should be time for them to lay down their pencils and be divided, the sheep from the goats. Twelve men eat six bags of potatoes. Each bag holds six kilograms of potatoes. What is the quotient? He saw himself write down 12, he saw himself write down 6.

> He did not know what to do with the numbers. He crossed both out. He stared at the word *quotient*. It did not change, it did not dissolve, it did not yield its mystery. I will die, he thought, still not knowing what the quotient is. (110)

Let me attempt to rewrite this passage in terms that spell out the underlying motion of my reading:

> There comes to me a vision of something that happened in the past, but still persists in the present as a configuration of tropes that inhabit my consciousness, waiting for the right impulse to call it to the surface. When it comes, it comes in the guise of a pictorial environment, a pattern of spatial relations: a classroom. Almost immediately, as if dragged behind on a chain and unleashed into the picture, comes an emotion. Not just any emotion, but a terror that has the power of paralysis over the physical body. I see myself in the picture, and the other details crystallize into place. These details are not simply objects. They carry with them the burden of the way I have thought about them ever since I first saw them; all sorts of meanings, mythical and personal, have been attached to their presences. The teacher, who might have been a simpleton, a well-meaning nondescript, a black-blooded tyrant, anything – my memory has been tainted by my fear – has become a menacing figure, and I am his prey. To this teacher has fallen the allotment of time: he decides how many minutes must pass before the judgement. He giveth and he taketh away. Similarly, it is he who will divide us into those who are saved and those who are damned. The teacher has the power of redemption over me, and to aid him in his judgement he has given us all a test. If we pass it, we will be saved; if we fail, we are damned.
>
> This test has to do with men and what they eat. I am not sure I trust this detail; in my present condition food is of such great concern – what I wouldn't give for a few potatoes to plant in my garden! - that it may have blurred my recollection of the problem. Be that as it may, there are twelve men with six bags of potatoes, each containing six kilograms of potatoes.

> Then there is a question about the quotient. I have no idea what potatoes have to do with a quotient. I have no idea what a quotient is. Perhaps it will help if I write down the numbers. I have enough confidence in my numerical ability to write down the numbers. It does not help. The numbers by themselves on the paper do nothing. They remain static; they do not approach the riddle of the quotient of their own accord. I cross them out, try to think of another angle. I suspect the key to this problem is the word quotient, so I look at it to try and discover something. The word will not reveal its mystery, neither will it go away. It stays there, stubborn, unmoving. The word persists, despite the fact that I cannot make it my own. Even if I were to die, and with me my means of making sense of the world – my means of taking raw materials, trimming them down (like we do in the woodwork class) and fitting them into my picture of the world – this word will not reveal itself to me. I will never have true knowledge of its essential being. Nevertheless, I must find a way of working with it that will allow me to attain the salvation that this man who is stalking me can give, as he can give damnation.

The word "quotient" is in itself an interesting choice. It signifies, in the most basic sense, a ratio between two quantities. The last sentence of the passage leaves the application of the word open: "I will die, he thought, still not knowing what the quotient is." Specifically, the inclusion of the article "the" in that sentence creates an ambiguity of meaning. It could refer to the particular problem in Michael's recollection, namely the quotient between the men and their potatoes, or it could refer to the meaning of the word, "quotient". In an interpretive sense, however, it also indicates Michael's inability to discover the golden ratio between the different forces at work in his life. These forces, which somehow conspire to determine whether he will be saved or damned, will remain fundamentally obscure throughout his entire life. There is, on the one hand, the yearning of the body, which is a figure for the unrepresentable impulse toward truth and is always and eternally encapsulated in the present; on the other, the pressure of assimilation into the structure of progress, which requires a historical perspective for its unfolding. This progress need not be understood in the derogatory sense of materialistic expansion: it also includes the temporal dimension of a narrative performed in language.

Coetzee's *Slow Man* (2005) incorporates the issue of physical deformity into a narrative that is overtly concerned with the value of subjective representation, thus giving the reader an opportunity to investigate the dynamic of the authentic impulse toward truth as it appears through the image of the body. Paul Rayment's right leg is amputated after a cycling accident. He refuses to undergo the parody of prosthesis and confronts the dullness of the time that remains to him with a demeanour hovering between acceptance and despair. Like Michael K, he conceives of his life before the accident as "frivolous", in the sense that "[h]e will leave no trace behind, not even an heir to carry his name" (19). However, unlike Michael K, who thinks it fortunate that he is allowed to live a life "that consists merely of passing time" (*Life & Times of Michael K* 104), Rayment delivers judgement on himself: "*Sliding through the world*: that is how, in a bygone age, they used to designate lives like his.... If none is left to pronounce judgement on such a life... he will pronounce it himself: *A wasted chance*" (19).

Contrary to what one expects from such an attitude, however, Rayment does not try to make things easy for himself, most notably in the way he confronts his deformity. He hires a nurse to look after him; she "calls the bedpan the potty; she calls his penis his willie" (23); he fires her. It seems that he will not tolerate any attempt at making light of his situation. The nurse's attitude, which can best be described as frivolous, clashes with Rayment's attitude, which can also be described as frivolous, albeit for different reasons. The nurse's frivolity comes from her unwillingness to confront the actual material of her surrounds. She does not care to recognize Rayment's individuality – instead, she sees him as the latest incarnation of the genus "patient". She is content as long as things progress according to forms she has become accustomed to. She is happy and ignorant in her casual acquiescence to the flow of time. Rayment's frivolity, on the other hand, comes from his unwillingness to look beyond the actuality of his material surrounds, to engage in the codes of tacit denial that underlie the everyday work of caring for the sick. In other words, he refuses to submit his experience of authenticity to the formal requirements of progress. Like the protagonist of *Youth* (2002), Rayment has become stuck in the present tense[22]:

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22 *Youth* ends with the protagonist "locked into an attenuating endgame, playing himself, with each

> Night or day, time drags... He stares at the watch face, imprinting the position of the hands on his mind. Then he closes his eyes, tries to think of other things – his own breathing, his grandmother sitting at the kitchen table plucking a chicken, bees among the flowers, anything. He opens his eyes. The hands have not stirred. It is as though they have to push their way through glue.
>
> The clock stands still yet time does not. Even as he lies here he can feel time at work on him like a wasting disease, like the quicklime they pour on corpses. Time is gnawing away at him, devouring one by one the cells that make him up. His cells are going out like lights. (11)

The first paragraph gives one a sense of the infinite present in which Rayment finds himself. His physical existence ("his breathing"), his personal history ("his grandmother"), the cycles of natural life, hinting at procreation ("bees among the flowers") - all these things are contained in a moment frozen between the ticks of the clock. However, the image of the time at work here is itself only a figuration in Rayment's head: it has been imprinted on his mind. In other words, his understanding of himself, including his notion of how this understanding works, is nothing more than the collective symbolism in his head at a given moment in time. In the second paragraph, it becomes apparent that there is another force at work. Faceless time, which has nothing to do with the image of the clock that has been imprinted on Rayment's mind, is taking its toll on his body. This time has the nature of an anonymous force that imposes itself on the subject in its cocoon of personal time. The imagery in this paragraph concerns itself with the decomposition of the physical body. On the most basic level of organic life, the level of cells, time is taking him out. He is "consuming time and being consumed" (19).

If one bears this in mind, Rayment's possession of his deformity in all its ugly reality becomes more defiant than the nurses or doctors will ever suspect. It seems to be no

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move, further into a corner and into defeat" (169). In this context, the present tense in which the book is written can be seen as a constant subjective awareness of the immediacy of representation and the impossibility of transcending that representation. If Paul Rayment's dilemma in *Slow Man* is read in conjunction with this passage, it appears that Rayment is stuck in the same space of immediacy and shares the protagonist of *Youth*'s obstinate refusal to compromise that immediacy.

less than an attempt to incorporate the decay of his body into the constellation of acute symbolic presences that denote his subjective experience. For that is who Paul Rayment is: someone who dreads the thought of excursion into the unknown, someone who likes to control the texture of his personal environment. This is not to say that he revels in his disfigurement. On the contrary, he refuses to allow it sovereignty outside the effect it has on his psyche: "He still has a sense of being a soul with an undiminished soul-life; as for the rest of him, it is just a sack of blood and bones that he is forced to carry around" (32). Rayment's disfigurement has the unexpected effect of turning him away from the corporeal and into the symbolic. The "calamity" (54) of the accident "circumscribe[s]" his life: it walls him off from the outside world, it traps him in a written environment. The etymological origin of the word "circumscribe" seems to emphasize the symbolic nature of his new existence: "circum" means "around" and "scribere" is Latin for "to write" (Collins 242).

Enter Elizabeth Costello, another character who has once before found herself inexplicably stuck in the prison cell of symbolic referentiality (*Elizabeth Costello*, 2003). Another way of describing this cell is to call it a "closed system of mirrors" (Coetzee, *Pale Fire* 6), in which the subject is constituted of words reflecting each other like magic shadows. Costello's presence in Rayment's world is never fully revealed; it remains obscure and mystifying. There are various references to the fact that she did not come to him, but he to her, and the general thrust of her locutions seems to be that she wants him to kickstart himself into action: "Live like a hero. That is what the classics teach us. Be a main character. Otherwise what is life for?" (229). She seems to have privileged access to the inner workings of his mind, specifically to the words that constitute what goes on in his mind ("I feel, to use Homer's word, *unstrung*. A word with which you are familiar, I seem to remember", 160). Even more than that, she seems to be in touch, somehow, with the actual words that make up the book itself. Chapter Twenty begins: "...he finds her by the riverside, sitting on a bench, clustered around by ducks that she seems to be feeding" (151). Later in that same chapter, Elizabeth says to Rayment:

> I become vaguer with each passing day. A pity. Hence this little lesson I am trying to teach you. *He finds her by the riverside, sitting on a bench, clustered around by ducks that she seems to be feeding* – it may be simple,

> as an account, its simplicity may even beguile one, but it is not good enough. It does not bring me to life. Bringing me to life may not be important to you, but it has the drawback of not bringing you to life either. Or the ducks, for that matter, if you prefer not to have me at the centre of the picture. Bring these humble ducks to life and they will bring you to life, I promise. (159)

It emerges that Elizabeth's project sprouts from the fact that she herself is becoming "vaguer". Her effort to resuscitate Rayment into the world of the living, which increasingly takes on the character of a supplication toward the end of the novel, becomes an effort to resuscitate herself. The word "lesson" calls to mind the subtitle of the book which dramatizes Elizabeth's own struggle to escape from the hall of mirrors, namely *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons*. In that book, it is never clear who is supposed to be teaching whom; here, in Rayment's dungeon, she asserts that she is the one who is teaching. It seems to be quite a simple lesson, too: Rayment must learn creative identification with the world of objects, because it is a means of escaping the "gloom" (25). However, the objects in question are not actual objects; they are words. Thus the problem of creative identification resides in the building blocks of language itself. Rayment must alter his methods of self-representation if he wishes to end his isolation and resuscitate the vitality of his experience of the world.

Even though Elizabeth seems to be in control of the arrangement of the words, it is Rayment who provides them. Elizabeth's disapproval of Rayment resides in the inadequacy of the words with which he provides her. The words are inadequate because Rayment refuses to take them from any environment that implicates the presence of his body, other than the confines of his flat. In an effort to retain control over his self-representation, he limits himself to safe words, words that have meagre scope for unexpected referentiality. Rayment has isolated himself in a sepia environment, and he will not allow the colour of strange and new symbols to penetrate his subjective being. It is interesting to note that Elizabeth's own lexicon – even more than that, her tone of speaking – has undergone a metamorphosis from her previous appearance in *Elizabeth Costello*. Instead of speaking about Kafka (in the chapter entitled "What is Realism?"), she speaks about Don Quixote (228); instead of gloom and uncertainty, she spouts witticisms and unexpected smiles. To be sure,

there is a residue of fatigue about her character: one senses that she is making an effort to furnish Rayment's book with aspects of the comic, understood in the sense of displacement and arrest:

> Come on. Do something. Do anything. Surprise me. Has it occurred to you that if your life seems repetitive and circumscribed and duller by the day, it may be because you hardly ever leave this accursed flat? Consider: somewhere in a jungle in Maharashtra State a tiger is at this very moment opening its amber eyes, *and it is not thinking of you at all*! (229)

It appears that Rayment's mental circumscription derives from his unwillingness to explore the physical world, which is a direct result of his accident. Rayment will not submit his deformity to the time-tested and professionally accepted procedures of rehabilitation, which he conceives of as parody; thus he isolates himself from historical time, from the natural progress of time ("What could be more selfish, more miserly – this in specific is what gnaws at him – than dying childless, terminating the line, subtracting oneself from the great work of generation?" 20). His attempts at transgressing his narrow environment, based on the realization that frivolousness is insufficient, take on a warped form. He broods in his flat, rejecting intrusions from anyone and everyone that does not suit his temperament. Then he jumps at the first seemingly suitable candidate for love that makes her way past his rigorous defences by treating his stump as a lifeless, anonymous object. Rayment experiences Marijana's treatment of his deformity as a signal that she respects his humanity, likes him for who he is. He will not let the physical reality of his being, however truncated and changed it might be, interfere with his subjective opinion of himself. Marijana triggers a response in Rayment through her apparent identification with this position, but it is only apparent, as Rayment suspects. The problem is that he will not let go of his self-image.

Elizabeth seems determined to alter Rayment's subjectivity. However, she does not force anything on him. As the writer of his book – or if not writer, then at least someone who seems to be in mysterious communication with the writer – it would not be difficult for her to devise a strategy that forces Rayment from his comfort zone. She could, for example, burn down his house, or she could have him kidnapped. But

that is not her style. It is not the mode of writing at work in the book. Elizabeth makes suggestions, draws strings, applies her arcane knowledge at apt moments; the crucial point is that Rayment's change has to come from within himself. That is to say, no amount of intrusions from the hostile world of historical reality will be sufficient to alter his mental space, his symbolic being. Elizabeth cannot climb into the “word-box” (230) where he keeps his words and fill it with a new language. Her task is to find a way of releasing Rayment from the stronghold of subjective isolation into which he retreats after losing a leg. She must do it without infringing on his autonomy. This is her mission statement and her technique:

> But the reality is more complicated than that, Paul. In reality you see a great deal more – see it then block it out. Light of a certain stridency, for instance. A figure trapped by that light beside the softly fluent water. Lances of light that stab at her, threaten to pierce her through.
>
> Unnecessary complication? I don't think so. An expansion. Like breathing. Breathe in, breathe out. Expand, contract. The rhythm of life. You have it in you to be a fuller person, Paul, larger and more expansive, but you won't allow it. I urge you: don't cut short these thought-trains of yours. Follow them through to their end. Your thoughts and your feelings. Follow them through and you will grow with them. (158)

The motion contained in this suggestion is one of opening up, observing, not blocking out. At a first glance, this would seem to indicate a relaxing of subjective defences – an indefinitely sustained lapse of regulated will – in order to give the agency of representation free scope to choose words from those areas of memory and experience that the subject does not necessarily want to explore. If writing is used as an analogy, this process would be equivalent to reading a book in a foreign language, then taking words from it at random to put in one's own sentences. At a closer look, that is not what Elizabeth is suggesting. She does not preach novelty for novelty's sake. The imagery she uses to introduce her suggestion, namely that of light and its effect on the natural world, comes from an area that is all too familiar to Rayment: photography. Elizabeth confirms this notion when she says that Rayment already has it in him to become more “expansive”. The necessary material is there; it is in their application that fullness lies. The process of application should occur naturally, like breathing.

In other words, Rayment should stop enforcing his will on the material that makes up his subjective space. He should stop regulating, and start observing his “thoughts and feelings”. The notion of “breathing” emphasizes the corporeality of the process that leads to an expansive representation of subjectivity. Expansive in this context denotes a subject that does not have to ram its head against its own walls.

Rayment's attitude to his physical deformity can be read as a figuration of this dynamic. In fact, the way in which the corporeal represents itself to the subject is a recurring trope in Coetzee's work. In *Foe*, Susan Barton's attempts at subjugating Friday to a system of codified communication fails. She can only reply to his dancing with her own dancing. The narrative fails to explain the interaction between their bodies, because it is an interaction that takes place beyond the scope of language. Susan and Friday never speak to each other. Friday's mind, his subjective environment, remains a cypher; Susan's thoughts are visible because she writes and speaks them to her projected author. Yet the integration of Friday's body into her symbolic existence has a drastic effect on that existence. Friday is still isolated from her in the most profound sense, but somehow his presence has entered her own isolation, and changed it. She has an intuition of other modes of living (104), based on her awareness of the unrepresentability of the body. This unrepresentability enters the narrative as an appeal made to authentic being, an unspecified yearning for truth, rather than as a depiction of authenticity itself. Rayment's consciousness must learn to integrate the cypher of his body – which I have treated in this chapter as a figure for the unrepresentable yearning for truth, in the sense that it seems to be the locus of the movement toward that truth – before the subject can experience growth.

Rayment's gloomy acceptance of his deformity at the beginning of the novel does not entail the kind of “making peace” I am describing here. On the contrary, he abandons his body (his “sack of blood and bones”, 32) to the ravages of history and shuts himself in with his overwrought symbols. As I have tried to explain, Rayment's challenge is to find a new way of experiencing his symbolic reality. Much has already been said on the isolation of the subject, and if there is to be any chance for redemption – that is to say, any chance for the subject to transgress its limitations – this chance will have to occur on the level of symbolic reality. As long as one speaks in, through or of language, as long as one speaks, or reads, or writes, the symbol is the

most basic and essential constituent of reality. In the context of Rayment's dilemma, which emerges from his disfigurement, it becomes crucial for the symbol to incorporate the corporeal. In other words, a representation of subjectivity needs to acquiesce to the reality of the body, which is a slave to the passing of time and can never be fully interiorized.

Coetzee's insistence on the physical stretches deeper than the use of the body as metaphor. The corporeal is not merely a convenient device for invoking something like, say, suffering. It does not point in the direction of an abstract theme and leave it at that; it functions more like an unsettling cypher of yearning that gives shape to the representation itself. The corporeal appears to be a locus for the negative space from which the symbol, the word on the page, stems. Thus Coetzee seems to test his words against a secret quotient of his own, a quotient of which physical experience is an important term. The other term, of course, is meaning, coherence, syntax, grammar, form. This duality of origin contributes to the predominant ambiguity one experiences when reading any of Coetzee's books. On one level, they seem almost desiccated, bare, exhausted – they read like suicide notes, delivering with precision the reasons for their own morbidity. This level of reading is a fruitful source for the commentator on literary tradition; it croaks from the wasteland of late modernism. This makes sense if one takes into consideration that the author has devoted many years of his life to a study of books that spiral around the loss of the subject (Beckett et al.); the study of these books constitute an integral part of his lived experience. On another level, the books can be read as a homage to the vitality of lived experience – if not in subject matter, then in actuality, on the level of the representative symbol. The actual words have striking power; they strike the core of the reader's being.

Ray Dolan, neuroscientist, writes the following:

> What we apprehend in the realm of the senses is represented by images and concepts that facilitate representation in memory and awareness. What we sense from our bodies is, for the most part, only recognized as a vague background state, a current feeling within our ongoing mental life, that is largely without symbolic mediation and conceptual form. However, this absence of conceptual form arguably provides the basis for

> the felt immediacy of experience, and a subjective consciousness, that emerges out of a dynamic mapping between brain and body. (2006: 85)

Coetzee has devised his own ploy for resisting assimilation into the grand scheme of historical understanding: he reproduces for the reader the urgency of experience by incorporating the "vague background state" of bodily awareness into his representation. The lessons of tradition are transmuted into a representation that bases itself on a subjective awareness of the body and its being. In *Slow Man*, Costello gives away the terms of the quotient that leads to the kind of representation found in Coetzee's writing: "She turns a reflective eye on him. 'Passion and order, Paul. Both, not one or the other. But proceed with the story of your love affair...'" (194).

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