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Introduction

'I don't think or act in sweeps', says Coetzee to David Attwell in one of the interviews in *Doubling the Point*. 'I tend to be rather slow and painstaking and myopic in my thinking' (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 246). A cursory perusal of the titles of some of Coetzee's critical essays bears testimony to the measure of his statement: 'The Manuscript Revisions of Beckett's *Watt*'; 'The First Sentence of Yvonne Burgess' *The Strike*'; 'The Rhetoric of the Passive in English'; 'The Agentless Sentence as Rhetorical Device'; 'Time, Tense and Aspect in Kafka's "The Burrow"'... These linguistic analyses may not at first seem pertinent to the deeply ethical concerns that have attracted the interest of much Coetzee scholarship, yet one of my leading arguments is that sustained attention to Coetzee's preoccupation with a grammar that limits linguistic and aesthetic choices provides a way of appreciating the complexity of Coetzee's ethical engagements. Clearly, I am using the term 'grammar' in a slightly special sense here – in the sense of what the structures of language within a work of literature enable the writer to say.¹ More specifically, my discussion throughout the book constitutes an extended thinking through of the ethics and aesthetics of literary address: that is to say, in what ways do seemingly innocent linguistic choices on the part of the writer have ethical consequences for the position of the speaking or writing self in relation to those whom one addresses, or in relation to those on whose behalf one speaks, or in relation to a world one attempts to represent or create in writing?

Underwriting these questions throughout my book is a sustained exploration of what we might understand as constituting 'ethics' in

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Coetzee's work. If, in Coetzee's terms, '[s]eriousness is, for a certain kind of artist, an imperative uniting the aesthetic and the ethical' (Coetzee, *Giving Offense* 73), it is worth pursuing just what that seriousness might consist in. In several of his interviews, reviews, critical essays – and also his fiction, we witness Coetzee responding (in different ways) to other writers, thinkers and artists with a critical and creative acuity that leads to a searing self-interrogation, and it is within this context of seriousness that I shall be using the term 'ethics' in the discussions to follow. I take my cue from Coetzee's own reflections throughout his writing about what the term 'ethics' might entail – reflections perhaps most deftly summarized in his response to a question posed by David Attwell in the 2003 Nobel Prize interview:

I would say that what you call 'the literary life,' or any other way of life that provides means for interrogation of our existence – in the case of the writer fantasy, symbolization, storytelling – seems to me a good life – good in the sense of being ethically responsible. (Coetzee and Attwell, 'An Exclusive Interview with J.M. Coetzee' 3)

Throughout his work, both fictional and non-fictional, Coetzee develops what one might call a philosophy of writing. But to date, Coetzee scholarship has not paid sustained attention to the *link* between Coetzee's explicit preoccupation with language from the perspective of the linguistic sciences on the one hand, and the ethical force of his work, from a literary-philosophical perspective, on the other.² Using the linguistico-philosophical underpinnings of his fiction and critical essays as a starting point, the book explores Coetzee's ethics of writing, which is perhaps most striking in its consideration of the grammar of subject positions: what is ethically at stake in the use of proper names, or in recourse to a first-person plural 'we', or in the projection of an implied second-personal 'you' through the very logic of literary address? What authorial commitments arise by writing in the first person, or in the third? Grammatical choices such as these frequently arise in Coetzee as having profoundly ethical ramifications – especially in relation to questions about the authority, and hence the responsibility, on the part of the writer.

An engagement with questions raised by the linguistic sciences is at the core of Coetzee's writing; the fiction and critical essays bear testimony to that, as do Coetzee's own statements on the matter. In response to a question posed by Jean Sévry in 1985, for example, Coetzee speaks about the continuity between his interest in linguistics, and his 'activities as a writer': 'in many ways I am more interested in the linguistic than the literary side of my academic profession', says Coetzee;

I think there is evidence of an interest in problems of language throughout my novels. I don't see any disruption between my professional interest in language and my activities as a writer. (Coetzee and Sévry 1)

And in his opening address at the 'Linguistics at the Millennium' conference held at the University of Cape Town in January 2000, Coetzee expresses the wish to acknowledge, 'in some way', the debt he owes to the linguistic disciplines: 'although I cannot any longer call myself an active linguist, my own approach to language has been shaped more deeply than I know by immersion in ways of thinking encouraged by linguistic science' (Coetzee, Opening address at the 'Linguistics at the Millennium' conference 1). In taking this interdisciplinary continuity seriously, my discussion throughout the book considers Coetzee more broadly as a *writer*, rather than exclusively as a novelist. In his sustained attention to problems of language across his novels and his critical essays (so my argument goes), Coetzee makes an active and original contribution to contemporary literary-critical thinking; his novels do not simply serve as allegories of an extraneous and *given* theoretical or philosophical frame.

In the remarkable series of essays and interviews with David Attwell in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee speaks in some detail about his preoccupations as a writer of fiction and as a literary critic. In many of the discussions to follow I use these essays and dialogues as my starting points, thinking in the tracks of Coetzee as critic, to ask what insights his linguistic investigations may have to offer to a reader of his fiction. *Doubling the Point* thus provides the impetus for the present project, but this is not to say that I read the novels as straightforward illustrations, within a fictional framework, of ideas

delineated in Coetzee's critical writing. As I hope to show, and as even a preliminary reading of his entire oeuvre must testify, the relation between Coetzee's critical writing and his fiction is far more subtle and complex than such a reading would allow.

In this introduction, I place emphasis on a particular moment in Coetzee's intellectual biography, namely, the ten years or so leading up to the writing of his first novel, *Dusklands*, which was published in 1974. In this time Coetzee wrote his MA dissertation on the novels of Ford Madox Ford (he defended his dissertation at the University of Cape Town in 1963) and his doctoral thesis on Samuel Beckett, which he completed at the University of Texas at Austin in 1969. Thus Coetzee begins developing his own literary-critical discourse, but in ways that would prepare the ground for his own distinctive projects in prose fiction.

His doctoral thesis, *The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett: An Essay in Stylistic Analysis* is an important resource, since it provides invaluable insight into Coetzee's preoccupation with narrative as a form of rule-bound play; the thesis also draws attention to, and sheds light on, comments elsewhere in Coetzee's interviews and critical essays that one might otherwise easily overlook. Perhaps most importantly, though: Coetzee's generative interest in linguistically based stylistic analysis as *part of* his enterprise as a writer of fiction is clearly visible throughout his life of writing, and we see the beginnings of this in the thesis on Beckett, which 'treat[s] style [so the abstract tells us] as linguistic choice within the economy of the work of art as a formal whole'. In the course of the argument the thesis explores, but ultimately questions the value, for literary analysis, of statistical methods of stylistic description.³ By the time he wrote his thesis, Coetzee found himself at an unusual intellectual confluence of mathematics, computational logic, linguistic science and English literature. He had his BA Honours degrees in English literature and linguistics – and in mathematics. He completed his MA on Ford Madox Ford at the same time that he was working as a mathematician and computer programmer in England (between 1962 and 1965). Of Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*, Coetzee writes in his MA dissertation that it is 'probably the finest example of literary pure mathematics in English' (Coetzee, *The Works of Ford Madox Ford* x). Speaking to David Attwell in 1992 about his work on Beckett, Coetzee remarks that he set out writing his doctoral thesis at a time when there seemed to him 'to be

something in the air, a possibility that linguistics, mathematics, and textual analysis might be brought together in some way' (*Doubling the Point* 25–6). Even though the project, *in these terms*, did not seem to warrant further exploration on Coetzee's part, the work that he did on Beckett is pivotal in terms of the development of his own craftsmanship as a writer:

The essays I wrote on Beckett's style aren't only academic exercises, in the colloquial sense of that word. They are also attempts to get closer to a secret, a secret of Beckett's that I wanted to make my own. And discard, eventually, as it is with influences. (*Doubling the Point* 25)

Coetzee's immersion in linguistics⁴ enabled him to appreciate more clearly (with 'a degree of consciousness', he says (*Doubling the Point* 25)), the effects of Beckett's writing on his own, and an understanding of style in terms of the author's linguistic choices which, in turn, are at least in part determined by the overall structure of each literary work. Despite his final disaffection with the spiritless mechanics of a numerical analysis of style ('What do the figures tell us? and, specifically, What do the measures measure?' (*The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett* 159)), Coetzee's approach stresses the materiality of writing; style is a matter of observable linguistic phenomena and, by extension, it is the complex sequence of empirical linguistic choices on the part of the writer that produces certain literary-aesthetic effects. In Michael Riffaterre's terms, 'In the sender-receiver function which actualizes the poem, the receiver's behavior may be subjective and variable, but it has an objective invariable cause' (Riffaterre, 'Criteria for Style Analysis' 419). In the attempt to get closer to Beckett's secret *as a writer* the emphasis of the thesis is not so much on the thematic or philosophical content of the works under discussion ('Dante and the Lobster', *Murphy* and *Watt*) as it is an attempt to identify patterns in Beckett's linguistic choices, and to analyse the stylistic effects of these patterns and rhythms within the structure of the literary work. I shall be considering Coetzee's fiction in a related way – as *experiments* with the effects that can be generated by putting certain linguistic structures into the field of narrative play. The young John of Coetzee's fictionalized autobiography, *Youth* (published in 2002), speaks about his first attempt at

writing prose in precisely these terms: 'He sets aside a weekend for his first experiment with prose' and

The story that emerges from the *experiment*, if that is what it is, a story, has no real plot. (Coetzee, *Youth* 61, my emphasis)

It is worth noticing the way in which this anecdote is phrased. 'The story that emerges from the experiment' does not cede syntactical – or subjective – agency to the writer. It is as if a story (if it is that!) surfaces in the writing, independently of authorial control. Here, then, are markers of Coetzee's early leanings towards structuralism, which recall especially the Roland Barthes of 'The Death of the Author' and 'To Write: An Intransitive Verb?'⁵ Indeed, it is with rare enthusiasm in an interview (this time with Stephen Watson in 1978) that Coetzee speaks about Roland Barthes as a source of literary-critical inspiration:

I have the greatest admiration for Barthes as someone who has experienced what I regard as the fundamental movements in modern criticism in a very intense and very intelligent way, and really has much to say to practising writers. (Coetzee and Watson, 'Speaking: J.M. Coetzee' 24)

Here, as elsewhere throughout his interviews and critical essays, Coetzee's engagement with a literary-philosophical figure is distinctive: whether he is speaking about other novelists, or about poets, or linguists, or literary critics, or even scientists or philosophers, Coetzee treats them as *fellow-writers*. As a *writer*, each thinker confronts specific, if complex, challenges in the activity of working with language. Coetzee identifies these challenges and then proceeds to analyse their implications with all the rigour that his own linguistic background affords. At the same time, though, Coetzee himself is an artist, and his literary-critical engagements with novelists, scientists, philosophers...carry the freight one would expect from someone practising the creative arts: 'what linguistic challenges did Kafka face? or Newton? or Celan? or Descartes? How might these challenges best be understood, and how might I learn from these challenges in my own writing? What challenges of my own do I face?' In an interview about Kafka, Coetzee speaks of 'the

kind of writing-in-the-tracks one does in criticism' (*Doubling the Point* 199). If the distinction that is being drawn here is between creative writing and literary criticism, where criticism comes off second-best, it is also, importantly, a distinction between reading and *writing*. Taking proper heed of this second distinction means that great value is placed on the activity of critical writing *as part of* a creative exercise – and the initial assumption about the secondary order of criticism is tempered in an important way. It is worth the trouble to consider this carefully. First, here is the part of the discussion that gives a sense of the subtle and intimate relations of artistic creativity and literary criticism through the activity of writing:

I work on a writer like Kafka [Coetzee says] because he opens for me, or opens me to, moments of analytic intensity. And such moments are, in their lesser way, also a matter of grace, inspiration. Is this a comment about reading, about the intensities of the reading process? Not really. Rather, it is a comment about writing, the kind of writing-in-the-tracks one does in criticism. For my experience is that it is not reading that takes me into the last twist of the burrow, but writing. (*Doubling the Point* 199)

A similar kind of response can be seen when Coetzee writes about Beckett in his doctoral thesis, or about Lacan in his essays on censorship, or about Celan in the *New York Review of Books*, or about nineteenth-century English travel writers in *White Writing*, and in his own fictionalized autobiography, *Youth*. The strong (if implicit) message that comes across is that Beckett, Lacan, Celan and Burchell are all writers themselves, and it is in their capacity *as writers*, with Coetzee writing in their tracks, that the author's own creative activity is sparked.

This brings me to the title of my book, which comes from a passage where Coetzee writes of writing, setting it against the 'monologic ideal' of the straitjacketed interview. This is not to say that writing is under the absolute control of the author (Coetzee speaks of an author's '*phantasmatic omnipotence*' (my emphasis)) or that writing is free; in fact, quite the contrary, and in an intricate way:

Writing is not free expression. There is a true sense in which writing is dialogic: a matter of awakening the countervoices in oneself

and embarking upon speech with them. It is some measure of a writer's seriousness whether he does evoke/invoke those counter-voices in himself, that is, step down from the position of what Lacan calls 'the subject supposed to know.' (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 65)

It is as if Coetzee's critical engagement with the writing of others – already an explicit dialogue – proceeds to raise counter-voices within himself, so that each word that he writes becomes *dialogic* in Bakhtin's specific sense of the term. 'Imagine a dialogue of two persons', writes Bakhtin,

in which the statements of the second speaker are omitted, but in such a way that the general sense is not at all violated. The second speaker is present invisibly, his words are not there, but deep traces left by these words have a determining influence on all the present and visible words of the first speaker. We sense that this is a conversation, although only one person is speaking, and it is a conversation of the most intense kind, for each present, uttered word responds and reacts with its every fibre to the invisible speaker, points to something outside itself, beyond its own limits, to the unspoken words of another person. (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 197)⁶

A serious author, playing up this dialogic potential of writing, instead of trying to suppress it, raises a counter-voice, producing a discourse inflected by an invisible interlocutor. An ultimate and unitary authorial voice is thus no longer assured. Clearly, Coetzee's engagement with other writers is one of intellectual *involvement*. It is not the case, I would argue, that Coetzee merely illustrates, or presents by way of allegory in his own fiction, a theory or philosophy developed by someone else. Instead, throughout his work, Coetzee is responsive to other writers and to practitioners and philosophers of different branches of the linguistic disciplines, but in ways that enable him to develop a refined literary-critical discourse of his own, and to conduct experiments in prose fiction himself with a heightened degree of consciousness about that process. In Bakhtin's terms:

For the prose artist the world is full of other people's words, among which he must orientate himself and whose speech characteristics

he must be able to perceive with a very keen ear. He must introduce them into the plane of his own discourse, but in such a way that this plane is not destroyed. He works with a very rich verbal palette, and he works exceptionally well with it. (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 201)

Coetzee writes about Bakhtin at several important junctures in his own critical writing – in the essay, ‘Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky’ (an essay Coetzee would later identify as pivotal in his career in its turn to a more philosophical engagement with his situation in the world),⁷ in the essay on Breyten Breytenbach in *Giving Offense*, and in a review of Joseph Frank’s five-volume biography of Dostoevsky (in *Stranger Shores*). In this last-mentioned essay, Coetzee speaks about the critical currency of Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism – a dialogic novel is one in which there is no central claim to truth or authority since there is no dominating authorial consciousness; instead the reader is presented with a number of competing voices and discourses. But Coetzee goes on to make an interesting observation: ‘what is missing in Bakhtin’, says Coetzee, is the acknowledgement that dialogism in Dostoevsky is not reducible to a question of ideological positioning, or even novelistic technique. Ultimately, ‘Dostoevskian dialogism grows out of Dostoevsky’s own moral character, out of his ideals, and out of his being as a writer’ (*Stranger Shores* 145–6, my emphasis). In this discussion of Bakhtin and Dostoevsky (which I revisit in some detail in Chapter 3, ‘Voice’), we see in Coetzee an attentiveness and a return to the idea of authorial consciousness – and the ethical implications attendant upon that. These preoccupations constitute a break with more programmatic structuralist conceptions of authorship, authority and authorial consciousness.

At the time of doing his doctorate, Coetzee is concerned to meet the rigour demanded by a linguistically based stylistics, but simultaneously, to ‘evolve a linguistic stylistics with some kind of critical penetration’ (*Doubling the Point* 197) – or, in the terms of his thesis, ‘to present non-trivial critical conclusions based on empirically verifiable stylistic features’ (Coetzee, *The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett* 156). It is within this distinctive context that I think Coetzee’s thesis on Beckett can be read as a sustained critical engagement with the work collected in a book called *Essays on the Language of Literature*, most especially with the essays in Part Five,

'Style and Stylistics'. More specifically still, the thesis seems to me to be in direct conversation with contributions by W.K. Wimsatt, Richard Ohmann and the two essays by Michael Riffaterre. Riffaterre is careful to acknowledge the importance of linguistics in stylistic analysis, but also recognizes the risk of conflating style and language:

Linguistic, structural description of style [...] requires a difficult adjustment: on the one hand, stylistic facts can be apprehended only in language, since that is their vehicle; on the other hand, they must have a specific character, since otherwise they could not be distinguished from linguistic facts. (Riffaterre, 'Criteria for Style Analysis' 412)

In his thesis Coetzee takes this problem to the next level. Where Riffaterre is preoccupied with the relation between linguistics and stylistics, Coetzee is interested in integrating linguistic stylistics within a meaningful *literary* analysis.⁸ Coetzee explicitly states his 'focal points of disagreement with positivist stylistic linguistics':

(a) The experience of a work of literature is not necessarily linear in time, i.e. the analogy of reader to decoding device is misleading [Riffaterre draws this analogy in his essay, 'Criteria for Style Analysis'].

(b) Stylistic features are not necessarily more primitive than larger-scale structural or formal features, i.e. the program of stylistic description followed by critical analysis may sometimes be misguided. (Coetzee, *The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett* 18)

What Coetzee hopes to demonstrate is that linguistically based stylistics 'do[es] not, and seemingly cannot, integrate the study of style into overall literary study' (Coetzee, *The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett* 7). Yet in much of his own writing, Coetzee explores further the possibility of just such an integration, which means that his discourse falls beyond the generally accepted reach of linguistic stylistics. Coetzee discusses several of the writers with whom he engages (Kafka, Newton, Beckett, Celan, the Dutch poet, Achterberg – to name a few) as pressing the boundaries of their respective languages. Coetzee, in order to speak with justice about these writers, in turn

hopes to 'push at the limits of the linguistic disciplines' (*Doubling the Point* 197).

Let me demonstrate this briefly by tracking (reconstructing?) just one of Coetzee's many intellectual paths, which has to do with his fictional account of his own emergence as a writer – and his engagement with structuralism. A variant of Barthes' conception of the 'death of the author' occurs to the John of *Youth*: 'might it not be argued that the invention of computers has changed the nature of art, by making the author and the condition of the author's heart irrelevant?' (Coetzee, *Youth* 161).⁹ It is at this time that Coetzee was experimenting with computer-generated poetry. In the brief explanatory essay that he attached to one of these poems ('Computer Poem', published in 1963 in the University of Cape Town student journal, *The Lion and the Impala*),¹⁰ Coetzee goes so far as to suggest that even most of his editing of the poem could have been done by a more sophisticated computer program; not only the author, but even the editor cedes ground to the writing generated by the machine. In the abstract of his doctoral thesis, Coetzee understands style to be a question of linguistic choice within the structure of the work of art as a formal whole – and it is interesting to see that it is in related terms that he speaks about the program that he wrote for his computer poems. The poem (Coetzee tells us) is structured on a paradigm of eight statements (action-present, place, manner, action-past, action-present, place, manner, manner). 'I', 'you' and 'they' – are added later at random, 'and then', Coetzee goes on to say, '(somewhat cynically) statements of Nature-description are inserted randomly' ('Computer Poem' 12–13). The computer generated 2,100 poems, within the programmed structure, using a vocabulary bank of about 800 words. Coetzee then chose one of these poems and edited it:

Poem (ex computer)
 Dawn Birds Stream
 Calm-Morning
 You) Stand-Among
 Forest
 Alone Tense
 You) Cry
 You) Spend-The-Nights

- 1) Away-From
 Terrified Rapt
 Owls Blackmen
 You) Hope Violence
 (Coetzee, 'Computer Poem' 12)

And:

Poem (edited)
 Dawn, birds, a stream, a calm morning.
 You stand among the trees alone and tense.
 You have cried.
 You spend the nights away from me,
 Terrified, rapt,
 Among owls and black men,
 Hoping for violence.
 (Coetzee, 'Computer Poem' 12)

An experiment then, in which the final outcome challenges complacent assumptions about the attribution of authorship to a text. But what is at stake in the notion of 'experiment' itself? This question is crucial in my approach to Coetzee's writing, not least because I take it to serve as a conceptual hinge between Coetzee's preoccupation with linguistics (especially structuralist linguistics, and transformational-generative grammar)¹¹ on the one hand, and his attentiveness to the potential – but not entirely predictable – ethical impact of a literary artwork on the other. It is the idea of experiment that seems to me to precipitate Coetzee from literary criticism towards the practice of writing fiction. 'The *feel* of writing fiction', he says,

is one of freedom, of irresponsibility, or better, of responsibility toward something that has not yet emerged, that lies somewhere at the end of the road. When I write criticism, on the other hand, I am always aware of a responsibility toward a goal that has been set for me not only by the argument, not only by the whole philosophical tradition into which I am implicitly inserting myself, but also by the rather tight discourse of criticism itself. (*Doubling the Point* 246)

Even though Coetzee openly expresses his appreciation of structuralism, and the work of Barthes in particular, it is clear that Coetzee's own development of a literary-critical discourse goes well beyond what a mainstream structural analysis would afford. In its most deductive form, structuralism considers *any* narrative (in a sense broad enough to include paintings, cinema, news items, conversation, stained-glass windows, theatre...) to 'share [...] with other narratives a common structure which is open to analysis' (Barthes, 'Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives' 253). The focus of attention in this strict and early phase of Barthes' structuralism is on the technical and entirely predictable interrelation between the parts of the posited structure. Yet if an 'experiment' has to do with objective physical phenomena of empirical science, it is, at the same time, a 'test', a 'trial' a 'procedure adopted in *uncertainty* whether it will answer the purpose', an 'action or operation undertaken in order to discover something *unknown*' (*OED*, my emphasis); the approach in an experiment is not deductive in the way that the structuralist enterprise so explicitly announces itself to be; the results of an experiment, by definition, are not known *a priori*.

In his own fiction Coetzee goes on to experiment with the possibilities that are at once limited, and opened up by linguistic structures. Just as philosophers develop thought-experiments, Coetzee develops formal and literary ones, setting up various conditions of possibility within language for aesthetic play and therefore, contingently, for historical and ethical awareness.¹² It seems to me that this is a central preoccupation in Coetzee's activity as a writer – a negotiation of the tension between the material stuff of the words that have to be written, and the uncertainty of the more elusively abstract impact of a work of art on the other. Structuralism, in its own terms, and versions of stylistics rooted in structural linguistics, stop short of a discussion of the ethical effects of the work of art. But it is this interplay of physical medium and abstract effect that inspires Coetzee's own thinking about art, both as a writer and as a reader, in the broadest possible sense of this latter term. Thus the *impetus* of Coetzee's discussions about art – while taking into account all the implications of the linguistic turn in stylistics and in approaches to narrative – is very different from that of an orthodox structuralist approach. At least some of the complexity of Coetzee's aesthetics is evoked in an incident in *Youth*, when the protagonist encounters a

painting by Robert Motherwell, *Elegy for the Spanish Republic 24*. The painting consists of 'no more than an elongated black blob on a white field'. Nevertheless, the John of *Youth*

is transfixed. Menacing and mysterious, the black shape takes him over. A sound like the stroke of a gong goes out from it, leaving him shaken and weak-kneed.

Where does its power come from, this amorphous shape that bears no resemblance to Spain or anything else, yet stirs up a well of dark feeling within him? It is not beautiful, yet it speaks like beauty, imperiously [...] Does *Elegy for the Spanish Republic* correspond to some indwelling shape in his soul? (Coetzee, *Youth* 92)

The painting 'speaks' to its viewer in a singularly complex and intimate way, and yet one can imagine that at the time of creating this work, the painter may well have been experimenting with black blobs on a white ground. Coetzee often speaks about the scene of writing along similar lines: the writer experiments by placing words on a page, without knowing what the effects will be, and even without quite knowing what it is that he wanted to say. It is only once the words have been written and read (and once the words are written, the writer, too, becomes a reader) that something will have been said, and that we can begin to appreciate the dynamic and protean force-field of the work of art as it takes singular effect in each reader's or viewer's response.¹³ The program that Barthes sets up in his 'Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives' is clearly not intended to take on an aesthetic discussion of this kind, and if we are to accept that there are sympathetic resonances between the young John of *Youth* and Coetzee himself, then we read in the emergent writer an increasing disaffection with deductive assumptions of an innate and self-contained structure – assumptions shared by structuralist approaches to narrative clearly rooted in Saussurean linguistics, and by approaches in other disciplines that apply the binary systems of computational logic. Thus the John of *Youth* comes to the realization that the 'threat of the toy [the computer] by which he earns his living, the threat that makes it more than just a toy, is that it will burn *either-or* paths in the brains of its

users and thus lock them irreversibly into its binary logic' (Coetzee, *Youth* 160), and

Finally he has no respect for any version of thinking that can be embodied in a computer's circuitry. The more he has to do with computing, the more it seems to him like chess: a tight little world defined by made-up rules, one that sucks in boys of a certain susceptible temperament and turns them half-crazy, as he is half-crazy, so that all the time they deludedly think they are playing the game, the game is in fact playing them. (Coetzee, *Youth* 149)

Ultimately, linguistically rooted structuralist approaches are not able to saturate Coetzee's own wide-ranging aesthetic enquiries, but these approaches, and others based on mathematical logic, evidently have a pivotal role to play in raising the questions that generate Coetzee's enquiry in the first place.

Structuralism and the theories in its wake have been censured for a notorious (if at least in some instances, arguable) lack of interest in historical or political concerns. And it is perhaps at least in part due to his structuralist leanings that this charge is sometimes levelled at Coetzee's fiction. But in many of Coetzee's explicit references to structuralism, it is interesting to note that the lessons learnt in these disciplines *give rise to* his own ethico-historical insights – and this informs his fiction in crucial ways. It is *thanks to* his immersion in generative linguistics and other forms of structuralism that Coetzee identifies his realization of the contingency of English as the most powerful imperial language. 'What structuralism did do for me [...] was to collapse dramatically the distance between high European culture and so-called primitive cultures,' says Coetzee. 'It became clear that fully as much *thinking* went into the productions of primitive cultures' (*Doubling the Point* 24), to the extent that 'the term *primitive* meant nothing' (*Doubling the Point* 52; see also 53). And although structuralism and related linguistic disciplines in themselves did not provide a key to the activity of writing fiction,¹⁴ it is through his exposure to the grammars of other languages, including non-Indo-European languages (which Coetzee encountered in his forays into Chomskyan and other forms of structuralist linguistics), that the young writer would entertain thoughts more typically

characterized as postcolonial.¹⁵ His study of generative grammar ‘at quite a technical level [...] gave the biggest jolt to a Western colonial whose imaginary identity had been sewn together (how thinly, and with how many rents!) from the tatters passed down to him by high modernist art’ (*Doubling the Point* 24). Coetzee would go on to write an essay (as part of his doctorate at the University of Texas) on the morphology of languages that influenced one another in the early days of the Cape Colony – Nama, Malay and Dutch – and the scenes of colonial encounter that he would write into *Dusklands* had not only historical, but also linguistic specificity. The question of cultural contingency and its ethical implications (at the very least *signalled* in the confrontation of different languages), I take to be one of the leading concerns throughout Coetzee’s fiction.

This brings me to the foundational argument of my book: throughout Coetzee’s writing, in the critical essays as much as in the fiction, self-reflexive linguistic questions are at the core of his ethical enquiries, enquiries inflected by attentiveness to cultural and historical contingencies. By implication then, a sharper understanding of Coetzee’s contributions to the fields of ethics and literary aesthetics in his fiction can be gained by tracking a path back to his studies in the linguistic sciences. In the course of the book I discuss the *links* between Coetzee’s linguistic, aesthetic and ethical concerns through a series of questions. How does the grammar of ‘I’ or ‘he’ position the writing self – and in relation to what, or to whom (Chapter 1, ‘Not I’)? What are the linguistic constraints governing a meaningful encounter between ‘you’ and ‘I’ – or (differently put) how might one think of an ethics of address, especially when ‘I’ and ‘you’ are writer and reader (Chapter 2, ‘You’)? On what terms could one return to the idea of authorial consciousness, and what are the responsibilities of this authorial voice, especially with respect to the countervoices raised in literary writing (Chapter 3, ‘Voice’)? How does one write or speak to or *for* the other who has no voice, and what contribution can be made by literary, rather than strictly philosophical discourses (Chapter 4, ‘Voiceless’)? What do proper names tell us about the relations of power and the sites of authority of those who use these names, especially in colonial and postcolonial contexts (Chapter 5, ‘Names’)? What do the morphologies of words and the encounters between different languages reveal about cultural and historical contingency, and what are the ethical implications of running up against

the limit of what can be said (Chapter 6, 'Etymologies')? Finally (in the conclusion, 'We'), what are the effects of playing these linguistic structures out in works of fiction – and more broadly, how might the languages of the arts transcend ordinary linguistic limits, perhaps recalibrating the conditions of possibility for the relation of one to the other? In what ways does this extend the range of ethical engagements of we, the readers?

From this brief listing of chapters, it will be evident that my presentational strategy throughout the book constitutes a departure from other book-length studies of Coetzee. In nearly all the extant monographs on Coetzee, two distinctive patterns emerge: a series of discussions of the novels in more or less chronological order,¹⁶ and/or an undertaking to demonstrate the ways in which Coetzee's work embodies a given theoretical or philosophical position; Lacan and Levinas have provided the strongest critical lenses thus far.¹⁷ The important and recent exception here is Stephen Mulhall's *The Wounded Animal: J.M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy*. Mulhall's book focuses on *Elizabeth Costello*, and, as its title suggests, examines recent philosophical responses to Coetzee's writing, among them essays by philosophers Cora Diamond, Stanley Cavell and John McDowell, collected in the anthology, *Philosophy and Animal Life*. In their philosophical, rather than strictly literary or critical-theoretical impetus, *Philosophy and Animal Life* and *The Wounded Animal* constitute an important expansion to the field of Coetzee scholarship; I shall return to these texts in Chapter 4, 'Voiceless'.

Instead of dealing with themes in each novel considered as a discrete entity (the characteristic approach in literary responses to Coetzee) my book offers a series of discussions on linguistico-ethical topics, each of which ranges across Coetzee's entire oeuvre. I have already given an indication of the subtle interweaving of Coetzee's activities as critic and artist, and, in taking heed of the difficult relation between these two roles, I do not discuss scenes and events within the fiction simply as a thematization or staging of a received philosophical or theoretical framework, but rather as part of Coetzee's experiments in narrative fiction, which gain an extra dimension when considered against the ground of his own participation in, and contribution to, contemporary literary-aesthetic debates. In other words, the emphasis throughout my book shifts from the more usual

discussion of the *themes* of Coetzee's novels (whether we read those themes as theoretical or philosophical) to the aesthetic and ethical effects of the linguistic structures that the writer puts into play. As a consequence of this approach, my book is structured in terms of ideas and literary strategies which (as Elizabeth Costello does!) transgress the confines of each novel, and pose a challenge to the conventionally accepted limits of fictional, literary and academic discourses.

In the first two chapters, 'Not I' and 'You', I show how Coetzee's careful exploration of the grammar of person in Roman Jakobson and Emile Benveniste carries through to the fields of aesthetics and ethics, to become a discussion of what Coetzee calls the 'deep semantics of person'. Chapter 3, 'Voice', constitutes a hinge between discussion of the implications of Coetzee's experiments with structuralist conceptions of the 'death of the author' in the first half of my book, and a reinstating of some notion of authorial consciousness in the second half. Chapters 4, 5 and 6, 'Voiceless', 'Names' and 'Etymologies', carry the idea of authorial consciousness through, but in relation to its situatedness within ethical, cultural and historical contingencies. It is in Chapter 4 ('Voiceless') that I raise some of the questions that have also been of interest to contemporary analytic philosophers responding to Coetzee's work: what does literature have to offer in debates usually thought to be conducted best within the domain of philosophy? This question informs my discussions for the rest of the book, ending in a consideration of what is at stake, finally, in saying, 'we, the readers'.

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