

The Ethico-Politics of Autobiographical Writings: J.M. Coetzee's *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime*

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Abstract: Confessional writing in English has been burgeoning in South Africa over the past two decades. Covering a wide social range, autobiographies of novelists to political leaders, social activists and journalists, artists and scientists have all contributed to forging a considerable repertoire of individual testimonies making up the inclusive history of South African society. Outside of the instrumentalising context of the resistance struggle, in the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's dissuasive tendency to subsume personal testimonies within the hegemonic national discourse of forgiveness and reconciliation, the current publishers' increased interest in individual testimonies should not come as a surprise. Indeed, the contemporary proliferation of autobiographical writings can be seen as intrinsically embedded in the general tendency of post-millennial South African fiction to turn from the public sphere towards the private one, to reclaim space for auto-critique, self-questioning and expression of personal grief. With particular reference to the trilogy of fictionalized memoirs by J.M. Coetzee, *Boyhood* (1997), *Youth* (2002) and *Summertime* (2009), this article offers a detailed analysis of J.M. Coetzee's contribution to the flourishing field of South African autobiographical writing. While acknowledging the discursive shift towards the personal domain, this paper argues that Coetzee's works maintain the principles of 'committed' writing, working largely at the level of personal ethico-political responsibility of resistance against any spiritually oppressive systems. It is through Coetzee's formal experimentation, through the author's radical disruption of the discourses of the autobiographical genre, what Jane Poyner terms "acts of genre," rather than through his works' substance, that Coetzee manages to counteract established discourses and in doing so, restores the richness of South African intellectual life, which was severely regulated and stifled under apartheid.

Keywords: J.M. Coetzee; autobiography; committed writing; ethico-politics

Autobiographical writing in English has been flourishing in South Africa over the last two decades. Since the country's transition to democratic rule in 1994, the number of Anglophone memoirs and autobiographies being published each year has risen significantly. Covering a wide social scope, life stories of writers to politicians, artists and journalists, socio-political activists and religious authorities have all contributed to forging a considerable repertoire of individual testimonies making up the inclusive history of South African society. The contemporary proliferation of confessional writing and personal testimonies can be seen as embedded in a wider shift of emphasis in South African writing of the period that has been identified by a number of literary critics and cultural commentators, namely the passage from the public domain of politics and resistance struggle which characterised South African writing under apartheid to the markedly more introspective, private realm of self-questioning, reflection, and reclaiming of space for expression of personal grief (Attwell & Harlow 2000: 4; Nixon 1997: 77; Poyner 2008: 103-104).

Indeed, in the instrumentalising context of the anti-apartheid resistance, questions of political engagement, social responsibility and accountability were foregrounded and culture was promoted primarily as 'a weapon of struggle.' Writing under such circumstances became primarily a manifestation of one's ideological affiliations and thus a profoundly political act. The newly formulated agenda of 'protest' writing required explicit and straightforward engagement with the contemporary milieu. Thus, highly elusive postmodern narratives of such writers as J.M. Coetzee were denounced, the rejection being founded in their assumed apoliticism and the general postmodern tendency to mystify information and obscure reality. Instead, neo-realist strategies of representing contemporaneity were embraced.¹ Expressing, in Hayden White's words, the pronounced "impulse to moralize reality," social realism appeared to be better-suited for the purposes of the anti-apartheid struggle's didacticism (White 1987: 14). Yet, such subjugation of aesthetic choices to political imperatives was not endorsed without reservations and it soon elicited severe criticism from a number of South African intellectuals. In his 1987 Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech, J.M. Coetzee explicitly lamented the degrading properties of what Nadine Gordimer termed the period's expressed "conformity to an orthodoxy of opposition": "South African literature is a literature in bondage [...]. In South Africa there is

¹ Some critics point to the tendency to deploy realist modes of narration as being most evident among black writers. When pondering the developments in South African writing prior to the demise of apartheid, Mkhize juxtaposes "white writing" and "black writing" (Mkhize 2001: 173). Whereas by "white writing" he refers to the expressed tendency to deploy modern or postmodern modes of historical narration, "black writing" is perceived as embracing neo-realist strategies of representing the past.

now too much truth for art to hold, truth by the bucketful, truth that overwhelms and swamps every act of the imagination" (Gordimer 1988: 106; Coetzee 1992: 99). Among the first black writers to object to the realist tradition was Lewis Nkosi, who, as early as in 1965, bemoaned that black writing of the period remained closer to journalism than creative writing.² In his view, protest literature was a mere "journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature" (Nkosi 1965: 126). In his seminal essay entitled "Preparing Ourselves for Freedom," Albie Sachs went a step further by pleading for the deployment of "culture [as] a weapon of struggle" to be banned for a period of five years in order to counteract what he called "a shallow and forced relationship between the two" (Sachs 1990: 187). Similarly, the excesses of protest literature were invoked by Njabulo Ndebele, who deplored "the exhaustion of the content by the form" symptomatic of what he refers to as "the literature of the spectacle." In Ndebele's view, the entire ethos of committed literature "permits neither inner dialogue with the self, nor a social public dialogue. It breeds insensitivity, insincerity and delusion" (Ndebele 1994: 41-42, 50). In order to overcome what Nkosi called the "crisis of representation" and liberate South African literature of the period from "bondage," (Nkosi 1988) Ndebele advocated "the rediscovery of the ordinary," by which he understood cultivation of common African spirit by means of "the sobering power of contemplation, of close analysis, and the mature acceptance of failure, weakness, and limitations" (Ndebele 1994: 50). Manifestly, "the rediscovery of the ordinary" would entail a shift in focus in South African fiction from the public domain to the private sphere, to self-reflection and auto-critique. Such a self-questioning gaze inwards would naturally promote an emphasis on categories of experience that were shown disregard by the literature of the spectacle, and in doing so, it would also require a degree of formal experimentation in its quest for a narrative mode well-attuned to the newly formulated agenda. Ideally, the newly adopted narrative mode would reclaim space for an "inner dialogue with the self" without neglecting "a social public dialogue" advocated by Ndebele, thus engaging to deconstruct the public/private dichotomy.

Following the final demise of apartheid, outside of the restrictive context of the resistance struggle, South African writings seemed to be liberated from the 'bondage' of political and historical imperatives. Therefore, the current discursive shift towards the personal domain favouring introspection and auto-critique, which accounts for the publishers' increased interest in life writing, should not come as a surprise. Furthermore, the trend can also be viewed as reinforced

² At this point in history, Nkosi's criticism addressed exclusively black writers. In his 1987 speech entitled "Resistance and the Crisis of Representation," the argument was extended to incorporate white writers (Nkosi 1988).

by the workings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It can be argued that although the TRC hearings incited people to confess and provided a forum for expression of personal traumas, through their exclusionary practices and their restricted scope, they simultaneously left wide strata of society marginalized and deprived of an opportunity for self-representation.³ Furthermore, the Commission's dissuasive tendency to subsume personal testimonies within the hegemonic national discourse of forgiveness and reconciliation only contributed to the general sense of disillusionment and left many striving to regain space for expression of personal grief. As Poyner has rightfully pointed out, the TRC's significant contribution to the flourishing of autobiographical writing in the period directly following its hearings can also be traced down to the simple fact that it was the TRC hearings that effectively introduced truth and confession into the South African public domain (Poyner 2008: 103). We might be, therefore, inclined to believe, after Van der Vlies, that:

For all of its shortcomings [...], the TRC's self-consciousness about the importance of narrative, and its staging of (select, selected) narratives as partial enactment of, and as encouragement for, a national catharsis of sorts, positively invited ongoing excavation of narratives of individual and community experiences under apartheid. (Van der Vlies 2008: 950-951)

What is more, the shift may be also interpreted as embedded in a much larger, global phenomenon. Quoting after the prominent critic Barbara Everett, Kusek asserts that: "This is an age of biography, not of poetry" (Kusek 2012: 31). He views the comment as referring to an equal extent to the contemporary world literature as well as well-established literary criticism that has recently displayed unprecedented preoccupation with a variety of life writing practices. Indeed, a world-wide proliferation of life narratives over the last two decades has been identified by a number of critics, prompting Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, the authors of the landmark study of the genre *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2001), to revise and update their seminal work. Published in 2010, the second edition chronicles what the authors termed "the memoir boom" of the past two decades characterised by the emergence of increasingly multifarious forms of autobiographical writing (Smith and Watson 2010: 127-165). Indeed, over the last twenty years life writing has become a prized

³ Numerous political commentators have pointed to the exclusionary practices of the TRC. Among others, the objections were voiced against: its short duration; the fact that less than 10 % of testifiers were able to bear witness at public hearings; the relatively short period chosen for consideration, namely 1 March 1960 to 10 May 1994, which left much of the colonialist and apartheid oppression unaccountable for; the fact that its hearings were restricted exclusively to the investigation of human rights violations, thus excluding, among others, gender-related crimes equally engendered by apartheid legislation (Poyner 2008, Mamdani 2002, Van der Vlies 2008).

commodity both in print and online. Whereas Smith and Watson focus on self-referential writing, Coullie and Meyer point to "a phenomenal mushrooming of interest in auto/biographical accounts," which they have observed since the 1970's (Coullie et al. 2006: 16). The multiplicity of life writing forms in Southern Africa itself (the region is the main focus of the study) has led the researchers to settle on the wide-embracing term "auto/biographical account" that incorporates, among others, autobiography, biography, memoir, diaries, journals and letters. In their introduction to the special issue of *Journal of Literary Studies* devoted to the study of autobiography in Southern Africa, Vambe and Chennells see the recent surge of interest in auto/biography as stemming from the preoccupations of postmodernism. They claim that, as metanarratives of the past and the present are deconstructed, authors and academics "turn for understanding to the local, the particular, and finally the personal" (Vambe & Chennells 2009: 2). Indeed, close relationships between South African and international book markets enjoy a long tradition and date back to apartheid times. A boom in resistance auto/biographies in the 1970's and the 1980's, and the fact that most of the writings were banned in South Africa under apartheid legislation contributed to the works' publication and wide dissemination in other parts of Africa and globally. Therefore, it may be argued that, having long enjoyed a prominence in the international book market, post-apartheid South Africa has remained responsive to trends and expectations that emanate from there.

Within such a context, the gathering of pace of the auto/biographical turn manifested in the contemporary abundance of life writing: autobiographies, biographies, memoirs, fictionalized life narratives, as well as 'assisted' autobiographies seems to be a natural consequence of the social, political and cultural immediacies of the post-apartheid dispensation. In her informative study of South African autobiographical writing in the period following the TRC hearings entitled "'To Remember is Like Starting to See': South African Life Stories Today," Annie Gagiano draws our attention to the wide social range of the texts analysed. The multifarious collection of life-histories that have been published in post-apartheid South Africa include: the recollections of participation in the workings of the TRC, Desmond Tutu's spiritually-oriented *No Future without Forgiveness* (1999) and Zenzile Khoisan's *Jakaranda Time: An Investigator's View of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (2001) being just two examples among many, as well as life narratives of prominent lawyers: Albie Sachs's *The Free Diary of Albie Sachs* (2004), and more recent *The Strange Alchemy of Life and Law* (2009), and Richard J. Goldstone's *For Humanity: Reflections of a War Crimes Investigator* (2000). The period also accommodates autobiographies of political leaders, most notably Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994), as well as

the former state president F.W. de Klerk's *The Last Trek* (1999).⁴ The two publications clearly testify to what Gagiano terms the democratic nature of South African autobiography, which is manifested in its capacity to represent the point of view of political activists on opposite sides of the struggle. The apartheid politician Magnus Malan's *My Life with the South African Defence Force* (2006) and the ANC activist Ronald Kasrils's *Armed and Dangerous: From Undercover Struggle to Freedom* (2004), as well as the white opposition leader Alex Boraine's *A Life in Transition* (2008) can serve as just three more examples among many. Similarly, a great number of journalists have recently published their autobiographies. Zubeida Jaffer's *Our Generation* (2003), Max du Preez's *Pale Native: Memories of a Renegade Reporter* (2003), and Fred Khumalo's *Touch my Blood* (2006) all appeared in the last decade. Numerous theatre celebrities, among others Patrick Mynhardt, Peter-Dirk Uys and Antony Sher, as well as famous musicians such as Hugh Masekela have also recorded their life stories, with Masekela's *Still Grazing* (2004) having received international acclaim. The period is also rich in autobiographical accounts by South African intellectuals and academics recording their work in the fields as varied as: anthropology - Philip Tobias's *Into the Past: A Memoir* (2005), urology - Johan Naudé's *Making the Cut* (2007), or African language and orature - P.T. Mtuzé's *An Alternative Struggle* (2007). Yet, the most significant contribution to the last two decades' autobiographical output was, without doubts, made by major South African writers. The series of J.M. Coetzee's fictionalized memoirs comprising *Boyhood* (1997), *Youth* (2003) and *Summertime* (2009), now published in single volume under the subtitle *Scenes from Provincial Life*, Antjie Krog's *A Change of Tongue* (2003), Chris van Wyk's childhood memoir *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy* (2004), Breyten Breytenbach's *Dog Heart* (1998), Bessie Head's posthumous compilation of letters to Patrick and Wendy Cullinan *Imaginative Trespasser* (2005), Tatamkhulu Afrika's complex autobiography published three years after his death *Mr. Chameleon* (2005), as well as André Brink's *Fork in the Road* (2009) and Zakes Mda's *Sometimes there is a Void - Memoirs of an Outsider* (2011) all constitute a fascinating addition to the wide spectrum of life recollections recording from different angles personal contributions to the South African historical, political and intellectual process.

Similar survey by Coullie and Meyer discriminates between three major categories of auto/biographical production in post-apartheid South Africa: personal memoirs, accounts which reclaim portions of history or experience suppressed by the apartheid regime, and auto/biographies which focus on their subjects' at-

⁴ Gagiano interestingly notes the two autobiographies' unintentional interplay on words, the title of F.W. de Klerk's life history indicating a decisively more backward-looking orientation (Gagiano 2009: 273).

tempts to adjust to a new political dispensation (Coullie et al. 2006: 31-35). While the three categories may be seen as largely overlapping, the division remains valuable as it signals some of the works' pervading concerns, which to a great extent mirror the themes permeating much of post-apartheid literary output. Interestingly, as if belying Gagiano's claims concerning the democratic nature of the latest South African autobiographical output, Coullie and Meyer point out a racial imbalance among the texts published, with auto/biographical writings portraying white subjects outnumbering those depicting black subjects by almost three to one (Coullie et al. 2006: 30). Yet, both surveys seem to agree with Rob Nixon's analysis that at this specific historical juncture, after South Africa's democratic turn "a space has opened up for writing that probes the tensions between collective and personal commitments" (Nixon quoted in Coullie et al. 2006: 49).

Indeed, as Gagiano notes, this considerable oeuvre of texts, though manifestly testifying to the discursive shift towards the personal domain of introspective reflection, maintain the principles of 'committed' writing. While engaging to reconstruct the disjunction between the public and private spheres, the majority of autobiographical works analysed remain invariably preoccupied with 'South Africanness' and national identity. Placing emphasis on the socially and politically embedded character of the autobiographers' lives, the texts discussed remain historically situated, heavily contextualized and publicly oriented (Gagiano 2009: 261-262). This social orientation is evidenced by numerous works' explicit reference to South Africa in their title, either simply by the insertion of the country's name, or by the deployment of geographical or historical markers such as "Robben Island" or "apartheid." The texts' quest for universality and their desire to ascertain the ideological assent of South African masses is also exhibited in the authors' choice to publish in English, despite their differing linguistic background. Indeed, many of the works studied were conceived as a manifestation of one's responsibility towards his/her country and a demonstration of the author's contribution to the society. Such an ideological agenda would explain the authors' marked predilection for such themes as belonging, social adjustment, the importance of bearing witness and the need to reinvent the country and forge an inclusive national identity. Consequently, as Gagiano asserts, the overall impression one gathers from exploring a large body of contemporary South African life narratives is one of "a multifarious collection of compatriots" unvaryingly preoccupied with "the recognition of South African diversities and differences as sources of mutual enrichment" in their quest for a new 'South Africanness' (Gagiano 2009: 262, 278).

How does one of the most celebrated South African writers, J. M. Coetzee's life writing inscribe itself in the contemporary framework of South African, or in-

deed global, auto/biographical turn? Can J.M. Coetzee's post-apartheid oeuvre, and in particular the sequence of his fictionalized memoirs: *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (1997), *Youth* (2002), and *Summertime* (2009) be viewed as constituting a significant contribution to the discourse of engaged life writing? Or shall we interpret the writer's consistent disengagement with contemporary politics, his preoccupation with the ethics of intellectualism, his concern for the notion of authorial agency, and his marked predilection for self-questioning reflection, which have been exhibited most notably in his later, post-millennial texts (including the autobiographical works mentioned), as an overt manifestation of his withdrawal from the public realm and a deliberate choice to turn his gaze inwards? Since they engage with the depiction of fictionalized versions of Coetzee's younger self, and in many ways display the author's disillusionment with socially and historically embedded nature of human existence, the above mentioned memoirs may indeed be seen by some as claiming a space that is entirely detached from the domain of politics and society. Furthermore, given the writer's well-known insistence on protecting his private self, one might be inclined to believe that his recently published autobiographical works mark a crack in his scrupulously forged and closely guarded stronghold of an intellectual recluse, holding a key to solving the puzzle that J.M. Coetzee's personality constitutes to the imagination of the majority of his readers. Yet, when concerning a writer who is renowned for his taciturnity and reticence, his avoidance of any kind of publicity or media attention, an author whose rare public addresses took the form of lectures narrated by one of his fictional alter egos, one shall refrain from passing any judgements without having recourse to a detailed analysis of his works. Indeed, Coetzee has a reputation of an author who is invariably elusive on matters of politics, but simultaneously resents any type of intrusions into his personal life, in other words, an intellectual who has conscientiously carved himself, to use J.M. Coetzee's own words, a position of "nonposition" (Coetzee 1996: 84).⁵ In one of his rare interviews conducted by a fellow academic, David Attwell, Coetzee explicitly admits that his difficulty is "precisely with the project of stating positions, taking positions" (Coetzee 1992: 205). Would this reluctance on Coetzee's part to produce a determined stance on political or social matters, his chosen silence on socio-economic considerations imply that, as opposed to the great majority of contemporary South African autobiographers, J.M. Coetzee can hardly be examined within the paradigm of engaged writing and public intellectualism? And if

⁵ Indeed, Coetzee famously shirks oral interviews and avoids public speeches. He did not collect either of his two Booker Prizes for Fiction in person. Interestingly, his correspondence with Philip R. Wood published in a special edition of *South Atlantic Quarterly* (1994) offers an intriguing study, where the writer's succinct answers appear cynical when juxtaposed with the interviewer's lengthy questions.

his autobiographical writings could indeed be seen as promoting ethical responsibilities advocated by committed writing, would this imply Coetzee's betrayal of his own cause, a withdrawal of his famous denouncement of the silencing and intellectually degrading properties of the resistance literature?

To provide a response to the above-posed questions would require a closer analysis of the genre of autobiography, as well as a discussion of the implications such analysis might have for the interpretation of the trilogy of Coetzee's fictionalized memoirs: *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life, Youth and Summertime*. According to Lejeune, what enables autobiography to be interpreted as such are the terms of a bilateral contract between the author and the reader. In his seminal work *On Autobiography*, Philippe Lejeune states:

As opposed to all forms of fiction, biography and autobiography are referential texts:[...] they claim to provide information about a 'reality' exterior to the text, and so to submit to a test of verification. [...] All referential texts thus entail what I would call a "referential pact" implicit or explicit, in which are included a definition of the field of the real that is invoked and a statement of the modes and the degrees of resemblance to which the text lays claim. (Lejeune 1989: 22)

It seems that what Lejeune views as the organizing principle of autobiography remains in line with Laura Marcus's assertion that what primarily distinguishes autobiography from fiction is its ability "to secure [...] the much desired unity of the subject and object of knowledge - through the shared identity of the author and the autobiographical subject" (Marcus 1995: 42). In her perceptive study of female autobiographies, Susan Stanford Friedman goes a step further in her pronouncement that what guarantees the fixity of boundaries of the autobiographical genre is the concept of individuality based on the assumption that the autobiographical self constitutes a distinct, fixed and stable entity (Friedman 1998: 72-3). Such a traditional understanding of the genre of autobiography goes against the principles of artistic and spiritual freedom that Coetzee seems to subscribe to. Since the orthodoxy of the established canons of life-writing can be viewed in terms of imprisonment of one's intellectual capacities, and given the inconclusive and flexible nature of human interactions, including all kinds of bilateral contracts, there appears to be no reason why such 'a referential pact' should not remain open to renegotiation. In fact, the dynamic character of the relationship between the author and the reader permeates much of Coetzee's output, both fictional and critical. It is therefore easy to imagine that not only the notion of truth that an autobiographical work aspires to represent, but also the narrative strategies employed to invoke the intended kind of truth, as well as the extent to which the narrative produced will bear resemblance to a biographically

verifiable reality, that is to say to the reality “exterior to the text,” can be revisited and reconfigured. In one of his unpublished lectures entitled “Truth in Autobiography,” Coetzee himself signals the possibility of such a generic deconstruction. Such pacts, he claims, can be “negotiated over the years between writers and readers for each of the genres and sub-genres, pacts which cover, among other things, what demands may be made of each genre and what may not, what questions may be asked, and what may not, what one might see, and what one must be blind to” (Coetzee 1984: 5).

Indeed, rather than taking Lejeune’s conceptualization of life narratives as his starting point, Coetzee’s understanding of autobiography seems to be in line with recent theoretical studies of the genre embodied by the so-called third wave of autobiography criticism. With a new emphasis on performativity of autobiographical writing, heteroglossic dialogism, in other words, polyvocality through which one’s subjectivity is enunciated, as well as positionality of an autobiographical act, the genre’s apparent ontological and epistemological certainties have been displaced (Smith & Watson 2001: 137-145). Louis A. Renza points to the estrangement of the autobiographer from his past, as well as his status as an “I.” In his essay “The Veto of the Imagination: A Theory of Autobiography,” Renza argues that the autobiographical enterprise “occlude[s] the writer’s own continuity with the ‘I’ being conveyed through his narrative performance” (Renza 1977: 5). He further claims that, when recollecting his past, the life narrator inevitably “presentifies” that past, the present moment of writing always informing this recollection. Confronted with a “screen between the truth of the narrated past and the present of the narrative situation,” the writer of an autobiography is forced to engage “the impersonating effect of discourse” (Renza 1977: 3, 9). Thus, according to Renza, autobiographical writing entails “a split intentionality: the ‘I’ becoming a ‘he’” (Renza 1977: 9). Renza’s theorization of imaginative displacement of the subject in autobiography remains in line with another critic of the period, Michael Sprinkler’s rejection of the master narrative of the unified, sovereign autobiographical self. Paul John Eakin, on the other hand, draws a parallel between autobiography and fiction, by pointing to “a shift from a documentary view of autobiography as a record of referential act to a performative view of autobiography centered on the act of composition” (Eakin 1992: 143). Indeed, in his 1985 *Fictions of Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention*, he argues that autobiographical writing can be seen as a metaphorically potent act of self-invention driven by the double force of a “self-made,” but also “factual” self-referentiality (Eakin 1985: 23-24). Thus, Eakin’s theorization discloses the inevitability of fictionalization, which is entailed by the processes of novelization inherent in autobiographical writing. What is more, the theorist exposes the manifoldness

of such fictional manipulation, as he uncovers referential materials from the autobiographer's past life as being themselves involved in the act of self-invention and, thus, often highly fictionalized (Eakin 1985: 116). The work of the third wave of autobiographical critics over the last three decades has manifestly engaged the challenges laid out by postmodernism's deconstruction. Nonetheless, if we were to follow indiscriminately Derrida's contention that the law of genre can only operate by opening itself up to transgression, the term autobiography would have long fallen out of use, turning itself into a generic designation only to be annulled the next moment by the instability and *différance* instated within the law of genre itself (Derrida 1980: 212). Yet, the term is very much in existence, just as are the expectations with which the majority of modern-day readers come to an autobiographical text. Despite the difficulty of fixing the boundary between fiction and autobiography, certain well-entrenched assumptions, such as the one holding the autobiographical subject to be a person living in the experiential world, not a fictional character, as well as the unity between the author and the protagonist, are still alive. Thus, the following discussion of J.M. Coetzee's fictionalized memoirs focuses on the multifarious ways in which the texts set out to unsettle such common expectations.

My assumption is that what Coetzee attempts to achieve through his continuous disruptions of the readers' expectations and his demonstration of various potentialities that the autobiographical genre offers, as exhibited in the series of his fictionalized memoirs: *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*, *Youth* and *Summertime*, is an accentuation of the porousness of boundaries as such, and in doing so, the liberation of intellectual practice from the stifling effects of any self- or externally-imposed boundaries, be it generic, aesthetic, political or social. It is the very inconclusiveness of the truth delivered by Coetzee's works that the author's resistance against any intellectually oppressive systems is based on. Thus, it may appear that the South African author's public stance gets crystallized in his incessant re-configurations of the genre of autobiography.

It is already the confusion and ambiguity with which all the three publications were approached both by publishers, as well as reviewers, that clearly indicate that Coetzee's autobiographical writings escape any attempts at being classified as traditional autobiography. The blurb on the first edition of *Boyhood* reads: "*Boyhood's* young narrator," although Coetzee's "young self," referred to later in the same blurb, is actually never a narrator, but rather the main focalizer of the book. A similar mistake can be encountered in the 2003 British edition of *Youth*, whose blurb reads: "*Youth's* narrator, a student in 1950s South Africa." What is more, whereas the American edition of *Youth* has made a clear link with its prequel by inserting the subtitle *Scenes from Provincial Life II*, some reviewers, among

others Peter Porter, categorized *Youth* as a novel. *Summertime*, on the other hand, although instantly classified as a “fictionalized memoir,” in the British edition boasts a subtitle *Scenes from Provincial Life*. Yet, the American edition of the book offers a different subtitle, reading simply *Fiction*. The inconclusive interrelation of the three books is further problematised by the publication in 2011 of the latest British edition (Harvill Secker), gathering all the three memoirs, *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime* in one volume and under one common title, *Scenes from Provincial Life*. To minimise confusion, for the purpose of the following article I will restrict myself to the employment of the terms: ‘a fictionalized autobiography,’ ‘a fictionalized memoir,’ or ‘a novelized memoir,’ whose very oxymoronic nature, I believe, sufficiently signals the existent generic tensions.

As a number of critics have noted, Coetzee’s interest in life writing and the seemingly interminable potentialities that the autobiographical genre offers can be traced back to his earliest works (Cheney 2009, Poyner 2009: 169, Kusek 2012: 30). Indeed, Coetzee’s first novel, *Dusklands* (1974), introduces a number of characters named Coetzee, only to further unsettle our notion of verisimilitude through the introduction of the main character’s divergent accounts of his life, thus placing the notion of life writing at the very heart of its preoccupations. Therefore, it stands to reason that the author chooses to continue questioning the generic boundaries of autobiography in his later works.

The very fact that various events recorded in the works bear no resemblance to the real-life incidents from the author’s life already breaks with the convention of life writing. The action of *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (1997) spans the years 1950-1953, narrating John’s childhood between the ages of ten to thirteen, tracing the time he spent with his family in the provincial town of Worcester and then Cape Town, where the family moves towards the end of the narrative. *Youth*, published five years after the publication of *Boyhood*, chronicles the young man’s formative years focusing on the period of John’s life corresponding to the years 1959 - 1964, when he was a student at the University of Cape Town. Having completed his degree in mathematics, driven by his artistic ambitions and his desire to escape the country caught up in political turmoil, following the events of the Sharpeville massacre, young John moves to London, where he receives employment as a computer programmer. *Summertime*, the latest installment of Coetzee’s autobiographical project, focuses on the period in the author’s life from 1971 to 1977, when upon his return to South Africa from the United States, John Coetzee moves in with his widowed father, and when his first novel, *Dusklands* (1974), is published. A formal device deployed that most strikingly distinguishes *Summertime* from its antecedents is the main protagonist’s shift from the position of a subject to that of an object, someone to be examined, to be reflected upon. The

third volume of memoirs is conceived as a posthumous piece that narrates an English biographer's attempts at chronicling these crucial, yet neglected years in the Nobel Laureate's life when he "was still finding his feet as a writer" (Coetzee 2009: 225). Manifestly, each of the texts discussed defies autobiographical convention in offering not a comprehensive, all-embracing, or even representative account, but rather a fragmented, highly episodic record of Coetzee's life. What emerges is a highly anecdotal, patchy narrative, dwelling lengthily on some events and leaving many blank gaps in chronology. Thus, Coetzee challenges the developmental model of autobiographical narrative advocated even by most progressive critics in the field. In *Fictions in Autobiography*, Eakin asserted that the presence of traditional, chronological narrative in autobiography, far from reflecting the slavish adherence to the conventions of the genre, mirrors "the inescapable narrativity of the process of self-definition in...the living of a life and the making of a life story" (Eakin 1985: 160). Yet, Coetzee's adherence to a fragmentary narrative structure may be interpreted as his deliberate choice to inscribe a discontinuous subject, whose life, to use Klopper's words, "fails to conform to a naturalistic logic of cause and effect,...[is] determined by the arbitrariness of local contingencies, and [...] vulnerable to the vagaries of unstable memory" (Klopper 2006: 24).

Although the majority of the events invoked in the memoirs offer a truthful account of J.M. Coetzee's own life, some consequential factual inconsistencies remain. Out of the three volumes discussed, *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* seems to constitute the most faithful re-enactment of the real life incidents, although the original draft containing genuine names is known to have been modified by the American publisher in order to prevent litigation (Attridge 2005: 148-149). *Youth* and *Summertime*, on the other hand, strikingly overlook or misrepresent certain well-known events from the author's life, such as his marriage to Phillipa Jubber, which started in 1963 during his stay in London and continued until 1980 far beyond his forced return to South Africa. Similarly, the fictionalized autobiography does not mention the fact that by the year 1977 Coetzee was already a father of two children, and that the writer's mother did not die until 1985. Most obviously, the author is also still alive. Nevertheless, disruptions of the traditional discourse of autobiography are not confined to the falsification of factual evidence. Indeed, Coetzee employs a great number of formal and textual devices that all aim at defamiliarization of the genre of autobiography.

One of the most striking features of all the three memoirs discussed is their employment of the third-person singular narration. As Lenta shows, the decision to cast autobiographical work in the third person is not entirely new. As proved by former examples, most notably Caesar's *Gallic War* and *Civil War*, it might usefully serve as a distancing device, counteracting any potential claims of the

author's attempts at self-mythologising (Lenta 2003: 158). His acute concern for a writer's inability to escape the imprisonment of one's own illusions also finds expression in his critical writing. In *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee admits, "The self cannot tell the truth of itself to itself and come to rest without the possibility of self-deception" (Coetzee 1992: 291). Thus, the deployment of the third-person perspective seems to be particularly well-attuned to Coetzee's agenda, as the distance implied appears to be manifold. Indeed, the third person autobiography, termed heterodiegetic autobiography by Lejeune, not only disrupts the sense of intimacy between the protagonist and the author, disassociating the narrated consciousness from the narrative voice, but also accentuates the distance in time between the real-life experience and the time of recollection, thus pointing towards a possibility of a metamorphosis of one's character over time. Coetzee's choice to narrate his childhood and young adulthood in the third person seems to lay credence to Renza's theory foregrounding the vexed relationship between the autobiographer and his past, as well as his status as an "I."

In another autobiographical interview incorporated in *Doubling the Point*, when referring to his studies in Texas, Coetzee sketches a shift in his consciousness: "he now begins to feel closer to I: *autre*biography shades back into autobiography" (Coetzee 1992: 392). This, on the other hand, gestures toward the author's deliberate choice to reduce the usage of the main protagonist's name to the absolute minimum. In fact, in *Boyhood*, the main protagonist is almost never, but on one exception, referred to by his first name, making the impersonal pronoun 'he' the author's favorable mode of address. In *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, when discussing the third person autobiography, Barthes reflects that "'He' is wicked: the nastiest word in the language: pronoun of the non-person, it annuls and mortifies its referent; it cannot be applied without uneasiness to someone one loves" (Barthes 1977: 169).

This can be seen as accounting for the author's ruthless, self-deprecating portrayal of his younger self painted in all the three memoirs discussed. Indeed, John Coetzee of the texts is a repulsive figure, a narcissist deceived by delusions of grandeur, an impatient recluse unable to establish any form of meaningful relationship, a mediocre lover, invariably an object of ridicule and contempt. It is also striking to note that up to *Summertime*, the narrative deliberately overlooks any indications that the character might indeed one day become an established writer, concentrating instead on his unfulfilled ambitions and lack of talent (Cheney 2009). In this extremely harsh, merciless self-presentation tinted with dark humour and offered with remorseless ratiocination, Coetzee seems to be at pains to avoid any possible accusations of acting as his own advocate, thus only foregrounding the process of alienating the protagonist from the narrator.

Intriguingly, though, as Klopper asserts in his critical reflections on the liminality of autobiographical writing, some of the formal strategies employed in *Boyhood* and *Youth* can be viewed as serving just the opposite purpose, namely one of strengthening the affinity between the narrator and the protagonist. One such device is the author's consistent employment of the simple-present tense that provides a sense of immediacy, making the narration more dynamic. Furthermore, the author's employment of free indirect discourse, which, through the consistent usage of the linguistic style and register characteristic of a teenager or a young adult respectively, focuses the readers' attention on a single consciousness, thus symbolically equating the author/narrator with the character (Klopper 2006: 24).⁶ What emerges out of such a formal experimentation on Coetzee's part is an autobiography which is "ambiguously located at the limits of self and other, present and past, narration and historiography," an autobiography which constitutes "a complex portrayal of the subject in terms of a contradictory simultaneity of intimacy and distance, directness of observation and emotional detachment, access to the textured impressions of consciousness and its ironic displacement" (Klopper 2006: 23, 24). Although free indirect speech does tend to obfuscate all minor shifts in focalisation, Rimmon-Kenan's discussion of the mode points us in the opposite direction, redirecting our attention to the fact that by postulating "not only the co-presence of two voices, but also that of the narrator's voice and a character's pre-verbal perception or feeling" free indirect discourse actually "enhances the bivocality or polyvocality of the text by bringing into play a plurality of speakers and attitudes" (Rimmon-Kenan 1983: 111, 133).

One such external speech that is brought into play is what Lenta refers to as "immanent voice," a concept borrowed from de Reuck, which Lenta finds central to the reader's response to any of Coetzee's works containing autobiographical elements (Lenta 2003: 166, Lenta 2011: 6). The device employed most explicitly in the narrative of *Boyhood*, and to a varying degree also in *Youth* and *Summertime*, indicates the necessity on the reader's part to project his own understanding of the world in order to clarify any inadequacy or misunderstanding arising from the young protagonist's inexperience. Yet, the polyvocality of Coetzee's texts finds its most prominent expression in the latest installment of the series of Coetzee's fictionalized memoirs, *Summertime*. Divided into three sections, comprising John Coetzee's dated notebooks, five interviews conducted by the biographer of the dead author, and eventually, undated notebook fragments, the book boasts a decisively more elaborate narrative structure than any of its prequels.

⁶ As an attentive reading of the texts shows, some occasional extensions to the free indirect discourse in the form of shifting focalisation do appear, both in *Boyhood* and *Youth*, enabling the narrator to insert an external commentary (Lenta 2003: 164, Parker 2004: 15).

Whereas both sections of the notebook entries remain similar in structure and tone to their antecedents, *Boyhood* and *Youth*, in their employment of the third-person, present-tense discourse, the section containing transcribed interviews with Coetzee's colleagues, lovers and relatives whom the character considered important at this stage of his life, constitutes a polyvocal repertoire of selectively counterfactual and often contradictory versions of John Coetzee's life. Thus, from the variety of counter-voices invoked by the narrative of *Summertime*, the reader gains understanding of the complexity of the writer's character. The differences in the way each interviewee perceived John Coetzee and their mutual relationship stem primarily from their own differing life experiences and are clearly determined by the elusiveness of memory. With the exception of the account of Coetzee's cousin and his childhood sweetheart, Margot Jonker, whose interview has been recast by the biographer into an uninterrupted, third-person narrative, the stories delivered by the writer's friends are presented to us as a raw material. What is more, the projections of his intended biographer, Vincent, who never met John Coetzee in person, but who appears to have his own understanding of the author's life, are further framed by the late writer's self-presentations contained in what might appear as randomly collected extracts from his notebooks. What arises out of such a continuous juxtaposition of various subjectivities, of what Cheney terms "mirror-looking-at-a-mirror structure" of *Summertime*, is a complex, multi-vocal narrative whose central concern seems to be the way truth is brought to light and then disseminated, in other words the relationship between truth and fiction (Cheney 2009).

When reflecting on the workings of the TRC and the futility of common expectations of the TRC to elicit 'truth,' well-established South African poet and educationist Ingrid de Kok asserts that it is rather "in the multiplicity of partial versions and experiences, composed and recomposed within sight of each other, that truth 'as a thing of this world,' in Foucault's phrase, [would] emerge" (De Kok 1998: 61). In *Doubling the Point*, J.M. Coetzee recognises the importance of polyvocality in his intellectual practice in the following way:

Writers are used to being in control of the text and don't resign it easily. But my *resistance* is not only a matter of protecting a phatasmatic omnipotence. 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 *countervoices* in himself, that is, step down from the position of what Lacan calls "the subject supposed to know." To me [...] truth is related to silence, to reflection, to the practice of writing. (Coetzee 1992: 65, emphasis added by PG)

To Coetzee, it would therefore seem, truth reveals itself in the very act of writing, in its silences and its polyvocality, in the very dialogue with the self that the author embarks on through his intellectual practice and the unconscious self-revelations that it breeds. In view of the constructive properties of the very act of writing, Coetzee's famous articulation: "in a larger sense all writing is autobiography: everything that you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it" takes on a new light (Coetzee 1992: 17). One might, therefore, conclude that the South African writer is as preoccupied with the relationship between truth and fiction in autobiographical writing as any conventional autobiographer would be, it is only the nature of truth at the heart of his intellectual practice that differs significantly from what canonical forms of life-writing are concerned with. Indeed, the kind of truth that emerges out of Coetzee's autobiographical writing, and that both Coetzee and De Kok seem to have in mind, is definitely not an objectively verifiable factual truth external to the autobiographical text, but rather a more intersubjective, ethical truth that finds its best expression in the autonomy of intellectual expression.⁷ Such an ethical truth can be selective, fragmentary, easily lending itself to reinterpretation and questioning. Indeed, in his critical study of the autobiographical genre "Confession and Double Thoughts," Coetzee admits: "because the basic movement of self-reflexiveness is a doubting and questioning movement, it is in the nature of the truth told to itself by the reflecting self not to be final" (Coetzee 1992: 263).

In *Reading Autobiography*, Smith and Watson argue that autobiographical truth lies in "an intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of life" (Smith & Watson 2001: 13). If we approach autobiographical writing as an intersubjective process that occurs between the writer and the reader, the emphasis of interpretation shifts from recording factual inconsistencies and verifying credibility to examining processes of communicative exchange and understanding. Outside of a juridical model of truth, selectivity, numerous narrative silences, fictionalization, polyvocality can be all seen as serving the purpose of bringing us closer to the intersubjective, ethical truth. In *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee recognises the necessary selectivity of autobiography, which he sees as governed by the author's "evolving purpose." When pondering the dilemmas of recording the history of his intellectual career, he asks: "But which facts? All the facts? No. All the facts are too many facts. You

⁷ In this respect, the trilogy of fictionalized autobiographies that the essay has discussed can be seen as pertaining to the category of witness-bearing testimony, as opposed to eye witness accounts, in Kelly Oliver's terminology. In her insightful essay "Witnessing and Testimony," Olivier distinguishes between these two forms of confession. Whereas "eye-witness accounts" refer to historical facts, she claims that 'bearing witness' implies testifying to certain truth about humanity, and in doing so, it reveals "phenomenological or psychological truth" (Oliver 2004: 80).

choose the facts insofar as they fall with your evolving purpose" (Coetzee 1992: 18). By acknowledging the importance of a thesis that governs the meaning of a life narrative, he gestures toward the notion of 'intentionality.' The concept of intention has incessantly threaded its way through theoretical discussions of autobiography (Marcus 1994: 3; Hart 1970: 485-511; Anderson 2004: 2-3). Hart even centred his analysis of the genre around the issue of the autobiographer's intentionality, which he sees as closely related to the life narrative's form. Recognising that "'unreliability' is an inescapable condition" in autobiographical writing, the author always attempting to manipulate facts either towards his version of truth or the work's integrity, Hart contends that different set of criteria for selection of referential material must become important (Hart 1970: 488). Thus, for an author seeking to attain "organic unity [of the work] based on a defined sense of its own end," the aesthetic and ethical criteria substitute for the criterion of the narrative credibility or veracity of the account (Hart 1970: 489). In the process, autobiographical form becomes contingent on shifting principles of selectivity governed by the work's informing purpose. Hart admits that:

Form is really a multiplicity of formative options in the simplest autobiography: options of selection and exclusion, interpretive refocus or rearrangement, conflation of historical and expository arrangement, developmental rhythms in narrative and situational rhythms in the autobiographer's sense of movement toward his end. (Hart 1970: 502)

What would, therefore, the organizing principle, in other words, "the evolving purpose" of Coetzee's autobiographical trilogy be? And what implications would the presence of such an authorial signature have for the memoirs' form? One of the central premises of this essay is an assumption that the South African author's capacity to make public interventions lies precisely in his continuous reconfigurations of autobiographical genre. Thus, truly in the vein of Hart's redefinition of life narrative as a drama of interaction between intention and form, in Coetzee's autobiographical texts, ethico-political message remains intrinsically embedded in the works' formal structure.

In her perceptive analysis of Coetzee's later works, namely *The Lives of Animals* (1999), *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), Poyner suggests that it is through the form of Coetzee's writings, through the writer's radical disruption of the discourses of genre, what she terms "acts of genre," rather than through his works' substance, their content and the themes they explore, that the author's public stance gets crystallized (Poyner 2009: 167). According to Poyner, it is uniquely through formal experimentation, through, in Coetzee's own words, "the offensiveness of stories, [which] lies in their faculty of making and changing their own rules," that a writer can usefully counteract established

discourses and in the act assume a public role that can be seen as “profoundly ethico-political” (Coetzee 1988: 3, Poyner 2009: 173). “Ethico-politics” expresses here what Derek Attridge termed “a politics worth espousing[...], a politics that both incorporates the ethical and is incorporated in it, while acknowledging the inescapable tension and continual reevaluation that this mutual incorporation implies” (Attridge 1994: 70-71). Similarly, Spencer contends that it is the structure of Coetzee’s writings that “potentially makes them ethically and ultimately politically consequential experiences for their readers” (Spencer quoted in Poyner 2009: 173). Bearing in mind the multi-layered structure of *Summertime* and the multiplicity of ways in which the memoir sets out to unsettle generic boundaries, it seems highly paradoxical that, when reflecting on the main character’s internationally recognised literary output, Sophie, his former colleague, shall admit: “I would say that his work lacks ambition. The control of the elements is too tight. Nowhere do you get a feeling of a writer deforming his medium in order to say what has never been said before, which is to me a mark of great writing” (Coetzee 2009: 242). Although it may seem inadequate to map out a character’s voice onto the author’s voice, I still believe that this remark is indicative of J.M. Coetzee’s conviction that ‘acts of genre’ constitute not only one of the biggest strengths of his writing, but also a useful medium through which the writer can communicate his ethico-political position.

Within mainstream, Holocaust-derived trauma studies, it has become axiomatic that the profound psychic, as well as physical disruption that trauma entails can only be adequately rendered through the employment of formal experimentation and postmodern textual strategies. Thus, the authors’ reliance on anti-narrative modes, such as self-reflexivity, disruption of linear chronology, fragmentation, preference for hybridity and polyvocality and resistance to closure is viewed as mirroring and replicating the very conditions of a traumatic encounter and its damaging effects on human psyche. It is claimed that exclusively formal experimentation can effectively convey the ‘unspeakable,’ ‘incommunicable’ nature of trauma. As a careful textual reading of Coetzee’s autobiographical trilogy has shown, the texts seem to lay credence to certain implications of trauma theory about how anti-narrative representational methods and complications over traditional forms of authorship can be employed to reflect the paradox-laden disruptions to temporality and language of a traumatic experience. Yet, it may still be argued whether such narrative patterns stem from the experience of trauma itself, or whether they can be interpreted as the authors’ deliberate choice to draw on well-established conventions by which trauma is recognized in literary representation in the West. In Coetzee’s case, the two seem to be intertwined. Indeed, although Coetzee’s continuous disruptions of the genre

of autobiography and his exposure of various potentialities that the form offers may be interpreted as showing signs of the effects of the so-called "insidious trauma," they may be simultaneously viewed as an integral component of the author's severe criticism of the intellectually crippling effects of the apartheid dispensation. Thus, Coetzee's novelized memoirs may be seen as bearing witness to what Laura S. Brown labels "insidious trauma," and which she defines as "the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment, but that do violence to the soul and spirit" (Brown 1995: 107). In yet another interview dating back to 1992, when pondering the incommensurable nature of both history, as well as freedom, Coetzee argues that it is precisely because of the way the overwhelming brutality of South African history tend to short-circuit the imagination that "the task becomes imagining the unimaginable, imagining a form of address that permits the play of the imagination to start taking place" (Coetzee 1992: 68). My belief is that Coetzee's fictionalized memoirs markedly provide tools for such 'an imaginative play' to take place.

As I have earlier mentioned, it was already in 1987, in his Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech, that Coetzee lamented the stifling, degrading effects that the apartheid system had on the intellectual and spiritual life in South Africa. He openly denounced the political pressures shaping the act of writing, and the ubiquity of historical atrocities that "overwhelm[ed] and swamp[ed] every act of the imagination" (Coetzee 1992: 99). It was also in the same speech that the author condemned the highly regulated relations between ethnic groups imposed by apartheid legislation as resulting in the "deformed and stunted inner life" of the South African society as a whole (Coetzee 1992: 98). It seems that through the very act of writing, the act of summoning various countervoices in order to shatter the established assumptions of a literary genre, through his perceptive demonstration of the inconclusive nature of truth and the porousness of generic boundaries, Coetzee succeeds in deconstructing any received discourses, including the oppressive ones, and in doing so, restores the richness of South African inner life. Furthermore, his quest to regain the liberty of the imagination, to reclaim the freedom of the spirit equally manifests itself in his highly experimental writings' capacity to activate readers, resituating them as interrogators, rather than recipients of delivered truths. If, in Theodor Adorno's words, public "commitment" manifests itself primarily "at the level of fundamental attitudes," in an artistic work's capacity "to awaken the free choice of the agent," then J. M. Coetzee can indeed be viewed as a committed writer (Adorno 1962: 3). Truly in his 1962 essay "Commitment," Adorno argues that overtly engaged art is always "poisoned by the untruth of its politics," which tends to remain in conflict with

the internal reality of the work of art (Adorno 1962: 7). Thus, the political message of a work of art must be understood first and foremost as the sum of its internal relations, its form and substance playing equally important roles. According to Adorno, only a work of art that "contains within itself the sources of its transcendence," in other words, one that deforms, disrupts its own medium, can be seen as truly politically and ethically committed (Adorno 1962: 11). Taking as his example Picasso's oeuvre, Adorno argues that engaged writing should offer an image of society that stands in dialectical opposition to empirical reality. Bearing in mind Wittgenstein's well-known dictum that "ethics and aesthetics are one" (Wittgenstein quoted in Levinson 1998: 1), a close formal, structural analysis of a work of art seems to be indispensable for its ethical assessment. If engaged art should always provide a negative image of society, and a memoir's political stance gets crystallized uniquely in the work's totality, its structure being an important component of its message's validity, Coetzee's works cannot possibly be labeled apolitical.

Kusek has pointed to the marginal position occupied by politics in all the three of Coetzee's fictionalized autobiographies as being indicative of the writer's indifference towards South African public life of the period and his imperviousness to the country's oppressive regime (Kusek 2012: 37). My claim would rather be that what each reference to the South African political events of the time attempts to register is the author's denouncement of the devastating effects an oppressive regime has on society's intellectual life. In one of the scenes contemplating his struggles to produce a worthwhile story, the young protagonist of *Youth*, sadly admits: "South Africa was a bad start, a handicap" (Coetzee 2003: 62). Similarly, when confronted with a Pan Africanist Congress demonstration outside the university campus, his concern seems to be summarized in the following words: "What is the country coming to, when one cannot run a mathematics tutorial in peace?" (Coetzee 2003: 37). The oppressive, intellectually debasing properties of politics and the tyrannical nature of state are further foregrounded when one of his former colleagues, Sophie Denoël reflects on the Nobel Laureate's disengagement from politics: "In fact he was not political at all. He looked down on politics. He didn't like political writers, writers who espoused a political programme [...] He looked forward to the day when politics and the state would wither away." Nevertheless, she sadly concludes: "In Coetzee's eyes, we human beings will never abandon politics because politics is too convenient and too attractive as a theatre in which to give play to our baser emotions [...] In other words, politics is a symptom of our fallen state and expresses that fallen state." Yet, when asked how she would define Coetzee's public position, Sophie answers: "No, not apolitical, I would rather say anti-political" (Coetzee 2009: 228-229). Thus, Coetzee's

resistance to history, far from testifying to his imperviousness to the oppressive regime of apartheid, appears to be based on an ethico-political and liberatory imperative.

Rather than advocating direct engagement with politics, Coetzee's intervention into the public sphere can be seen as working largely at the level of personal duty to defy any spiritually oppressive systems. The sense of such personal ethico-political responsibility finds its best expression in the very act of writing. In this respect, Coetzee's trilogy of fictionalized memoirs can be viewed as his own literature of resistance that remains, as Poyner has rightfully pointed out, "suspicious of all forms of orthodoxy, including that of resistance" (Poyner 2006: 11). It could be, therefore, argued that Coetzee has become one of few artists who has managed to remain faithful to the principles of engaged writing, without simultaneously abandoning the commitment to liberate South African imagination from the orthodoxy of "the literature of the spectacle." Thus, the cause advocated by Sachs, Nkosi and Ndebele some decades ago is still very much alive, embodied in Coetzee's novelized memoirs.

In the epigraph of *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee contends:

I am not a herald of community or anything else [...] I am someone who has intimations of freedom (as every chained prisoner has) and constructs representations – which are shadows themselves – of people slipping their chains and turning their faces to the light. (Coetzee 1992: 341)

What J.M. Coetzee seems to express mirrors faithfully Nadine Gordimer's assertion that the very act of writing constitutes the author's "essential gesture as a social being," as, by definition, constituting "freedom of the spirit[...], art is [always] on the side of the oppressed" (Gordimer 1988: 286, 291).

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