Introduction

An artist is a creature driven by demons. He don’t know why they choose him and he’s usually too busy to wonder why.
—William Faulkner, 1956

Coetzee’s work has most often been read in relation to what Patrick Hayes described as ‘the vexed and complex question of political responsibility’. Such accounts have delivered much in the way of insight – and not only into Coetzee’s writing, but into the workings of literature. But perhaps as a result considerably less has been said about the other pole of Coetzee’s project: its power to stall the narrative generation of meaning to the point of impasse, or, most troublingly, to open not upon the ethical but what Coetzee has termed forms of ‘moral blankness’ (DP, 79). How can a writer habitually read in terms that centre on responsibility also be an author (to borrow a word both Anthony Uhlmann and Jan Wilm have recently used with relation to Coetzee) of such striking ‘provocations’?

This question forces us to reckon with a fact that, while seemingly simple and obvious, has not been fully considered: from the beginning, Coetzee was a writer of powerful contradictions. To an extent these contradictions were predictable and contextual – a matter, say, of a writer of Coetzee’s artistic and philosophical influences placed under the pressures of his time and place. But it is likely more to the point, and truer to the forces that worked on the novels, to venture that Coetzee’s writerly instincts were...
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conflicted and personal from the beginning – that in Coetzee, as with perhaps all authors, we are dealing with multiple selves and incommensurable loyalties, and not all of these are rationally chosen. For instance, to touch again on the topic of the disturbing or even morally questionable aspects of the writing, it is clear that from 1 January 1970 when he first began penning the text that would become ‘The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee’ to the summer of 1999 when the electronic files for Disgrace come to an end, Coetzee’s concern with what he later described as ‘the darker areas of human experience’ consistently drew him onto terrain that has troubled even his most dedicated readers (GO, 74). Why? Coetzee’s notes and manuscripts reveal that this aspect of his writing was not, or not merely, a response to the darkness of the times; he was also following a ‘horrified fascination’ that lay near the heart of his writing impulse and to which he feared to give rein (DP, 368). Yet along with this transgressive instinct, Coetzee of course harboured an equally powerful sense of duty to his times and place (‘this place being South Africa’ (Disgrace, 112)); and while he honoured this duty in work after work he could not do so without a competing desire for artistic freedom dogging his conscience with a sense of self-betrayal. ‘The pressure for so-called relevance to SA [is] too much for me’, he confesses while struggling with Age of Iron, ‘I am capitulating before it’.4

The tensions sketched above, and many others besides, would be matters of primarily biographical or psychological interest if they were not in some way reflected in the fictions. But if Coetzee’s notebook entries up to the late 1990s are any indication, he was not wholly unlike the Whitman described in a 1975 psychological study by Stephen Black (a study Coetzee consulted as he approached Waiting for the Barbarians): a figure whose turbid subconscious was both a site of struggle and the locus ‘where his fantasies and poetic impulses originated’.5

There is a particular ‘Coetzeean situation’ in the fiction that seems worth noting here. In this situation, a desire that can only be read as deeply


5 Stephen Black, Whitman’s Journeys into Chaos: A Psychoanalytic Study of the Poetic Process (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 3. Importantly, unlike the Whitman who only found peace in those periods when he could stop writing altogether, Coetzee’s compositional hallmark was consistency; his writing is the record of a struggle not only with multiple loyalties but with the internal ‘revolt’ against the self-inflicted torment of writing itself – a struggle that ended, inevitably, by reaffirming his powers of repression if not his sense of duty. Consider Coetzee’s note about ‘An experience of revolt this morning. Every morning since 1 Jan 1970 I have sat down to write. I HATE it’. Waiting for the Barbarians, small spiral notebook, 11 July 1977–28 August 1978, container 33.3, 30/5/78. Hereafter cited as WB NB1.
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suspect is acted upon by the protagonist even as this character justifies such an impulse as ‘generous’, adventurous, liberating, or even in some way responsible (‘generous’ is of course David Lurie’s word (Disgrace, 89)). This action is echoed by other events in the narrative, but as it is refracted in the text the relative clarity with which the reader may approach the ‘situation’ is unsettled; the responsible or the ethical or the generous does seem to flit through the story but in a way that appears ever more complexly interwoven with the text’s darker materials. Instead of a clarification of values, then, what we encounter is the unfolding of forms of multifarious desire. Magda’s embraces with Klein-Anna, the Magistrate’s ‘doubled image’ in his ministrations to the barbarian girl, ‘Dostoevsky’s’ attempts to resurrect Pavel in his son’s old room, David Lurie’s ‘learning’ about ‘love’ in the clinic (while killing the dogs): these are only some of the starkest moments in the elaboration of what Coetzee’s contemporary, Breyten Breytenbach, described as a writing that necessarily has ‘two faces’ and is riven by ‘internal conflicts’. 6 Posed through Coetzee’s texts with the force of an obsession, the ‘vexed question’ of responsibilities becomes stranger and more discomforting in its imbrication in forms of excess, violence, or abandon (Hayes, 1). At times – as Melanie Isaacs makes plain to David Lurie – the authority of this word seems flattened into a mask for all that resists being faced head-on: ‘Responsibilities: she does not dignify the word with a reply’ (Disgrace, 35).

To begin to read ‘Coetzee’s responsibilities’, then, would require us at the least to consider how, in both his work and his comments on art, we encounter different, even conflicting, forms of responsibility – including those that are not, or not solely, ethical. An application of the sort of ‘speculative unravelling’ Jarad Zimbler finds in Coetzee’s own style would surely discover ‘responsibility’ correspondent to an action ‘carried out in a morally principled or ethical way’ – but it would also confront more archaic notions of being ‘answerable or liable to be called to account’ as well as ‘being appointed to’ or ‘answering to’. 7 When ‘J.C’. invokes Kierkegaard in his claim that the mastery of the ‘great authors’ is ultimately a mastery of ‘authority’ (‘Authority cannot be taught, cannot be learned’ (DBY, 151)), he gestures towards – among other things – a writerly role in which one is merely the bearer of a message, and responsible only for delivering that message, not for its content. And when ‘J.C’. asks whether such authority may

6 Breyten Breytenbach, The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 56, 50. Hereafter cited as TCAT.
only be possible by ‘opening the poet-self to some higher force, by ceasing to be oneself’, he of course refers to an ancient tradition and its Romantic iterations by which the artist is uniquely responsive and bound to an attendant force that speaks through her (DBY, 151). Finally, when, in an essay concerned with ‘the harms of pornography’, Coetzee writes of a ‘seriousness’ that for ‘a certain kind of artist’ is ‘an imperative uniting the aesthetic and the ethical’ – an imperative that may not only permit but seemingly require forms of moral trespass – we may well consider the terms Coetzee confronts (the aesthetic, the ethical) as not only divergent, but conflicting – even, for most of his readers, incommensurable (GO, 73). I would like to return to this last point about ultimately oppositional loyalties or responsibilities shortly.

If the Coetzee of the period in question was a more conflicted writer than is commonly recognised, his half-serious, half-playful reference to the ‘vatic’ should not mislead us: he was also a more demonic author as well. Coetzee is considered one of the most cerebral novelists of his age, an academic whose fiction has spawned books about the role of the ‘public intellectual’ even as his work has itself served as a case study for dominant trends in literary-critical and philosophical thought.8 Yet as some of his admirers have always known, he is also a writer who deeply distrusts the mind, especially in the realm of art. As a student Coetzee witnessed Beckett’s transformation from the acolyte of Joycean erudition (‘soiled by the demon of notenatching’) to the author of Molloy – a text that, as the manuscript record of that novel suggests, at times emerged as if to the dictation of an inner voice.9 Coetzee reminds us that though Beckett’s learning was formidable and he is often considered an ‘intellectual writer’ ‘from this it does not follow that the intellect was the wellspring of his writing […]. Molloy comes from a source deep within its author, a source perhaps inaccessible to the intellect’ (LE, 194–95). Of Coetzee’s own writing it is now possible to say that if the evidence of the works themselves was not enough his notebooks and manuscripts reveal that he was not like Beckett’s early master, André Gide, a figure whose imagination could schematically follow his theories – or to

8 See, for instance, Jane Poyner’s J. M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006). Regarding trends in criticism, the first generation of Coetzee’s commentators frequently interpreted his project with relation to post-colonial theory, post-structural theory, and post-war ethics. But this ‘theoretical’ or ‘philosophical’ Coetzee has more recently been updated in a spate of new readings involving categories like post-secularism, post-humanism, or studies that centre on Coetzee’s status as a philosopher in his own right. See, for instance, Kai Wiegandt’s J. M. Coetzee’s Revisions of the Human (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019). See also Uhlmann’s recent J. M. Coetzee Truth, Meaning, Fiction as noted above.

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put it differently, Coetzee is not the sort of artist, as Henry James wrote of George Eliot, whose ‘figures and situations are evolved, as the phrase is, from [the] moral consciousness’. As David Attwell has shown, the novels had a taproot in Coetzee’s personal life and were written with only the loosest of plans, if any. And if the fictions are yet inseparable from what Tim Mehigan and Christian Moser have called Coetzee’s ‘intellectual landscape’ they also arose out of a certain unknowing and in accord with the writer’s abiding commitment not to resolve the contradictions in the work or to illuminate the wellsprings of his fiction to himself. There is indeed a doubleness to Coetzee’s craftsmanship whereby the ‘highly controlled’ is joined with a process by which ‘reversals, blockages, and serendipitous encounters’ become a part of the whole (Zimbler, §).

This particular divergence – between what Beckett, describing himself, once termed the ‘poet’ and the ‘professor’ – runs deeper than it may appear; it was inseparable from the Coetzee who was ‘a child of [his] times’ and that Coetzee who resisted being cast in the mould of his age (DBY, 150). Even as Coetzee was hailed as a writer whose work is best understood in tandem with the ethical, he has emulated and staged his emulation of figures like his admired Dostoevsky – whose greatest work perhaps ‘has nothing to do with ethics and politics, everything to do with rhetoric’ (DBY, 225). And this struggle with a past master was of course also part of a greater ambition, marked in the first three novels especially, to position his writing within the tumultuous period that was leaving the edifice of modernism for new territory. Was Coetzee the writer whose work would critique current global events, launching his condemnations of American foreign policy from afar (for instance, by setting his aborted second novel in Chile during the junta)? Or did his politics in fact play second fiddle to his impulse to act as a provocateur (the author both troubled by and aware of the potential links between forms of ‘serious’ novel writing, ‘sadism’, or ‘pornography’ (D, 14))? Or was Coetzee at heart a post-war enfant terrible, a formal innovator exiled to the provinces whose closest artistic allegiances lay with French

10 See Gide’s comment that ‘imagination (in my case) rarely precedes the idea; it is the latter, and not at all the former, that excites me; but the latter without the former produces nothing in itself; it is a fever without virtue, The idea of a work is its composition’, qtd. in Jean Delay, The Youth of André Gide, trans. June Guicharnaud (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 487. For James’ remark see Atlantic Monthly, vol. 55 (May 1885); rpt. David Carroll (ed.), George Eliot: The Critical Heritage (London: Routledge, 2009), 498.


experimental fiction, theory, and film – the student of Beckett, Barthes, Robbe-Grillet, and Jean-Luc Godard? Fragments of these personae appear in the notebooks and drafts but Coetzee did not give in to the temptation to dissipate into any one of them. In a real sense, the melding for which the Coetzee up to 1999 is known – what one might crudely describe as an importation of forms of modernist experimentation and realist narrative strategy injected into a fraught, recognisably ‘political’ subject matter – grew out of the struggle with these oppositional alter-selves.

Yet the identity that was most readily expected was of course that of the white writer of responsible South African fiction and all that entailed: in short, the example of Nadine Gordimer, the modes of representation championed by the Georg Lukács of *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, and the legacy of Sartrean ‘commitment’. Against this pressure, these models, Coetzee assembled a sort of counter-tradition: authors defined by their interest in those forces largely unaddressed by realism or by the ‘liberal tradition’s’ focus on institutions, and whose work could hardly be accused of acting as a ‘supplement’ to historical knowledge. This was not only an early rejection of, say, the underpinnings of English social realism and the South African liberal tradition for a turn towards philosophy and traditions of ‘psychological’ writing. It was also, as Coetzee pointed out in an early interview, a search for models whose particular interest for him stemmed ‘from [a] capacity to confront and analyze metaphysical Evil – with a capital E – in man’.

It is worth pausing for a moment to consider how striking Coetzee’s little-discussed comment about ‘metaphysical Evil’ is, not least when it was delivered in 1974. For it runs counter to both what Susan Neiman has described as the distinguishing feature of modern philosophy – its failure to explicitly engage the category of evil – and the only major philosophical interrogation of such in the post-war period at that time, that of Hannah Arendt: ‘Evil possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface’. Yet for the Coetzee of, say, *Dusklands*, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *The Master of Petersburg*, and *Disgrace*, evil is not, or

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13 For the discussion of literature’s ‘rivalry’ of versus its ‘supplementarity’ to history, see Coetzee’s widely cited talk, ‘The Novel Today’, *Upstream*, vol. 6, no. 1 (1988), 2–5.
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not primarily, explicable in terms of the ‘surface’ (for instance, the systems of modern bureaucracy in Arendt’s account of Eichmann’s role in the Third Reich). Rather, ‘metaphysical’ evil would be inextricable from the inner workings of the psyche and the powerfully evasive forms of desire driving it, and therefore may – as Coetzee’s ‘Dostoevsky’ informs Maximov – require precisely those terms rejected by Arendt: ‘spirits’ and ‘spirit-possession’ (TMP, 44). Coetzee’s avowed interest in Dostoevsky as a ‘psychologist’ indicates an alliance with fictive models whose contribution does not lie primarily in their analysis of systems, but in their investment in forms of intensity and obscure invitation.16

This last point returns me to the notion of ‘Coetzee’s responsibilities’. For the obscure summons to which I am referring is extended in the first place to the writer. Coetzee’s darker materials were significant in this regard if none other: they are directly connected to what is perhaps his most striking figure for the origins of the artwork, what Faulkner termed crossing beyond ‘the dark door’. In this view, as Faulkner’s fictional novelist Dawson Fairchild puts it, art is always itself a form of solicitation, it is ‘a kind of dark thing … Like somebody brings you to a dark door. Will you enter that room, or not?’17 It was to this motif that Coetzee turned to reflect on his own writing on torture in the 1986 essay ‘Into the Dark Chamber’, citing John T. Irwin’s Freudian study of Faulkner in Doubling & Incest/Repetition and Revenge (1975):

> It is precisely because [the writer] stands outside the dark door, wanting to enter the dark room but unable to, that he is a novelist, that he must imagine what takes place beyond the door. Indeed, it is just that tension toward the dark room that he cannot enter that makes that room the source of all his imaginings – the womb of art. (Irwin, qtd. in Coetzee, DP, 363)18

The figure of the dark door in Coetzee’s essay is an uneasy one not least because it is inserted into the context of his reflections on his own representations of the obscene. It is not simply that Coetzee attaches this figure, ambiguously, both to the ‘womb of art’ and the ‘torture room’ – a place he also describes as ‘like the bedchamber of the pornographer’s fantasy’ in its isolation, its opportunity for what Slavoj Žižek has called obscene freedom

17 William Faulkner, Mosquitoes (New York: Liveright, 1927), 248. Fairchild is sceptical of those who claim to know what is on the other side of the door: ‘There are rooms, dark rooms, that they didn’t know anything about. Freud and these others –’ (Faulkner, Mosquitoes, 248).
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('one human being is free to exercise his imagination to the limits' (DP, 363)). What disturbs is that the undertones of what can only be called an obscene proposition (‘Will you enter …?’) are recognised and answered in the artist’s awakening to this summons (‘the source of all his imaginings’; ‘wanting to enter’; that ‘tension toward the dark room’).

Coetzee’s motivations in writing revolved around ‘a desire for freedom’, but this desire could not be separated from more obscure fascinations that were themselves bound to an abiding moral rage (DP, 363). And this rage was itself indissociable from what the author sardonically termed the ‘impeccably right ideas’ he both upheld and unsettled by what he created.

For the reader ‘sensitive to their implications’, the sinuous workings of Coetzee’s fictions in their recurrent confrontation with evil is not the outer limit of what we could signify (to borrow from Shane Weller on Beckett) by his ‘taste for the negative’ (GO, 13). And the other tensions I have noted in Coetzee’s formation played a part here, too. The Coetzee who was a programmer for IBM, a student of chess strategy, an academic and public intellectual, a figure whose compositional hallmark was consistency – this Coetzee turned the writing into a series of attempts to critique and escape the overtures of the intellect and ‘the ideology of work’.

Like the Defoe with whom he juxtaposed himself in his Nobel Prize acceptance address, and the Crusoe he returned to time and again, Coetzee could play the role of a dutiful labourer, a deckhand ‘toiling in the rigging’ of his fictions; but like the Bataille he also studied, not a few of the novels represent concerted attempts to explode that world, or to discover within it forms of sovereignty.

Coetzee’s interest in ‘the challenge of idleness to work, its power to scandalize’ gave rise to a series of characters not only unwilling but also incapable of meaningful political action or productive activity (Michael K; Vercueil; Friday) (WW, 34). And the recurrence in his books of shadowy moments of redemption, grace, and even mystic revelation were likewise inseparable from possibilities that precisely opposed the world of end-based thinking and its vision of an instrumental reason that

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19 The phrase ‘impeccably right ideas’ appears with reference to Coetzee’s early liberal protagonist in the ur-text for Age of Iron, handwritten drafts ‘0–2’ and ‘fragments’ with light revisions, 19 May–26 October 1987, container 14.1 (25/1/88). Hereafter cited as Age MS 0–2.
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would master even time in a ‘universe of labour’, ‘killing the seconds as they emerged’ (Age, 44).

Such antithetical impulses of course appear at the level of form, too: if the world of clock time is the world of the realist novel, it is in Coetzee’s treatment of fictional tradition that some of the greatest tensions in his writing may also be said to lie. Most apparently, Coetzee derided ‘dull realism’ even as he quickly became one of the period’s most adroit stylists within versions of that mode; it was as if, after 1980, when Coetzee turned from what many considered allegory (in Waiting for the Barbarians), he actively sought to erode realism’s epistemic and philosophical underpinnings from within.\footnote{Coetzee, qtd. in Martin Woessner, ‘Beyond Realism: Coetzee’s Post-Secular Imagination’, in Patrick Hayes and Jan Wilm (eds.), Beyond the Ancient Quarrel: Literature, Philosophy, and J. M. Coetzee (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) 143–59, 144.}

In Age of Iron and The Master of Petersburg the ‘modern sense of time’ on which the novel’s reality is based vanishes in curious passages that seem an inversion of the form’s replacement of ‘the classical world’s view of reality as subsisting in timeless universals’.\footnote{Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 24, 23.} Against what Ian Watt termed the novel’s revolutionary turn towards an ‘individual apprehension of reality’ Coetzee’s texts repeatedly summon an ‘a-historical vision’ governing older narrative forms (epic, allegory, parable, generational cycle, myth) (Watt, 23). The novel’s moorings in Cartesian reasoning and Lockean empiricism slip in those shadowy spaces Coetzee seems to have constructed precisely to cast his realist vehicle adrift: Michael K’s cave in the mountains, the ‘home of Friday’, Pavel’s room as ‘Dostoevsky’ channels Stavrogin. Coetzee’s characters shuffle behind the ‘ox-wagon of history’ (they do not, as Gordimer would have it, ‘make’ that history); they harken to the voices of gods, dreams, or unreasoning impulse (Elizabeth Curren; David Lurie); they find themselves displaced from their wonted centrality and cast into larger patterns that extend beyond even the needs and aspirations of the human.\footnote{Nadine Gordimer, ‘The Idea of Gardening’, review of Life & Times of Michael K by J. M. Coetzee, The New York Review of Books, 2 February 1984, 3–6, www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1984/feb/02/the-idea-of-gardening/. ‘The ‘ox-wagon of history’ is found in Manuscript of Life & Times of Michael K, Versions 1–4, handwritten draft with revisions, 31 May 1980–14 January 1981, container 7.1, 10. Hereafter cited as LTMK MS vn. 1–4.}

‘Contamination’

The currents I have sketched above run throughout the novels. But in confronting Coetzee’s beginnings, the critical reception suggests that the tensions in his work are starker if not simpler.
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For at least two generations of readers, the debate around Coetzee’s first book in particular has hinged on what is usually termed ‘violence’ – a word whose range should include those meanings often applied to *Dusklands* (the representation of physical violence) as well as the forms of cruelty and psychic violation we find alongside physical brutality in *In the Heart of the Country*, *The Master of Petersburg*, or *Disgrace*. For the majority of Coetzee’s readers, the ostensible intent of the fiction is likely not (or no longer) in question. But the more complex question remains: What ends do such representations of violence serve in the event? How do they function in the text?

What is difficult to discuss in all the above instances is not simply that the violence is, as commentators have pointed out, ‘explicit’ and (for example, in ‘The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee’) so consistent as to be a ‘burden’ upon the reader; it is not even the view that, as some have alleged, through such violence Coetzee himself somehow ‘reenact[s] true savagery and thereby further[s] its claims’. It is that the evils depicted are inseparable from the acts of writing which the narratives stage – in ways that seem to somehow taint the reader and her acts of reading. Attwell is correct that such writing is ‘surely transgressive, not in the theoretical manner […] but in an aggressive mode that is aimed at readers’ sensibilities’; even more unsettling is Jane Poyner’s argument that ‘we are both complicit with and revulsed from the text’ (Attwell, 55). What unsettles here, to borrow a word Coetzee uses most heavily in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, is surely the writing’s power of contamination.

This dynamic discomforted the writer first of all. Several years after his first novel, and with the benefit of hindsight, Coetzee was able to consider *Dusklands* and the forces that contributed to its genesis more clearly:

> I can now see that *D* was a product of the passionate politics of 1965–71, USA. I was a satirist in *D*, not a satirist out of moral conviction, but because I was being aroused by events in a way I feared to be aroused.

The tension between what Coetzee terms ‘conviction’ and something far more unruly (‘arousal’ and the fear of it) is one that we could extend over his work of the period. Noteworthy here is Coetzee’s insight that the mode he adopted in his first novel arose out of a certain *fear* of being moved by

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28 Small notebook, 16 March 1974–9 February 1976, container 33.3 (Coetzee’s notebook for *In the Heart of the Country* and also the first *Waiting for the Barbarians* notebook), 28/6/74. Hereafter cited as *IHC NB*.