

Writing Oneself, Writing the Other: J.M. Coetzee's Fictional Autobiography in *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime*

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Abstract. How is a writer's life to be embodied in writing? How to tell one's own life story? How to challenge a reader and not to imprison oneself in the modes and forms of conventional life writing? The above-posed questions remain central to J.M. Coetzee's oeuvre who in one of the interviews with David Attwell confessed that "in a larger sense all writing is autobiography: everything that you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it" (Attwell 1999: 17). Coetzee's difficult and highly confusing group of late twenty and early twenty-first-century works – *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*, *Youth*, *Elizabeth Costello*, *Slow Man*, *Diary of a Bad Year* and *Summertime: Scenes from Provincial Life* – focus on a variety of strategies in which a life can be represented in a literary work. These genre-bending contributions to life-writing discourse constantly challenge the readers to tell fact from invention, autobiography from fiction, never satisfying them with the answers given. Yet, they explore the intriguing figure, that is the author – in all his peculiarity, accidentalness and actuality – in a way that can hardly be matched by many other contemporary works. Mikhail Bakhtin once observed that "the process of assimilating real historical time and space in literature has a complicated and erratic history, as does the articulation of actual historical persons in such a time and space" (Bakhtin 1981: 84). The present paper focuses on three such articulations, Coetzee's autobiographical volumes entitled *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*, *Youth* and *Summertime: Scenes from Provincial Life* and investigates their self-referentiality, i.e. a relationship between the 'real'/historical 'I' and the narrated 'I'.

Key words: J.M. Coetzee; life-writing; autobiography; self-referentiality

1.

The thirtieth “strong opinion” from Coetzee’s 2007 novel *Diary of a Bad Year*, tellingly entitled “On Authority in Fiction,” addresses an issue that has always been at the very core of Coetzee’s writing, both fiction and non-fiction. In this short piece, the major character of *Diary of a Bad Year*, Señor C, who contributes to the volume pronouncing “what is wrong with today’s world” (Coetzee 2007: 21), analyses the relationship between the notion of authority and works of fiction, further declaring Tolstoy to be the exemplary writer whose oeuvre proves the significance and inerasability of the authorial component. Señor C speaks against the announcements of Ronald Barthes and Michel Foucault and their claim that “the authority of the author has never amounted to anything more than a bagful of rhetorical tricks” (Coetzee 2007: 149). On the contrary, he appears to be supporting the view that the effect the writings of Tolstoy and other great masters have on the readers can by no means be reduced and understood as a simple consequence of author’s rhetorical skills. “What the great authors are masters of is authority,” he announces and, consequently, poses the following questions:

What is the source of authority, or of what the formalists called the authority-effect? If authority could be achieved simply by tricks of rhetoric, then Plato was surely justified in expelling poets from his ideal republic. But what if authority can be attained only by opening the poet-self to some higher force, by ceasing to be oneself and beginning to speak vatically?

The god can be invoked, but does not necessarily come. *Learn to speak without authority*, says Kierkegaard. By coping Kierkegaard’s words here, I make Kierkegaard into an authority. Authority cannot be taught, cannot be learned. The paradox is a true one. (Coetzee 2007: 151)

Coetzee’s extraordinary body of works shows an undying fascination with exposing and probing the paradoxes that govern the question of authority in works of literature. Though interest in authority in fiction is one of the major concerns of postmodernism, Coetzee’s methods of addressing the issue are unique and highly idiosyncratic. His struggle against those who wish to expose the impostures of authorship, against Diderot, Sterne, the Russian formalist critics of the 1920s, Barthes and Foucault, manifests his opposition not only to the pronouncements of the death of the author, understood as a radical separation of texts from their creators, but of the person behind the words as well. Ultimately, what Coetzee’s narratives voice appears to be tantamount to opposing his own demise.

In the age where writers have joined the ranks of celebrities and, apart from those with a natural propensity for exhibitionism, are made to share their personal

life to answer the demand of the publishing market and audience, Coetzee, determinedly self-effacing and inscrutable, has followed Thomas Pynchon and J.D. Salinger in their insistence on remaining an enigma and a puzzle. Neither of Coetzee's two wins of the Booker Prize for Fiction was accepted personally by him and the rare speeches or lectures that he is asked to give take the shape of fictional stories often accounted by his imagined alter ego. The position of self-doubt and resistance towards interpreters is what greatly characterises Coetzee's oeuvre and, in turn, may partly explain his avoidance of interviewers, as well as refusal to show up at the award shows and his protest against being treated as a performing/celebrity figure. Who is J.M. Coetzee, then? If we were to judge from his infrequent public appearances, we could follow the description provided by one of the journalists: "thin-blooded, professorial type, sunk too deeply in pained thought for heartiness or even, it is rumoured, laughter" (Tayler 2007). If one were to create an image of Coetzee based on his most recent storylines, one would imagine his private life to be consumed with unreciprocated passions, especially lust for younger women, and deep concern for the lives of animals manifested in his vegetarianism. However, as one learns from Martin, a character in Coetzee's latest novel entitled *Summertime*, "it would be very, very naïve to conclude that because the theme was present in his writing it had to be present in his life" (Coetzee 2009: 215). The statement inevitably further problematises the issue of self-representation – especially to those researchers who hope to arrive at some knowledge of the writer by means of pursuing biographical information in the author's fictional creation.

As I have already stated, Coetzee is, indeed, a paradoxical writer with regard to the issue of self-referentiality: the writer who in his works gives voice to personal obsessions and experiences (as acknowledged, for example, by his friend Derek Attridge [2005: 139]) and, simultaneously, remains deliberately anti-self-revelatory. Despite the overt refusal to perform any ostensible act of personal revelation, his fiction is permeated by the questions of author, life (his own, most notably) and their embodiment in fiction, resulting in what Jane Poyner calls "a tension [...] between the private and public" (Poyner 2006: 4). The self-conscious narrator of *Youth* announces the centrality of life-writing (and, consequently, self-censorship) to Coetzee's oeuvre in the following way: "The question of what should be permitted to go into his diary and what kept forever shrouded goes to the heart of all his writing" (Coetzee 2003: 9). Performance of the self appears to run in Coetzee's family as, according to the narrator of *Boyhood*, two of Coetzee's ancestors, Balthazar du Biel and Albert Coetzee, his uncle on the father's side, attempted to write their autobiographies. In the last decade, the nature of Coetzee's literary project has significantly changed (until

Disgrace [1999] and with the exception of *Dusklands* [1974], *Foe* [1986] and *The Master of Petersburg* [1994] his major preoccupations were of a different character, especially concerning the power relation between the oppressor and the disenfranchised in oppressive systems). Old forms have been abandoned and Coetzee, instead, has turned towards other genres such as memoir, essay, lecture, polemic – all of them being, in fact, intimate conversations Coetzee is having with himself, or, to be more precise, the multiple alter egos that he invents for the purpose of his fiction. But his interest in life-writing can be traced back to the very origin of his profession as a writer. *Dusklands* of 1974 was not only the book that introduced postmodernism and its techniques into South African fiction, but it made the question of life-writing one of its central themes. Divided into two novellas, “The Vietnam Project” and “The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee,” the latter section offers an account of Dutch colonial activities in eighteenth-century South Africa. *Dusklands* is, in fact, populated by various Coetzee impersonations and this proliferation clearly manifests metafictional procedures that the narrative undergoes. There is the original Jacobus Coetsé, a distant relative of the author. There is Jacobus Coetzee, the character of the narrative. There is also S.J. Coetzee, the editor of Jacobus’s story working on the early explorers of South Africa between 1934 and 1948 and, finally, J.M. Coetzee, the author of *Dusklands* and the creator of the previous versions of Coetzee. Already in Coetzee’s first work of fiction readers are offered hints as to what is to become the writer’s major thematic preoccupation towards the end of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Also, when looking at Coetzee’s theoretical discussion of the use of fictional confession (in particular Dostoevsky and Tolstoy), what one encounters is a great deal of scepticism towards the ‘truthfulness’ of such accounts and their impossibility to escape a procedure of self-mythologising. In *Doubling the Point* Coetzee says “The self cannot tell the truth of itself to itself and come to rest without the possibility of self-deception” (Attwell 1999: 51). This results in the understanding of traditional life-writing genres as another form of imprisonment which does not ‘decipher’ the subject but keeps him or her ‘captive’ in the maze of own illusions, projections and self-deception. But Coetzee’s disillusionment with the idea of (auto)biography does not mean complete abandonment of this life-writing form. On the contrary, in his case, it means revisiting the form and playing with the many potentialities that it offers, since, as he himself admits in another interview with David Attwell, “in a larger sense all writing is autobiography: everything that you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it” (Attwell 1999: 17).

While reviewing a new selection from the notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge in the *London Review of Books*, the celebrated critic Barbara Everett declared about our times: "This is an age of biography, not of poetry" (Everett 2003: 6). This, in my opinion, very pertinent comment applies not only to contemporary literature, but professional academic literary criticism as well, which, in the last few decades, has generated an unprecedented number of categories wishing to embrace and define numerous and diverse forms of life-writing practices. From addiction narratives to war memoirs, such terms as autobiographics (L. Gilmore), autofiction (S. Doubrovsky), heterobiography (P. Lejeune), otobiography (J. Derrida), and periautography (J. Olney) – to name just a few – populate the pages of contemporary life writing criticism – all, by means of establishing some new terminology and vocabulary, hoping to arrive at some conclusions concerning the relationship between 'reality' and fiction in the works of life-writing. As my discussion of Coetzee's autobiographical volumes will prove, his works cannot by any means be classified as traditional autobiography since they refuse to acknowledge and secure "the much desired unity of the subject and the object of knowledge" (Marcus 1994: 5) – a primary principle of autobiography according to Laura Marcus. However, in my discussion of Coetzee's *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime*, I do not wish to restrict myself to reading the volumes as exemplifications or articulations of one genre or one theory only – though I recognise the importance and fruitfulness of such endeavours. Undoubtedly, some of the above-mentioned categories could easily be applied to Coetzee's works. For example, the puzzling relationship between the character of *Boyhood* and its author, J.M. Coetzee, could well be explained by the application of the term 'autofiction' – first introduced by Serge Doubrovsky upon the publication of his 1977 novel *Fils* and, subsequently, elaborated on by other theoreticians of textual genetics, Philippe Lejeune included. Doubrovsky's definition of 'generic autofiction'¹ could be particularly useful in one's attempts to grasp the phenomenon of *Boyhood* as the book consciously and deliberately invites generic ambiguity and the so-called "contradictory pact" (Vilain 2011: 5). According to Doubrovsky, a work classifiable as 'generic autofiction' presents itself as entirely referential (in the case of *Boyhood*, John would be identified as J.M. Coetzee) and boasts considerable exactitude in terms of facts, while, simultaneously, it performs a move of non-referentiality by claiming to be a novel and welcoming elements of historical inaccuracy (Vilain 2011: 5). Leigh Gilmore's 'autobiographics' appears to be equally helpful (and applicable, particularly in relation to Coetzee's third autobiographical volume entitled *Summertime*) when

¹ Following the contentions of Philippe Lejeune, one could, for example, further discuss *Boyhood* as being representative of either "referential autofiction" or "fictional autofiction" (Vilain 2011: 5-6).

analysing the author's self-representation. Concerned with "interruptions and eruptions, with resistance and contradiction as strategies of self-representation," autobiographics welcomes contradictions and multiple angles (in *Summertime* primarily achieved by means of polarised and discrepant interviews conducted with Coetzee's lovers, family and friends) in the representation of identity, "the shifting sides of identity" which "allow[s] us to recognize that the *I* is multiply coded in a range of discourses" (Gilmore 1994: 42).

However, instead of reading (and consequently analysing) Coetzee's autobiographical volumes as, for example, works of periautography, heterobiography, autofiction, or autobiographics, I wish to perform the basic procedure which lies at the very heart of any life writing criticism, i.e. to investigate the work's referentiality: the relationship between author and character. Philippe Lejeune says:

As opposed to all forms of fiction, biography and autobiography are *referential* texts: exactly like scientific or historical discourse, 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).

In the present paper I wish to submit Coetzee's *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime* to such a 'test of verification' and, thus, with the help of basic instruments provided by narratologists, investigate the relation between what Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson call 'real' / historical 'I' and the narrated 'I' (Smith and Watson 2010: 72).

2.

Philippe Lejeune has convincingly demonstrated that the canonical form of autobiography is characterised by the equation author = narrator = character, and he has reserved the formula author = character ≠ narrator for the special case of 'third-person' autobiography (later called heterodiegetic autobiography) (Lejeune 1996). However, Coetzee's first autobiographical works, i.e. *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* and *Youth*, from the very beginning posed a number of questions concerning the status of both narratives as they did not easily comply with Lejeune's categorisation.

Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life,² a slim volume published in 1997, was the first work by Coetzee boasting an overtly autobiographical character, tracing

² The title of the novel is a clear reference to George Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life* of 1857 and William Cooper's *Scenes from Provincial Life* of 1950.

Coetzee's early life from childhood to entering St Joseph's, a Catholic secondary school in Cape Town, showing faithfulness to the real-life incidents and facts of the Nobel Winner's life (the readers even witness the origins of Coetzee's famous vegetarianism, following the slaughter of sheep in the family farmhouse in the Karoo). From the formal point of view the book is to be read as Coetzee's memoir and the examination of Coetzee's young self, tracing episodes from John's life from the age of ten to the age of thirteen with some earlier reminiscences included. This is precisely what the publisher (through the book's back cover) encourages the readers to do: "In *Boyhood* J. M. Coetzee revisits the South Africa of half a century ago, to write about his childhood and interior life" (Coetzee 1998). Undoubtedly, *Boyhood* is a work of life-writing, but impossible to be categorised as a memoir proper due to its being written in the third person and the present tense, i.e. the technique which, at least from a theoretical point of view, makes the book fall under the category of heterodiegetic autobiography. It needs to be emphasised that the third-person narrative style is highly unusual for autobiography, since, among other limitations, it lacks the sense of intimacy that is to be gained from an orthodox first-person confessional account. Moreover, only once does the narrator refer to his 'protagonist' as John who is otherwise credited with the pronoun 'he.' Finally, a discrepancy exists between the story of a boy and its narration provided by a mature artist, resulting in a re-articulation and hence fabrication of the experience (e.g. projecting present notions onto his younger self), which ultimately questions the idea of truth or veracity of such an account and, consequently, the writer's self-representation.

The volume starts with the major character growing up in the newly built South African town of Worcester immediately after the Second World War - all the personal details are, indeed, biographically accurate. Already the first characteristic that strikes the readers of *Boyhood* is the character's double position of outsider and insider. John is a special type of South African citizen, the family being Afrikaner, but whose first language is English which is clearly a mode of dissociating themselves from the Afrikaner group and heritage (in the book Coetzee speaks English to his parents and Afrikaans to his relatives and colleagues). His family differs from their neighbours in other respects as well. Their separation from the community in which they live results not only from ethnic but also religious estrangement since they declare themselves to be atheists. The family and its members certainly do not fit into the picture of the new state. 'He,' meaning John, is portrayed as an isolated individual. "He shares nothing with his mother" (Coetzee 1998: 5), the narrator of *Boyhood* declares proving the character's alienation even from his closet relatives. The narrative further adds: "He knows that he is damaged. He has a sense that something

is slowly tearing inside him all the time: a wall, a membrane. He tried to hold himself as tight as possible to keep the tearing within bound. To keep it within bounds, not to stop it: nothing will stop it" (Coetzee 1998: 9).

In the second chapter of the novel John symbolically burns his feet on the warm tarmac when he wants to join other boys playing with bare feet while exercising at PT classes. After three days of recovery at home he returns to school. Yet, instead of being offered sympathy, he becomes an object of ridicule. John puts the shoes back on his feet never to join the ranks of other boys at school – the process of separation continues and John does not create some further forms of estrangement for himself by, for example, imagining to be the only Roman Catholic boy among his schoolmates. Soon he abandons this mask to befriend the two Jewish boys and be identified as one of God's Chosen People. Consequently, he suffers from anti-Semitic remarks uttered even by his own mother. School is depicted as a hostile place, giving birth to the experience of terror and shame as the boy's peers are flogged daily. It is at school that John first registers the sympathy for the dispossessed or disenfranchised which further evolves into his concern with the race issue in apartheid South Africa. John distinguishes between the white people, Coloureds and Natives, who are the lowest and most derided part of the society. Out of all the children's stories he is exposed to, one leaves the deepest mark on the protagonist of *Boyhood*. In the story

the third brother, the humblest and most derided, who after the first and second brothers have disdainfully passed by, helps the old woman to carry her heavy load or draws the thorn from the lion's paw. The third brother is kind and honest and courageous while the first and second brothers are boastful, arrogant, uncharitable. At the end of the story the third brother is crowned prince, while the first and second brothers are disgraced and sent packing. (Coetzee 1998: 65)

For John, the parallel is clear, and he considers the Natives to be the third brother, the one with whom he has spiritual affinity. In a telling episode, John takes his friends for ice cream, while the Coloured children are standing at the window and looking at them, "drinking in the sight" (Coetzee 1998: 72). "Whatever happens," the narrator states, "whether they are chased away or not, it is too late, his heart is already hurt" (Coetzee 1998: 73). South Africa is presented as a thoroughly sick state, governed by injustice, corruption and discriminatory laws as well as all-pervasive violence; the place where Afrikaners "are people in rage all the time because their hearts are hurt," while the English [are] "people who have not fallen into a rage because they live behind walls and guard their hearts well" (Coetzee 1998: 73). The narrative suggests that it is in the experience of living in South Africa that one should look for the origins of Coetzee's writing:

"What he would write if he could, [...], would be something darker, something that, once it began to flow from his pen, would spread across the page out of control, like spilt ink. Like spilt ink, like shadows racing across the face of still water, like lightning crackling across the sky" (Coetzee 1998: 140).

The novel also offers a vivid portrayal of the violent relationship between the character and his parents. The major feeling towards his weak father ("an appendage, a contributor to the economy as a paying lodger might be" [Coetzee 1998: 12]) gradually descending into alcoholism and debt is that of contempt: "he has never worked out the position of his father in the household. In fact, it is not obvious to him by what right his father is there at all" (Coetzee 1998: 12). Feelings for his mother are more complex and conflicted when love turns into resentment ("what torrents of scorn he pours upon her, how much like an inferior he treats her" [Coetzee 1998: 13]) then dependency and admiration, again. "The thought of a lifetime bowed under a debt of love baffles and infuriates him to the point, where he refuses to be touched by her. When he turns away in silent hurt, he deliberately hardens his heart against her, refusing to give in" (Coetzee 1998: 47). John is watchful and secretive, but above all, he is a divided personality: "at home [...] an irascible despot, at school a lamb" (Coetzee 1998: 13), living a double life.

What the readers of *Boyhood* are ultimately confronted with is the fact that *Boyhood* in its honesty is a mockery of an idea of childhood. As defined by the *Children's Encyclopaedia*, it is "a time of innocent joy, to be spent in meadows amid buttercups and bunny-rabbits or at the hearthside absorbed in the storybook" (Coetzee 1998: 14). This encyclopaedic childhood is a concept alien to John. His childhood, if anything, is "the time of gritting the teeth and enduring" (Coetzee 1998: 14), the time of corruption, disillusionment and evil. And John, a sensitive child that emerges from the final pages of the novel is not saved from corruption entering his heart: "His heart is old, it is dark and hard, a heart of stone. That is his contemptible secret" (Coetzee 1998: 123).

Boyhood is, then, a book as much about Coetzee himself, as it is about the process of distancing oneself from who one is.³ It is about pretences and lies just as it is about the desire for singularity and unrelatedness in the world. "The truth that *Boyhood* offers, then," Derek Attridge declares,

is first and foremost that of testimony [...]. But *Boyhood* is a literary as well as documentary work, and to the extent that it is the former, its object is not the conveyance of historical truth. Literature may, however,

³ The (a)historical character of the narrative is further problematised by the fact that the first proofs of *Boyhood* contained original names which the American publisher of Coetzee – afraid of litigation – asked to change into the invented names which the author consented to as if not concerned with the factual accuracy of his work (Attridge 2005: 148-149).

be deeply involved in an exploration of truth-telling, of what it means, and what it feels like, to articulate sentences governed by an obligation to be accurate and honest and *Boyhood* enacts the truth of confession, and writing as confession, without transgression, repentance, or absolution. (Attridge 2005: 155-156)

3.

The process of formal distancing of author from his character is further developed in *Youth*, Coetzee's book of 2002. Even though read by some as a sequel to *Boyhood* – the American edition, for instance, was subtitled *Scenes from Provincial Life II* – it was met with considerable puzzlement by a number of reviewers (e.g. Deresiewicz 2002 and Dyer 2002) who opened up a debate on its being either novel or memoir. In the United Kingdom, the book had no subtitle of any kind which would suggest its genre, and the blurb encouraged the readers to approach it as if it were a novel with serious autobiographical ingredients.⁴ *Youth* is a writer's take on his life, his own portrait of the artist as a young man and his existential struggle over commitment to people, literature, profession.

Similarly to Joseph Conrad's 1898 novella,⁵ *Youth* is concerned with a young man's formative experience of a journey and disillusionment over the romantic and idealistic vision of life. Written in the present tense and third person, just like its prequel, the novel follows its principal character John who re-enacts the events from Coetzee's own life over the years 1959-1964 as confirmed by biographical research. He studies and graduates from mathematics at the University of Cape Town in the 1950s, works part-time in a library and, above all, hopes to become a man of letters and a man of increased sexual experience. These two preoccupations, namely becoming a writer and a lover, are of primary importance to John, the protagonist. He actually finds them to be firmly linked and intertwined: "art cannot be fed on deprivation alone," he says, "there must be intimacy, passion, love as well" (Coetzee 2003: 10). Politics occupies the margin of the novel/memoir (similarly to the parents who, when compared with their appearance in *Boyhood*, are hardly present in *Youth*) – a surprising move, especially since the confessional character of the narrative (manifested, for example, in sharing intimate and often highly compromising personal details with the readers) could be considered a

⁴ The blurb reads: "*Youth's* narrator, a student in 1950s South Africa, has long been plotting an escape from his native country" (Coetzee 2003).

⁵ The title of Coetzee's work also echoes Tolstoy's *Youth*, especially as far as presenting oneself in an unfavourable light and tripartite form of Coetzee's memoir (*Boyhood*, *Youth*, *Summertime*) are concerned.

perfect tool for elaboration of Coetzee's anti-apartheid views and involvement in the politics of oppression; an issue clearly on his mind as proved by other non-fictional works of his (most notably, perhaps, in Coetzee's 1987 Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech). There are indeed some echoes of police violence, marches and opposition to the apartheid regime (and later, when he moves to London, the Cuban missile crisis, Vietnam War, the Sharpeville massacre), but John remains relatively impervious to them. Instead of being sympathetic to the 'third brother,' he is portrayed as thoroughly cynical – the scene in which the Pan Africanist Congress demonstration remains of concern to John only to the extent that it can affect his plans of escaping South Africa ("Will ships be still sailing tomorrow? – this is his one though. I must get out before it is too late!" [Coetzee 2009: 39]) is particularly illustrative of the character's indifference towards the oppressive regime. Following disillusionment with the South African state and the threat of being conscripted, John abandons South Africa and moves to London where he is employed as a programmer at I.B.M. His leisure time is consumed by researching the oeuvre of Ford Madox Ford, writing poetry and fiction, and visits to the British Museum Reading Room. He desires to become a great poet in the manner of his heroes, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. His ideas, however, are not attributed with any reverence, profundity or originality. Instead, they are striking in their naivety and cliché-like character. John believes in passionate love and its "agency of [his] transfiguration" (Coetzee 2009: 10) and is looking for the one, "the Destined One," (Coetzee 2009: 93) expecting that transformative sex will allow him to emerge as a new being. However, when confronted with the real problems concerning a relationship, he behaves disgracefully. When Sarah, his Cape Town girlfriend, gets pregnant, he abandons her and makes her arrange an illegal abortion all by herself. John also pronounces that:

the artist must taste all experience from the noblest to the most degraded. Just as the artist's destiny to experience the most supreme creative joy, so he must be prepared to take upon himself all in life that is miserable, squalid, ignominious. It was in the name of experience that he underwent London – the dead days of I.B.M., the icy winter of 1962, one humiliating affair after another: stages in the poet's life, all of them, in the testing of his soul. (Coetzee 2003: 164)

Undoubtedly, the novel offers a truthful account of a number of Coetzee's own life incidents.⁶ It is also veracious as far as showing his scholarly interests, especially the oeuvre of Ford Madox Ford and computer studies, are concerned.

⁶ However, a number of available biographical facts have been ignored by the narrative, most notably Coetzee's marriage to Philippa Juber and obtaining his master's degree from the University of Cape Town in 1963 – both events being omitted by the narrator of *Youth*.

His wonderings on the new technologies ("If he cannot, for the present, write poetry that comes from the heart, if his heart is not in the right state to generate poetry of its own, can he at least string together pseudo-poems made up of phrases generated by a machine" [Coetzee 2003: 160-161]) will, as we know, result in John completing a computer-based stylistic analysis of Samuel Beckett which he will defend as his PhD in 1969. But the London-set part of the narrative gives priority to an investigation of John's sexual exploits and frustrations incurred in the process. His affairs are numerous, yet unsatisfactory and not even once does a relationship bring him closer to the emotional fulfilment which he so desperately desires. Towards the end of the novel John diagnoses his condition as the "lack of heart, lack of heart" and being "cold, frozen" (Coetzee 2003: 168), the two adjectives being most often used while referring to his future fictional personas - in this way the motif of the "dead heart" first introduced in *Boyhood* finds not only its continuation, but a form of elaboration as well.

The character in *Youth* also shares a number of traits with his younger version portrayed in *Boyhood* - narcissism, impatience and grandiosity being just a few of them. Yet the most important difference between the two parts of Coetzee's autobiographical project is a considerable intensification of self-contempt and self-mockery that the narrator expresses towards his younger self. The distance that Coetzee creates between the character and the narrator is by no means characteristic of Chaucer, whom John admires and who, in his own estimation, "keeps a nice ironic distance" (Coetzee 2003: 21). Coetzee's harsh and ruthless portrayal leaves no space for sympathy towards John - a coward, a sexual predator and a pretentious artist - as the protagonist "is based on a concentration of all that is ignoble in John" (Head 2009: 12). Hermione Lee says of *Youth*: "if this is an autobiography, it is one which is at pains to demolish the pact which autobiography is meant to establish between writer and reader, that this is 'the real thing,' 'the true story.' It is an autobiography written 'under false pretences'; it is never going to tell us how much is 'the truth' about the self, because it does not know what it is" (Lee 2005: 168).

The quintessential feature of *Youth* is, hence, its impossibility of discovering the true nature of things. The narrator says of his character: "At one moment he might truly be himself, at another he might simply be making things up" (Coetzee 2003: 59). *Youth* certainly shows little affinity with traditional life-writing forms and formulas. Instead of expressing a desire for unity and reconciliation of antagonistic elements (present and past selves), it offers a harsh critique of the truthful representation of an individual's life the genres in question traditionally aspire to achieve. It is not a straightforward autobiography; but a parody of a genre and a parody of self - a parody understood in its Aristotelian

terms as "singing beside: that is singing off key; or singing in another voice – in counterpoint; or again, singing another key – deforming, therefore, or *transposing* a melody" (Genette 1997: 10).

4.

Summertime: Scenes from Provincial Life, Coetzee's novel of 2009 is the last (at least for the time being) in the long series of Coetzee's life-writing experiments and could be seen as a third volume to the already discussed *Boyhood* and *Youth* series. What formally differentiates *Summertime* from its genre-bending prequels is that the final instalment is a posthumous piece in which Coetzee imagines himself being dead. Unlike the other two it has not been instantly categorised under a 'non-fiction' label but has been described by the publisher (on the book's cover) as "fictionalised memoir" – without much surprise since such a categorisation would imply that the subject in question, J.M. Coetzee, was truly deceased. Coetzee still insists on writing about himself using the third person narrative, but this time the impersonal narrator is substituted by an Englishman named Vincent who is writing Coetzee's own biography and who appears to have neither qualifications nor talent for depicting the Nobel Prize Laureate's life. Structurally *Summertime* is a tripartite story, consisting of Coetzee's dated notebooks, five interviews, and ultimately, undated notebook entries. The book is, then, a draft of Vincent's biographical work with special focus on the years 1972-1977 (in the word of the biographer the times when Coetzee "was still finding his feet as a writer" [Coetzee 2009: 225]) which consists of Coetzee's notebooks from the period opened posthumously whose entries are accompanied by transcribed interviews with colleagues, lovers and other important people in Coetzee's life as mentioned in the notebooks in advance and interrupted by italicised notes by Vincent.⁷

The book does not pick up on Coetzee's life exactly where *Youth* left it, but rather a couple of years later when, after his stay in the United States, Coetzee returns to South Africa to live in Cape Town with his father.⁸ Apart from learning about his family situation (ailing father, dead mother and brother remaining overseas), the readers are invited to trace his pursuits of various job opportunities, investigate John's dilemmas concerning moving back inlands to run the farm belonging

⁷ The form of the book is similar to the second volume of Günter Grass's autobiography *The Box: Tales from the Darkroom* (published in English in 2010) which is composed of Grass's children (under pseudonyms) meeting in their different houses and swapping stories of their father.

⁸ The gap between *Youth* and *Summertime* can be filled by Coetzee's brief memoir entitled "Remembering Texas" (Attwell 1999: 50-53).

to his family in the Karoo, and witness the publication of *Dusklands*. As I have already mentioned, apart from the documentation procedure, Vincent conducts five interviews: three with Coetzee's lovers (one of them, a Brazilian widow named Adriana Nascimento who was Coetzee's dance instructor, is shown as a prototype for Susan in Coetzee's *Foe*; the other two being Julia Frankl, a Canadian psychotherapist, and Sophie Denoël, an academic), as well as his cousin and childhood sweetheart Margot Jonker and Martin, Coetzee's male friend whom he befriends while applying for a university position in Cape Town.

Similar to Coetzee's previous autobiographical pieces, the writer offers an extremely harsh and unwelcoming portrait of himself – as seen both by himself (notebooks) and others (interviews). The expressions that are used by the interviewers to describe Vincent's subject are far from complimentary. What appears to be specifically humiliating is his sexual performance, which is characterised by such phrases (to mention just a few of the self-deprecating expressions which populate the pages of *Summertime*) as "eunuch," "moffie," "heatless," "an autistic quality," "tepid," "disembodied," and "stiff, intractable, unteachable" (Coetzee 2009: 114, 103, 118, 52, 196, 198, 183). None of the interviewees offer a positive image of the writer who is repeatedly the object of ridicule, patronisation and contempt. Even the notebook entries (written in the same formula as *Boyhood* and *Youth*, i.e. third person present tense voice) show Coetzee as an off-putting persona – but for the readers acquainted with Coetzee's other autobiographical writings, self-criticism, self-deprecation and ruthless presentation, John indulges in this form of meta-review are by no means surprising. In *Summertime* criticism extends beyond his persona and invades upon Coetzee's own work. Sophie, a faculty colleague from the University of Cape Town says: "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. Too cool, too neat, I would say. Too easy. Too lacking in passion" (Coetzee 2009: 242).

Even Coetzee's seminal role in showing the underprivileged and oppressed of South Africa under the apartheid regime to the world is questioned. "As long as liberation meant national liberation, the liberation of the black nation of South Africa, John had no interest in it" (Coetzee 2009: 229), his fellow scholar and lover Sophie Denoël concludes. But unlike *Boyhood* and *Youth*, *Summertime* abandons facts for the sake of the more fictionalised account since a researcher of Coetzee's life learns that in the early ninety seventies Coetzee was already married to Philippa Jubber with two kids. Moreover, his mother, to whom he referred in his speech during a banquet in Stockholm, died in 1985, eight years

after the closing date of *Summerime*. Coetzee's cousin Agnes, for the first time introduced in *Boyhood*, now, in *Summertime*, is portrayed under the name of Margot. The novel, hence, once again poses a number of questions concerning the relationship between fact and fiction, truth and obfuscation. Taking the above-mentioned distortions of factual truth into account, *Summertime* cannot be read as a referential text as it fails Lejeune's test of verification. "But what if we are all fictioneers, as you call Coetzee? What if we all continually make up the stories of our lives? Why should what I tell you about Coetzee be any worthier of credence than what he tells you himself?" Sophie Denoël speculates towards the end of the book (Coetzee 2009: 226). As acknowledged by many reviewers (e.g. Dee 2009), the statement which is central in the analysis of the novel's theme is provided by one of Coetzee's lovers named Julia, who in her interview with Vincent states the following: "Consider [...]. Here we have a man who, in the most intimate of human relations, cannot connect, or can connect only briefly, intermittently. Yet how does he make his living? He makes his living writing reports, expert reports, on intimate human experience. Because that is what novels are about – isn't it? – intimate experience... Doesn't that strike you as odd?" (Coetzee 2009: 82).

The question about the writer turns out to be a question about writing *per se*. The self-portrait that Coetzee offers throughout his trilogy is based on the principle which questions the possibility of connectedness not only to other human beings, but to oneself as well. It is not that the writer has no capacity for love or intimacy with others. First and foremost, J.M. Coetzee, the author, shows no love for himself. Is it all an act of provocation? Does J.M. Coetzee truly consider himself a repellent figure and his writing an ambitious failure? Surely, what Coetzee wishes to achieve is to ridicule all the attempts that have been made by many researchers all over the world, especially after the bestowal of the Nobel Prize, to learn about the writer's life for the sheer reason of his being elevated to public figure status. Paradoxically, the others, like the interviewees, appear to have a much more colourful and interesting life than the subject that is sought by Vincent. Moreover, the marriage of fact and fiction seems to suggest that the image of the celebrated South African writer should not be read as an accurate and faithful one. Coetzee – an academic who knows far too much about the tenets of contemporary life-writing which, following the post-structuralist break, acknowledges fiction to be at the basis of biographical discourse – could by no means suggest that the picture he delineates for his readers is true simply because in its assumed sincerity it goes against one's natural propensity for positive representation of the self. Any act of writing falls into the dangers of distortion and manipulation. It also becomes a scene where the dialectics of power is exercised. Coetzee seems to be saying that ultimately every writer performs

the crime of enslaving and appropriating the voices of others and making them speak in his own – one of Coetzee’s favourite subjects, which he returned to on a number of occasions, most overtly in *Foe*. The act of appropriation of other voices is particularly evident in Vincent’s re-writing his interview with Margot as a continuous narrative which is “fixed up” (Coetzee 2009: 87) and with “a detail or two [added] to bring the scene to life” (Coetzee 2009: 105) – evident synonyms for distortion. Margot’s opposition to her story being re-written is an identical move to the one performed by Susan in her fight against *Foe* over the ownership of the story of Cruso and Friday. If so, why not assume that one’s own voice becomes enslaved as well? What the (anti?)narcissistic project of Coetzee surely validates is the mysterious nature of a life which cannot be grasped and the apparent futility of any life-writing project.

Summertime also anticipates the future actions undertaken by various biographers of Coetzee and states the impossibility of answering the questions that the existence of the subjects poses, such as the one formulated by Adriana in her interview with Coetzee’s imagined biographer: “How can you be a great writer if you are just an ordinary little man?” (Coetzee 2009: 196). Fiction does not only resist the pretence that easy answers can be given to the seminal questions of human existence. On the contrary, it implies that there may be no answers at all. As concluded by Derek Attridge in his study entitled *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, what really matters in Coetzee’s autobiographical oeuvre is “the event – literary and ethical at the same time – of storytelling, of testing, of self-questioning, and not the outcome” (Attridge 2005: 205).

Finally, I would like to emphasise the fact that, in contemporary South African literature, Coetzee is not the only one questioning and probing the limits of writing the self. Damon Galgut, in my estimation Coetzee’s closest follower among contemporary South African writers,⁹ shows similar concerns in his Booker shortlisted novel *In a Strange Room* of 2010 – a tripartite story of a man’s journey through Greece, India and Africa. Galgut’s novel in particular constituted a matter of contention for the critics due to the impossibility of labelling it either as a memoir (non-fiction and as such ineligible for the Booker competition) or a novel (fiction) – hence, repeating the debate sparked by Coetzee’s works of autobiographism. Interestingly enough, in the words of its narrator, called Damon Galgut [sic!], the book itself shows heightened awareness of the inevitable failure of any attempt at its categorisation and invites its readers to transcend the boundary between fiction and non-fiction, art and life, character and author:

⁹ Similarities between Coetzee’s and Galgut’s works include, among others, often unspecified locations, language (clean and sparse prose with no ornamentations), style (third person, present tense) critique of South Africa and the use of allegory.

"Looking back at him through time, I remember him remembering, and I am more present in the scene than he was. But memory has its own distances, in part he is me entirely, in part he is a stranger I am watching" (Galgut 2010: 5).

5.

There is a story from Jean Genet's life which indisputably remains one of the most powerful and radical demonstrations of how to change the existing formulas. In 1985 Genet gave a televised interview to the BBC. The episode is relatively well-known not only because of the fact that it was Genet's last public statement, but also due to the famous misunderstanding between Genet and a television presenter. Nigel Williams, a young novelist and the translator of *Deathwatch* (1949) was conducting the interview and, at some point, asked Genet about love. Because of his accent Genet thought Williams was saying 'death' (*la morte*), not 'love' (*l'amour*). And when he realised that a serious question about annihilation was actually about an emotion he no longer cared about, he laughed and showed his contempt for the latter. But the interview demonstrates another interesting feature, which seems to be pertinent to my understanding of Coetzee's contribution to the realm of life-writing.

At the end of the second day of shooting, Genet insisted that he wanted to interview the technical crew. He suddenly announced that he had a dream the night before in which the technical staff had rebelled. With camera turned around to disrupt everyone's expectations, Genet, with Williams translating, started interviewing the technicians. Having finished that, Williams asked Genet if he enjoyed breaking down the order of things. Genet replied, "Of course, it all seems so frozen to me. I'm all alone here and in front there are one, two, three, four, five people, six people, and obviously I want to break down the order..." (White 1993: 630). For Genet, the only statement that an interviewee could make and which, simultaneously, could break the existing order, was changing the formula.

In this present paper, I have offered a short overview of the techniques in which J.M. Coetzee writes himself into his fiction, which, in my estimation, results, as in Genet's interview, in a radical change of the life-writing formulas. Are Coetzee's quasi-autobiographical works classifiable as instances of writing oneself, or writing the other? Are they the works of autobiographical non-fiction or do they inhabit the realm of fiction and, hence, should no referentiality be sought by readers?

Instead of providing a direct and unambiguous response to the above-listed questions (and consequently, offering a definite judgement on the volumes' factual or fictional provenience), I should like to resort to a solution proposed by Sue Kossew in one of her articles on self-referentiality in Coetzee's texts. Having commented on Coetzee's perdurable engagement with the problematics of borders and thresholds, she suggests that the so-called "border poetics" which breaks down "the containment and categorization inherent in established borders" (Kossew 2009: 61) should be applied to one's reading of Coetzee's autobiographical texts. Hence my deliberate refusal, expressed in the introductory part of the present paper, to discuss *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime* as examples of established (i.e. defined, contained and categorised) poetics or genres such as autofiction, autobiographics, heterobiography, etc. I should like to claim that the three volumes briefly discussed here are not genres *per se*, but "acts of genre [...] at once contrived, duplicitous and yet agential" (Hayes 2010: 2). Or, to put it differently, together with Sue Kossew, I see Coetzee's works as engaged in creating ambivalence, "a 'neither yes nor no,' a 'both/and' rather than an 'either/or'" (Kossew 2009: 62). It is the same ambivalence which guides Coetzee's paradoxical reading of the nature of the Self, most explicitly stated by Elizabeth Costello at the gate of heaven:

But who am I, who is this *I*, this *you*? We change from day to day, and we also stay the same. No *I*, no *you* is more fundamental than any other. You might as well ask which is the true Elizabeth Costello: the one who made the first statement or the one who made the second. My answer is, both are true. Both. And neither. *I am an other*. Pardon me for resorting to words that are not my own, but I cannot improve on them. You have the wrong person before you. If you think you have the right person you have the wrong person. The wrong Elizabeth Costello.

Is this true? It may not be true but it is certainly not false. She has never felt more like the wrong person in her life.

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

'Yes. No, emphatically no. Yes and no. Both.' (Coetzee 2004: 221)

In *Fiction & Diction*, Gérard Genette concludes: "The relation author – character is most often inferred from the (other) characteristics of the narrative taken as a whole. It is no doubt the most difficult relation to pin down (thus providing a bone to pick for narratologists), and it is sometimes the most ambiguous, as is,

after all, the relation between truth and fiction" (Genette 1991: 79). The ambiguity of Coetzee's works, as exemplified by the present study and the impossibility of passing an ultimate judgement on whether the narrated 'I' of *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime* is, in fact, the 'real' 'I' of J.M. Coetzee, seem to confirm Genette's thesis altogether.

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