

## ***In limine primo: The difficulty of reality in Paul Ricoeur and JM Coetzee***

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### **Abstract**

Two works were published the same year: Ricoeur's *Oneself as Another* and Coetzee's *Age of Iron* (1990). One is philosophy and one is fiction. Both attempt to heal wounds, personal and political. Eschewing purely biographical narratives, their authors attempted to deal meaningfully with death and the work of mourning. What might these works say about symbols, narrative identity and the liminality between life and death, fact and fiction, history and character? I argue that the female narrative of Coetzee's works are *in limine primo* – in a place that is no-place – a kind of haunting ground of liminal subjects with no real existence. This form of storytelling approaches the real by means of shocks or intimations that provide an opening onto another world. Both works, *Age of Iron* and *Oneself as Another*, can be read together as attempts at a work of mourning and at reconciliation with the past and loss.

### **Key words**

*Death, narrative identity, self, mourning*

“In limine primo: on the threshold of death, the threshold of life.

Creatures thrown up by the sea, stalled on the sands, undecided, indecisive, neither hot nor cold, neither fish nor fowl.”<sup>1</sup>

“Actively revealing oneself to others, with words and deeds, grants a plural space and therefore a political space to identity – confirming its exhibitivite, relational and contextual nature.”<sup>2</sup>

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- 1 J. M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 92. Hereafter cited parenthetically as “AOI.”
  - 2 Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, trans. P. Kottman (London: Routledge, 2000), 22.

“[W]omen are ‘[homeless] or derelict ... because the female body is the raw material with which male philosophers build their home, their shelter against fear.”<sup>3</sup>

## 1. Introduction

This paper entails a furthering of the notion of “the difficulty of reality”, which may be defined as “Something in reality to be resistant to our thinking it, or possibly to be painful in its inexplicability, difficult in that way, or perhaps awesome and astonishing in its inexplicability.”<sup>4</sup> I will start from the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur and the fiction of J. M. Coetzee, but will not end there. The act of confronting this difficulty can be described differently, for example, “progressive fictionalization” (in Coetzee),<sup>5</sup> “oneself as another” (in Ricoeur),<sup>6</sup> or “the difficulty of reality” (in Cora Diamond).<sup>7</sup> All three of these means of confronting difficult realities are attempts at answering the question, “what is the human being?”

In utilising Coetzee’s narrative devices, especially of speaking from a woman’s voice, this fictionalization of the self makes sense of the self in a

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- 3 L. du Toit, *A Philosophical Investigation of Rape: The Making and Unmaking of the Feminine Self* (London: Routledge, 2009), 173.
  - 4 S. Mulhall, *The Self and its Shadows: A Book of Essays on Individuality as Negation in Philosophy and the Arts* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2013), 136–7 (quoting Cora Diamond whose article is mentioned in footnote 7 below).
  - 5 This term *progressive fictionalization* comes from D. Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face-to-Face with Time* (London: Penguin, 2015), p. 151, who describes the transition from “No. 6” (an earlier title) as letters from a son to a departed mother into the published novel, *Age of Iron*, in which it contains letters from a dying mother to a daughter. “Coetzee was making himself as vulnerable as possible, writing a text in which all the intensity of his relationship [with his mother] was on the surface. The drafts are filled with grief ... Coetzee would also have known that to transform this material into something less personal would be a struggle.” (145)
  - 6 See Paul Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1990), translated as *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) by Kathleen Blamey, henceforth abbreviated as OAA. Since this work was published the same year as *Age of Iron*, I do not presume that Coetzee read it. However, we do have Coetzee’s reading notes (in the archives of the Harry Ransom Centre in Austin, TX) of Ricoeur’s earlier books, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. E. Buchanan (Boston: Beacon, 1967) and *Freud and Philosophy*, trans. D. Savage (London: Yale University Press, 1970).
  - 7 See in particular Cora Diamond, “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,” in *Philosophy and Animal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 43–89.

way history, psychoanalysis, or philosophy cannot.<sup>8</sup> In this way, there is an indirect reading of these difficult possibilities – what will be shortly termed as crossing boundaries through confession – of “the difficulty of reality”. According to David Attwell, the use of a female narrator in Coetzee’s works “is a strategic way of positioning oneself on the margins of authoritative traditions.”<sup>9</sup> The key question here concerns identity *in limine primo*, both of the female protagonists and Coetzee himself (the author), and the border between them.<sup>10</sup> As a porous frontier, even within the form of his novels, it is clear that “[t]here is no unequivocal progression ... instead, (s)he offers the narrative of her life in the form of multiple possibilities.”<sup>11</sup> As readers, one is thus given multiple stories to believe and multiple ways in which to read each story, and this essential aspect of story in turn captures something of identity and its origin in myth, such as Virgil’s *Aeneid*. It is by means of the story that the boundary between author and reader is crossed. However, this identity also takes up symbolic themes, such as defilement, sin, and guilt. Taking up the theme of identity, in which Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello* has been scrutinized, I wish primarily to read some of this discussion into *Age of Iron*. Elizabeth Costello has been described as “wounded” or “haunted.” The same goes for the self of Ricoeur’s *Oneself as Another*. It is impossible to read these works without recognizing the “difficulty of reality”, or woundedness of the characters. Whether by means of a philosophical work or a work of fiction, the guiding question concerns narrative identity, or the liminality between life and death, fact and fiction, history and character. Utilizing philosophers on narrative and selfhood who follow Ricoeur’s existential and phenomenological approach, I wish to argue that the female narratives of these works are *in limine primo* – in a place that is no-place – a kind of haunting ground (hauntology) of liminal subjects with no real existence. Yet, belief persists even when the ground from which it grows is

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8 See where Ricoeur writes, “Literature will later give us a striking example of the understanding we have of mental states which are not attributed to anyone or which are suspended from attribution, to the extent that this understanding is the condition for their attribution to fictional characters.” (OAA, p. 97)

9 Attwell, J. M. *Coetzee and the Life of Writing*, 142.

10 The phrase *in limine primo* is taken from Virgil’s *Aeneid* VI and will be discussed below.

11 M. Vaughan, “Literature and Politics: Currents in South African Writing in the Seventies,” in *Critical Essays on J.M. Coetzee*, ed. S. Kossew (New York: G.K. Hall & Co, 1998), 50–65, here 58.

taken away, such that the academic personae of *Age of Iron* and *Elizabeth Costello* are characters whose questions concerning the very evidence or clarity and distinctness of the cogito pertain to the nature of belief. At its core, then, the wounded cogito of Ricoeur is expressed through the actions and words of characters in a novel. This form of storytelling hits on the real if only through shadows or intimations, that is, a fictive space that provides an opening onto another world, another way of being in which the plural space of selfhood can be understood. What is real and what is fictive become interwoven through the story in such a way that personal identity in its Western individualist guise becomes subject to oblivion.

To put it simply, I am thus interested in how Ricoeur and Coetzee speak at the meta-level about the act of confession, or the writing of a confession, which begins under another name, another character.<sup>12</sup> In Ricoeur's case, it entailed abandoning the philosophical register and entering the tragic figure of Antigone.<sup>13</sup> In Coetzee's case, it is the writing of fiction itself. For the latter, as I see it, in order to enter a character one must necessarily erase the self and formulate another in a different space. It may entail a switch of gender or religion. This process requires, like the hero's journey of *The Odyssey* or the *Aeneid* or Kafka's protagonist in "Before the Law", crossing a boundary. *In limine primo* is the first boundary that must be crossed. In the most general sense, Joseph Campbell describes it in the following way, "With the personifications of his destiny to guide and aid him, the hero goes forward in his adventure until he comes to the "threshold guardian" at the entrance to the zone of magnified power. Such custodians bound the world in four directions – standing for the limits of the hero's present sphere, or life horizon."<sup>14</sup> It is sometimes childhood, or the temptress, that holds one back from entering and crossing the first threshold. These distinct registers are crucial for accessing the symbol.

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12 See J. M. Coetzee, "Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoyevsky," *Comparative Literature* 37 (1985): 193–232. All of Coetzee's research for this article published in 1985 is held in the Harry Ransom Centre in Austin, TX, including photocopies of the major secondary sources. This is an invaluable resource for seeing his process of working.

13 See OAA, 241–249. See also the accounts in Charles Reagan, *Paul Ricoeur: His Life and His Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) and François Dosse, *Le sens d'une vie, 1913–2005* (Paris: La Decouverte, 2008).

14 J. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New World Library, 1949), 64.

For this paper, I will read confession as a way of approaching this problem of crossing boundaries.

There will be four sections, symbolically standing for each direction and the zones of boundary crossing mentioned in Campbell's book. The first section concerns symbolism, the second the self, the third the other, and the fourth death.

## 2. Symbolism

Paul Ricoeur describes his own enquiry into symbols by stating that “before all theology and all speculation, even before any mythical elaboration, we should still encounter symbols. These elementary symbols are the unique language of the domain of experience that we shall briefly call the experience of “avowal,” or self-confession (*l'aveu*).”<sup>15</sup> This avowal or confession is precisely due to a broad religious consciousness, to which philosophy has access. However, theology is a third-order discourse, following myth, which is a second-order discourse.<sup>16</sup> This order of discourse can also be seen in both authors. It is perhaps too simple to claim that for Coetzee, part of the woundedness that he speaks of is the harm done to non-human animals, similar to what was done to Jews (and others) in the Holocaust. But before any of these claims, his earlier works (from the 1970s and 1980s) speak to a South African setting in symbols.<sup>17</sup> What the symbol does is bridge the absolute consciousness of Descartes and the humiliated consciousness of Hume and Nietzsche, in something called the “wounded cogito.” A concrete example of this kind of woundedness exemplified in symbolism is a child's suicide. Since the authors we are presenting here would not have wanted this to be the meaning of the work, it is nevertheless a meaning behind the works. There is nothing more shocking or revelatory of the

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15 P. Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection,” in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 37–8.

16 Fortunately, there are Coetzee's reading notes on *The Symbolism of Evil* and *Freud and Philosophy* (in the Harry Ransom Centre in Austin, TX) so that it is not too difficult to know that he read these works.

17 I am thinking specifically of his novels, *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), and *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), which I have treated elsewhere.

*fallibility, fault, and evil* than this, which requires a work of mourning. Paul Ricoeur described it in the following way in 1995:

But I cannot leaven unmentioned the tragic circumstances in which the most important reworking of the Gifford Lectures, as they were delivered in February 1986, took place. A few weeks after our return from Edinburgh, our third son, Olivier, the child of the return from captivity, the child of peace, killed himself, the very day I was in Prague with our friends of the Patočka group. The catastrophe was to leave an open wound which the interminable work of mourning has not yet healed.<sup>18</sup>

This is the difficulty of reality that strikes at the heart, which cannot be described in any other way than indirectly. In the terms of crossing boundaries and recollecting or recreating such experiences without falling into psychoanalytic interpretation, one must approach these difficulties of reality symbolically.

As a methodological starting point, symbolically there is non-innocence. A crucial first step is to distinguish between causality and culpability, between fallibility and fault, and to recognize that the question is *not* one of relative guilt or innocence, but of varying degrees of non-innocence. In place of the theologically laden term “sin”, Ricoeur speaks of fallibility and fault, two distinct things.<sup>19</sup> This is the realm of guilt and innocence, in which a “new thematic structure and methodology”<sup>20</sup> are located. Central to Ricoeur’s analysis is the geological metaphor of fault (*faulle*).<sup>21</sup>

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18 Paul Ricoeur, *Critique and Conviction: Conversations with François Azouvi and Marc de Launay*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 91.

19 Whereas in *Le Volontaire et l’Involontaire* (1950), he places parentheses around these notions, in *Fallible Man* and *Symbolism of Evil* (1960), the parentheses are removed.

20 Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, xli.

21 See this recent article in the *Christian Century*: “the processes of physical and spiritual formation are analogous. The physical world is shaped by cataclysmic forces. Volcanoes, earthquakes, and meteorites shape the earth’s development. (The crustal plate slippage in 2004 that caused the Indian Ocean tsunami released more energy than 20,000 atomic bombs, and it was just one of countless formative events in earth history.) “By analogy,” Elphinstone writes, “the forming of a human personality, from smallest biological origin to something sufficiently splendid to be what religions call Godlikeness, must be of still more formidable creative significance. What we are ourselves seeing and taking part in is the continuing act of God’s creation, no longer at a physical level but at a spiritual, of which the raw materials are the more vulnerable and explosive ones of

A fault line need not necessarily *cause* an earthquake. Nor is it entirely culpable. Analogously, the human is structured by her fault lines, victim and perpetrator alike. Here, fault (or what we might call non-innocence, “always already broken”) “remains a foreign body to the eidetics of man.” Nor does fault “exist” empirically. So, if it does not exist eidetically or empirically, how does it exist at all? Indirectly, he says, it seems to exist in three realms: passions, reflection, and discourse. It is an existential truth rather than a philosophical one: “the fault is absurd”.<sup>22</sup> There is no pure absolute description of innocence in and of itself. From which perspective might you describe it? “Innocence is not in the structures, notions; it is concretely and totally human, as is fault”.<sup>23</sup> Innocence is as much myth as the fall is: “The fault does not give itself as loss of innocence”.<sup>24</sup> This is the phenomenological starting point for approaching the fault. For Ricoeur, the language of confession or avowal (*aveu*)<sup>25</sup> best approaches it, but indirectly. What was described in terms of anxiety for Kierkegaard, Ricoeur thinks in terms of fragility. Yet we are only able to approach this problem through the symbol, or starting from the symbol: “this language speaks of fault and evil ... and what is noteworthy in it is that it is *symbolic* through and through. It does not speak of stain, sin, or guilt in direct and proper terms, but in indirect and figurative terms”.<sup>26</sup> At the intersection of *Fallible Man* and *The Symbolism of Evil*, we find the move from fallibility to fault, and it is here where existential phenomenology best describes this

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human feeling, thought, emotion, and will.” (Bethany Sollereider, “From Survival to Love,” Sep 3, 2014)

- 22 Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature*, 27. The nothingness that Sartre speaks of points to a phenomenon that is similar to the “absolute irrational” or “mystery” of the absurd. The myth of the fall is an ever-present constant in Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein. Rather like Jean-Luc Marion’s description of the idol, humans construct images in their own likeness believing them to be truth. See S. Mulhall, *Philosophical Myths of the Fall* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).
- 23 Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature*, 28.
- 24 Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature*, 30.
- 25 The term avowal (*aveu*) and disavowal (*désaveu*) are also used on the first page of Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, in which the “problem and the promise” of phenomenology itself is described in terms of the “disavowal of science.” In this sense, there can be no “science” of forgiveness or evil.
- 26 Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, xlii. Cf. *Symbolism of Evil*, 235–243, where the same point is made with respect to the fall and forgiveness.

“state” (of non-innocence).<sup>27</sup> The difficulty of reality, in Ricoeur’s terms, is best situated with respect to the following question: “what is human “locus” of evil, what is its point of insertion in human reality?”<sup>28</sup> On the one hand, there is Ricoeur’s answer from within philosophical anthropology: *Fallible Man*, “the constitutional weakness that makes evil possible.” On the other hand, there is *The Symbolism of Evil*, which is the external point of view: a “maleficent substance’s being necessarily dramatized in the shape of demons or evil gods.”<sup>29</sup>

### 3. Self

“Doomed man! O never to live to learn the truth of who you are!”<sup>30</sup>

Following in the conversation between philosophy and literature, and the meaning of the difficulty of reality according to Cora Diamond about the “kind of intellectual biography of Coetzee’s intellectual protagonist”, one answer to the question of what is the human being? lies in the critique of the paradigm of Western individualism (or selfhood) that pervades Coetzee’s works. Following the symbolic, this critique includes what Ricoeur might call the aporia of ascription. To put it simply, we cannot fully know ourselves because we cannot be fully transparent to ourselves, including and especially our own motives and actions. To ascribe a particular action or emotion to oneself, let alone another, is a difficult task. And yet a fictional character who is authored may be able to ascribe motivations and actions to the character in a way which is unlike the real world, but still has bearing on the real world. This interweaving of fiction and reality exemplifies a Ricoeurian motif of fallibility and capability, something which runs deep from *Freedom and Nature* (1950) to *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2000). In order to “know thyself”, there must be a break or fracture in the cogito.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, some remnant of belief, some sense of self remains after the

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27 In conversation with Heidegger and Kierkegaard (as well as Nabert).

28 Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, xliii.

29 This being explored through Babylonian, Assyrian, Hebraic and Hellenic sources in *The Symbolism of Evil*.

30 Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 15.

31 Ricoeur calls this “le Cogito brisé” in *Soi-même comme un autre*, 22. The Nietzschean motif of anticogito, Ricoeur assumes, is as radical as Cartesian doubt.

fracture. In *Elizabeth Costello*, the fracture is exemplified by Coetzee's "formal gesture [of] questioning the boundary between character and author by blurring their supposedly distinct lines of accountability."<sup>32</sup> But in *Slow Man*, she embodies an entirely different character. "Elizabeth Costello: it is coming back to him who she is. He tried once to read a book by her, a novel, but gave up on it, it did not hold his attention."<sup>33</sup> What these two characters hold in common is the conscious way an author invades or explores a character in order to understand his own self. In other words, Coetzee's women are personae of Coetzee himself in which their difficult thoughts and actions, as wounded as they are, are an attempt at crossing a boundary of selfhood. The answer to the question of selfhood then requires another in approaching one's own difficult reality. But Coetzee's women are also a projection of Coetzee the author entering and crossing a line between life and death to reach into his own mother's psyche without colonializing or appropriating. "Dear mother, look down on me, stretch forth your hand!" (AOI, 54) He does this with fear and trembling, if not absolute respect, through fictionalization. This first aporia of ascription, then, crosses the line of sexual difference in order to embody the loss of self (who am I?) involved in parenting and attempts an impossible task: to create the link and loss between father/son, mother/ daughter, between South Africa and America, and between home and homelessness.

In order to speak of the self in a work of fiction, the place of this aporia of ascription or fracture is primarily situated within memories,<sup>34</sup> as when Stephen Mulhall writes, "Elizabeth [Costello]'s past more generally is frozen and mysterious, embodying forbidden and isolating topics ... Elizabeth's relations with the mother of her grandchildren are profoundly poisoned." The memory-image is fraught with identity, but not necessarily at the time

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32 S. Mulhall, *The Wounded Animal: J. M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 21.

33 J. M. Coetzee, *Slow Man* (New York: Viking, 2005), 82.

34 Of course, John Locke first introduced this definition of personal identity based on consciousness and memory. This is the subject matter of *Oneself As Another*, fifth and sixth study. Reading this study with an understanding of the difficulty of reality, and Ricoeur's own biographical personal challenge changes one's reading. However, for further recent work on the problem of identity, see Andy Hamilton, *The Self in Question: Memory, the Body and Self-Consciousness* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013) and Udo Thiel, *The Early Modern Subject: Self-Consciousness and Personal Identity from Descartes to Hume* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

of recall. It waits for a trauma to find the original instance in all its power. From the very first page of *Age of Iron*, Elizabeth Curren asks her daughter to remember the alley down the side of the garage. This familial ground of memory has the layers necessary to pose a question of narrative identity on this mother-daughter relationship that the author creates, a dynamic, in fact, which resembles his own (possible) relationship to his son.<sup>35</sup> This is already evident in the first several pages: “We bear children in order to be mothered by them.” (AOI 5) The storytelling adds to the characterization: “There is a story I want to tell you ... when my mother was still a child, in the early years of the century ... So – here the story begins – my mother lay at the top of the pass in the stillness of the night, snug in her blankets with her brothers and sisters sleeping beside her ...” (AOI 16–17) This is a question of what is it like (for Coetzee, for E.C.) to be a mother: “Too much to give: too much for someone who longs, if the truth be told, to creep into her own mother’s lap and be comforted.” (AOI 20)

When Susan Brison speaks of the “remaking of the self,” she incorporates elements of embodiment alongside narrative. She redefines motherhood and pregnancy, but after suffering an encounter in which she was “jumped from behind, beaten, raped, strangled and left for dead in a ravine ... The pleasures of embodiment were suddenly replaced by the pain and terror to which being embodied makes one prey.”<sup>36</sup> Certainly this difficulty of reality, which can scarcely be spoken of or socially recognized by even one’s closest friends, concerns the making and unmaking of the feminine self, to use Louise du Toit’s words, exemplifying a fracture of identity at the heart of sexual difference. Following Irigaray, The example of mother and daughter exemplifies this relational capacity. For her, and analogously through Coetzee, “And what I wanted from you, Mother, was this: that in giving me life, you still remain alive.” The novels are precisely an example of an author confronting and working through memories that are not exactly his own crossing the line of sexual difference to find a home by

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35 See the numerous early drafts of #6, later titled *Age of Iron* in the Harry Ransom Centre in Austin, TX; for the mother-daughter relationship, see Du Toit, *Philosophical Investigation*, particularly 175–180.

36 S. Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of the Self* (Princeton University Press, 2002), 44.

way of trigger or release.<sup>37</sup> Freud writes in 1895, “We invariably find that a memory is repressed which has only become a trauma after the event.”<sup>38</sup> To transform a story of the author’s mother out of its solipsistic mirror requires further depths of re-narrativizing, which is not necessarily linear: “Because that is something one should never ask of a child ... to unfold one, comfort one, save one. The comfort, the love should flow forward not backward. That is a rule, another of the iron rules.” (AOI 73) Reading the self symbolically in this way transforms memory from a solipsistic state to a shared one: to complement the reflexivity of *se* and *soi*, to use Ricoeur’s language of *Oneself as Another*, is to see the point of view of a mother to her daughter. This is the difficulty of reality in *Age of Iron*, which can only be explicated in another manner, as will be seen in the next section.

#### 4. Other

“The self’s non-self-identity and that of its society appear as internally related”<sup>39</sup>

The previous sections spoke to symbolism and the self in terms of Ricoeur’s philosophical anthropology and symbolism of evil. Here is an initiation into ethics or politics, in which the self must be situated with respect to another. Whereas for Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), the solipsistic Magda is a dead end trapped in patriarchy and colonialism with no way out, it is in his 1990 novel, *Age of Iron*, that a female protagonist is resurrected and transformed: it is “[v]ia Elizabeth Curren, an ex-lecturer of Latin – which she describes as “a dead language ... a language spoken by the dead” – [that] Coetzee returns to the discourse of liberal humanism, but ... it is a discourse that is truly marginal, hovering as it is between life and death.”<sup>40</sup> This “E.C.,” who is dying of cancer, has her own story to tell: “I

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37 The following passage from Louise du Toit’s book hits at this nerve: “[W]omen are ‘homeless’ or derelict ... because the female body is the raw material with which male philosophers build *their* home, *their* shelter against fear.”

38 S. Freud, “Project for a Scientific Psychology,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–1966), 1:413.

39 Mulhall, *The Self and its Shadows*, 143.

40 Teresa Dovey, “J.M. Coetzee: Writing in the Middle Voice,” in *Critical Essays on J.M. Coetzee*, ed. S. Kossew, 18–28, here 26. Dovey continues, “This is a self-reflexive

have no intention of summoning my daughter back. I may long for her but I don't want her here. That is why it is called longing. It has to go a long way. To the ends of the earth." (AOI 74) These are echoes perhaps of Coetzee's own mother and ex-wife, Philippa.<sup>41</sup> Or it is Coetzee writing from the point of view of a character like Besides the twists and turns ("face-to-face with time") of Coetzee's own narrative development, the novel as published turns us to Ricoeur's second aporia of ascription, narrative identity, which is at the heart of the difficulty of reality. If the first aporia concerns the problematic of believing that one's own cogito ascribes any existence to the self (I think therefore I am) and one's own thoughts, emotions, and actions as part of this self, the second aporia refers to others (including non-human animals). The problem of ascription, unlike description, entails prescription: oneself as another. The self cannot but help comparing or relating itself to others, a motion which entailed the difference between *amour de soi* and *amour propre* in Rousseau. Furthermore, as in Hegel, there is no self-consciousness without another's consciousness. This aporia is as intransigent and difficult as the first. If Magda never really loves another, Elizabeth Curren of *Age of Iron* searches for love:

"To live! You are my life; I love you as I love life itself ... The first task laid on me, from today: to resist the craving to share my death. Loving you, loving life, to forgive the living and take my leave without bitterness. To embrace death as my own, mine alone. To whom this writing then? The answer: to you but not to you; to me; to you in me. (AOI 6)"

Her confessional method aims at emptying the soul on the page through narrative, possibly through a fullness, yet at the same time withholds what may be too dear due to emptiness. "Why do I give this man food? For the same reason I would feed his dog ... if it came begging. For the same reason I gave you my breast. To be full enough to give and to give from one's fullness: what deeper urge is there?" (AOI 7). The letter<sup>42</sup> itself, an

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liberal humanism, aware of its severely circumscribed position in this age of iron, and addressed to a daughter in America, gone into voluntary exile there until 'the softer ages return to their cycle, the age of clay, the age of earth'."

41 J. C. Kannemeyer, *J. M. Coetzee: A life in writing*, trans. Michiel Heyns (London: Scribe, 2012), ch. 12.

42 Referring to Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), Patrick Hayes points out that "the presence of her letters literally make up for her absence" (*J. M. Coetzee and the Novel*

epistolary attempt at communicating, at filling in the gaps, points already to the fracture or aporia on three levels: “When I write about him I write about myself. When I write about his dog I write about myself; when I write about the house I write about myself. Man, house, dog: no matter what the word, through it I stretch out a hand to you.” (AOI 9) The who of writing is already split toward the other, other others. Yes, she is writing about herself, but she is writing about herself as another – what Ricoeur means by saying “oneself similar to another” (*soi-même semblable à un autre*) as much as “oneself inasmuch as being other” (*soi-même en tant que ... autre*).<sup>43</sup>

If this second aporia fractures the cogito even further, one of the ways individualism is overcome may concern what Coetzee refers to as the “sympathetic imagination,”<sup>44</sup> particularly as it relates to the natural world. What is it about imaginatively identifying with another, whether fictionally or in real life, that leads us to feel with others (both humans and animals), or even to feel for ourselves when we seem to be without feeling? The aporetic, even at the core of Plato’s dialogues, requires a spatial confirmation of oneself and another’s existence but never a proof of autonomy. The reasons for such confessions, for love or openness, may be the same reasons for writing a novel, but something is still kept back. “This letter is not a baring of my heart. It is a baring of something, but not of my heart” (AOI 15). Nevertheless, E.C.’s love goes beyond the love for her daughter, to whom she is writing. “Hunger, I thought: It is a hunger of the eyes that I feel, such hunger that I am loath even to blink. These seas, these mountains: I want to burn them upon my sight so deeply that, no matter where I go, they will always be before me. I am hungry with love of this world” (AOI 18). Unlike *In the Heart of the Country*, where love does not seem to appear except as the reverse side of hate, the explicit concern of *Age of Iron* is love, or charity, which may have more to do with

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(Oxford, 2010), 138–9). I am interested in how *Age of Iron* might relate back to Rousseau’s epistolary novel, *Julie, or La Nouvelle Héloïse*, where he first presents *amour de soi* and *amour propre*, but that is a subject for another paper.

43 *Soi-même comme un autre*, 14; *Oneself as Another*, 3.

44 For some discussion of the sympathetic imagination in Coetzee, see Durrant, “J. M. Coetzee, Elizabeth Costello, and the Limits of the Sympathetic Imagination,” in *J. M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual*, ed. Jane Poyner (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006), 118–134.

the heart, even when the heart is excised (e.g. AOI 73, 114). Here Mrs. Curren considers what it means to love her child. “How easy it is to love a child, how hard to love what a child turns into!” (AOI 57) It is here in “the gates of bone” that we are given *amor matris* before being “weaned away” and left “to stand alone...a life apart, deprived...undernourished” (AOI 57–8). Furthermore, this narrative identity is fully sustained by this life: “[W]hen you bear a child from your own body you give your life to that child. Above all to the first child, the firstborn. Your life is no longer with you, it is no longer yours, it is with the child.” (AOI 76) Reading the novel alongside narrative identity allows Magda to mother Curren who in turn mothers Elizabeth Costello in terms of narrative identity. If Costello’s relationship to her daughter is strained, if not poisoned, and the clarity or transparency of identity is obscured (self-consciousness cannot face its own shadow in the filial other), and “Elizabeth is immensely isolated from the world around her, to the point of madness ... every wounding word she utters gives expression to her own woundedness,”<sup>45</sup> then it is to this air of “hyperbolic victimization” that the woundedness of this particular difficulty of reality points. It equally points to the problem of sexual difference, in which we are stuck in the binary.<sup>46</sup> The lack of recognition or acknowledgement on behalf of the other(s) contributes to or inhibits the acting and suffering other.<sup>47</sup> As Elizabeth Curren puts it, “As they say on the bottle: old-fashioned drops, drops fashioned by the old, fashioned and packed with love, the love we have no alternative but to feel toward those to whom we give ourselves to devour or discard.” (AOI 9)

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45 Mulhall, *The Self and its Shadows*, 143. See also his *The Wounded Animal*, where he writes, “In Costello’s and Coetzee’s terms, one might say that death is the self-concealing and self-revealing wound of human life, a wound that is touched on in every aspect and element of any such mode of existence.” (101)

46 See L. du Toit, who writes, “Through its failure to create the vocabulary and the imaginative space within which rape could be properly addressed as a political issue in its own right—amongst other things by modelling victimhood and political agency on masculine presumptions—the TRC unfortunately set the tone for a ‘new’ South Africa in which sexual difference could not be acknowledged, nor be allowed to make a difference.” (*A Philosophical Investigation of Rape*, 12)

47 This is part of the definition of the self and what makes for identity in Ricoeur’s *Time and Narrative* and *Oneself as Another*.

Giving the self its due, or the other its place, is nearly impossible. But this is not Derrida's deconstruction, Levinas' *il y a*, or Lyotard's *différend*.<sup>48</sup> Even amidst the aporia of ascription, there is a space for connection. It is a quite tentative and vulnerable space, in which the self can be determined as both capable and fallible.<sup>49</sup> The trauma of the original event, sooner or later, becomes recognized and acknowledged. As Coetzee says in a non-fictional context,

“Is the goal of the therapist to bring the patient face to face with the true story of their life or to provide them with a story of their life that will enable them to live more adequately (more happily, which in the minimal Freudian prescription amounts to being able to love and work again)?”<sup>50</sup>

This form of narrative identity or narrative therapy, along the lines of narrative medicine created by Rita Charon, consists of a “narratable self [which is] at once the transcendental subject and the elusive object of all the autobiographical exercises of memory.”<sup>51</sup> This self entirely eludes the subject/object distinction, or clarity and distinctness of the self to itself, and is by no means obvious or even transparent, but there is nevertheless something from which to narrate to and with others, even if it is a mess.<sup>52</sup>

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48 Cf. Coetzee's discussion of his own reading of Derrida in Paul Auster and J. M. Coetzee, *Here and Now: Letters 2008–2011* (New York: Viking, 2013) as well as his own words in *Doubling the Point*, 244, and Coetzee & Kurtz, *The Good Story*. See also Mulhall, *The Wounded Animal*, 99ff., *The Self and its Shadows*, 136. Rachel Ann Walsh on Coetzee's Levinas, “Not Grace, Then, but at least the body: Accounting for the Self in Coetzee's Age of Iron,” *Twentieth-Century Literature* 56 (2010):196. The relation of Derrida to Levinas, or even Coetzee to Levinas is still stuck in the way that Coetzee describes Girard in his essay on Erasmus in *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 90–93. Even when Derrida appropriates his difference from Freud's *Nachträglichkeit*, there is no self, not even the intimation of a self, but for Coetzee (and Ricoeur, du Toit, Cavarero, and Mulhall) the self is acting and suffering. See J. Derrida, “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); see also the discussion in Eftichis Pirovolakis, *Reading Derrida and Ricoeur* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010).

49 This is Ricoeur's language for the self, particularly in his *L'homme fallible* (Paris, 1960), but also in *Oneself as Another*.

50 Coetzee and Kurtz, *The Good Story*, 6–7. See Arabella's answer on 9–11.

51 Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 34. See also Rita Charon, *Narrative Medicine: Honouring the Stories of Illness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

52 See Peter Goldie's last book before he died, *The Mess Inside: Narrative, Emotion, and the Mind* (Oxford, 2012), which is also an attempt at accessing the difficulty of reality in similar terms to what I am using here.

## 5. Death

“That is what is going on all the time. The child inside is beating at the gate.” (AOI 82)

If the symbolism of evil and the earlier aporias of ascription to self and others are not difficult enough, there is a final aporia, *in limine primo*: “at the threshold between life and death illuminates a différence.”<sup>53</sup> There are differing ways to approach this. Ricoeur describes it in the following way, “Between the two poles of individual memory and collective memory, does there not exist an intermediary place of reference where one operates concretely the exchanges between living memory of individual persons and public memory of communities in which we take part?”<sup>54</sup> To describe this space in analytic terms is impossible – it is neither found on a Cartesian grid nor in Newton’s mechanics. But if we are to talk of narrative identity, then the question of death arises.<sup>55</sup> As Aristotle has claimed, a story cannot make sense until it is completed (“call no man happy until he is dead”). While the entirety of history dwells in this “space,” and for Ricoeur there is a debt to this history, fiction also does, and similarly they both tie to the real. From Ricoeur’s *History and Truth* (1955) to *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2000) by way of *Time and Narrative* (1983–1985), he returned to this point again and again. For Coetzee, recreating or resurrecting E.C. in this space is a safe zone for dealing with demons. There can be no other meaning for the dedicatees of *Age of Iron* or the tragic interlude of *Oneself as Another*.

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53 Louise Bethlehem, “Materiality and the Madness of Reading: J.M. Coetzee’s Elizabeth Costello as Post-Apartheid Text,” *Journal of Literary Studies* 21 (December 2005): 235–253, here 240. Here, she ties Elizabeth’s body to Homer’s ram by projection and identification and finds that “the abject or wounded or even partially decomposed body of the victim of human rights abuses upon which the Commission [TRC] focused its gaze becomes a kind of archive, since the history of apartheid is inscribed in the materiality of this body...in South Africa under the state of emergency evoked in *Age of Iron*, a text which like Coetzee’s pronouncement on the body, arises from ‘a country prodigal of blood.’” (247–8)

54 Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli*, 161. Another interesting approach sees it in the following way: “the space of the transference in the analytic session is analogous to the space of dreams within Coetzee’s fiction.” (Durrant, “Coetzee, Costello, and the limits,” 123.)

55 Cf. Mulhall, *The Wounded Animal*, ch. 6.

After describing this literal place, a place of reconfiguration *sub specie aeternitatis*, Katarzyna Karwowska speaks of *Age of Iron* in which

“the correspondence between the body of the protagonist, the house where she lives and the country in which the narrative unfolds is symbolic in its nature. Those three spaces merge into one...Not only does she turn into a homeless person, but she also renounces her love for the country and severs the emotional bond with the land to which she traced her roots and which she considered the source of her identity.”<sup>56</sup>

When Mrs. Curren has a “welling up of tears,” she realizes that “the truth is, I cry more and more easily, with less and less shame ...[t]ears not of sorrow but of sadness” (AOI 70–1). She is isolated from her daughter, her country, her friends. There is no one clearly to turn to, except perhaps the homeless presence: “Perhaps, despite those keen bird-eyes, he is more befuddled with drink than I know. Or perhaps, finally, he does not care. Care: the true root of charity. I look for him to care, and he does not. Because he is beyond caring. Beyond caring and beyond care” (AOI 22). Ironically she becomes increasingly forced to depend on him for the most intimate things because of her growing weakness. Just as the Magistrate washes the broken feet of the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, so the vagrant washes Mrs. Curren’s underwear when the pain prevents her from doing it herself. He prepares her meals, shops, becomes her guardian. He is, she constantly reiterates, her messenger. “When it comes to last things,” she tells her daughter:

“I no longer doubt him in any way. There has always been in him a certain hovering if undependable solicitude for me, a solicitude he knows no way of expressing. I have fallen and he has caught me. It is not he who fell under my care when he arrived, I now understand, nor I who fell under his: we fell under each other, and have tumbled and risen since then in the flights and swoops of that mutual election. (AOI 196)”

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56 K. Karwowska, *Literary Spaces in the Selected Works of J.M. Coetzee* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2014), 61–62.

If Mr. Vercueil is thus a harbinger of *caritas* even though Mrs. Curren believes him to have “no charity in him” (AOI 131), then learning together means falling under each other, serving without love, tumbling and rising within a mutual bond of trust. The space in which this fiction is constructed is a space between life and death, an other-place of non-human spectres.<sup>57</sup>

While work has been done on Dante in Coetzee’s *Age of Iron*,<sup>58</sup> it is by means of Virgil’s *Aeneid* that the underworld truly reveals the difficulty of reality,

“Immediately voices are heard, a loud wailing, the weeping spirits of infants, just by the gate: they were those whom a black day had carried off without their share of what is sweet in life, torn away to bitter death as they sucked.”<sup>59</sup>

The term “at the gate” (*in limino primo*) returns in *Elizabeth Costello*, where the issue of belief is at stake. The first draft of this chapter was written for a conference in Italy where Coetzee himself was asked what he believed (what he terms a confession). He used the character of Elizabeth Costello to provide an answer. But the chapter in *Age of Iron* gets to the heart of this difficulty of reality: “Then at the very edge of oblivion something looms and pulls me back, something whose name can only be dread.” (AOI 27) As a Dantesque or Virgilian subtext, then, the scene in which Elizabeth Curren leaves her comfortable suburb without Vercueil during a time of crisis concerns the feeling of something dreadful, other-wordly. She is with Florence, whom she tells, “Let me make myself clear, Florence: at the first sign of trouble I am turning back.” (AOI 89, 90) This place is thus full of darkness, mist, wraiths, and spirits. In this place, a ten-year-old war

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57 The research Coetzee did for this book includes the following materials found in his notebooks (see box 33, folder 7 and box 99, folder 5, in the Harry Ransom Center, Austin, TX): The Demeter of Cnidos, Tertullian, end of *De Resurrectione Carnis*, Cicero, *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*, Pseudo-Dionysius, *De divinis nominibus*, Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* and *Sonnets to Orpheus*, as well as Charles Trinkaus, *In our Image and Likeness* and Stephen Bemrose, *Dante’s Angelic Intelligences* (on Alfarabi, scriptural and patristic angelology).

58 See Sheila Roberts, “‘City of Men’: The Appropriation of Dante’s *Inferno* in J.M. Coetzee’s *Age of Iron*,” *Current Writing: Text and Reception in South Africa* 8 (1996): 33–44; David Hoegburg, “‘Where is Hope?’: Coetzee’s Rewriting of Dante” in *Age of Iron, English in Africa* 25 (1998):27–42.

59 Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. C. H. Sisson (London: Everyman, 1998), 159.

veteran guides them “wearing a balaclava cap too large for him ... a child of the time, at home in this landscape of violence.” (AOI 92) But here, in this forgotten place, there is no sunshine, no eucalyptus, quiet rustle of water, or lulling of the doves. “If justice reigns at all, we will find ourselves barred at the first threshold of the underworld.” (AOI 92) When Virgil describes this first threshold as one of “loud wailing,” “spirits weeping,” Elizabeth the Classicist places it in political South Africa: “White as grubs in our swaddling bands, we will be dispatched to join those infant souls whose eternal whining Aeneas mistook for weeping. White our colour, the colour of limbo: white sands, white rocks, a white light pouring down from all sides.” (AOI 92) The colour of Elizabeth’s skin, the colour of the place, between heaven and hell, Coetzee writing himself as another.<sup>60</sup> The liminal world becomes a crossing point between three simultaneous dimensions: life and death, author and character, history and fiction.

If this place to which Coetzee’s construction E.C. is going, *in limine primo*, appears here in the novel, his intention will never be clear. “Among the dedicatees of Age of Iron appear also the initials of a third person: “NGC (1966–1989)”. This is Nicolas Guy (Talbot) Coetzee, the son of Coetzee and Philippa, who was born on 9 June 1966, and died, according to the dedication, in 1989.”<sup>61</sup> Much of the novel was written before this death whereas *The Master of Petersburg* is “about” Nicolas.<sup>62</sup> So, this space concerns Coetzee’s mother, a writing to and for his mother, a letter never to be read, by a son whose initials are not E.C. The posting of the parcel is the publishing of a novel, read but not read by a mother. The addressee could be Vera and it could be Nicolas: “I would cry my cry to you if you were here. But you are not ... I want to be held to someone’s bosom, to Florence’s, to yours, to anyone’s, and told that it will be all right.” (AOI

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60 This act resembles what Rachel Ann Walsh, “Not Grace, Then, but at least the body,” says of Coetzee: “The ‘you in me’ she addresses shifts throughout the novel from the memory of her daughter as a young girl to an imagined, admonitory voice that forces her to question how her empathetic inclinations are culturally choreographed.” (175–6)

61 Kannemeyer, *Coetzee*, 452. Coetzee added the initials to draft 10. See Harry Ransom Centre, box 16, folder 2.

62 Besides Kannemeyer, see also Pojanut Suthipinittharm, “Finding Authenticity in an Inauthentic Novel: J.M. Coetzee’s *The Master of Petersburg* as Personal Confession,” in *Traveling Texts: J.M. Coetzee and Other Writers*, eds. Bozena Kucala & Robert Kusek (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2014), 95–106.

40) There is something terribly sentimental here, something simpler than readings of Coetzee's Levinasian, Derridean, or Lyotardian selves can digest. But there is nothing Coetzee or Ricoeur would desire less than to be read personally or autobiographically. Their difficulty of reality is to use this *coming to writing*, to use Hélène Cixous' term, in order to express why the death of another leads one to the first threshold. Here, the guardian is one's own child. Linear time becomes upended in such a place in which the child beats at the gate.

Before one becomes too sentimental in this space, collapsing into tears and shivers, something from the other side speaks. Despite the fact that Mrs. Curren is at death's door, she does not seem to be sympathetic enough. There are limits to the sympathetic imagination in terms of character, author, and text. Like Magda, the question of whether she really wants someone to return her love or not is left open. She soon wakes in the middle of the night, crying,

“not for the confusion in my head, not for the mess in the house, but for the boy [who has just died] ... Head on arms I sobbed, grieving for him, for what had been taken from him, for what had been taken from me. Such a good thing, life! Such a wonderful idea for God to have had! The best idea there had ever been (AOI 109).”

Mrs. Curren's life is not the doll's life, who cannot “conceive such a thought.” Dolls cannot reflect on themselves or weep real tears, but they:

“... do not die. They exist forever in that moment of petrified surprise prior to all recollection when a life is taken away, a life not theirs but in whose place they are left behind as a token. Their knowing a knowledge without substance, without worldly weight, like a doll's head itself, empty, airy (AOI 109–110).”

It is this consciousness, this recollection, this ascription to identity and the tying down of belief that is so problematic but nevertheless necessary that distinguishes human beings from dolls. In some sense though humans can put themselves into the place of dolls, problematizing the narrativising of identity during a time of crisis. The time of crisis is a loss of mother, father, and son. The time of crisis is a land falling apart, splitting at its seams. The time of crisis is a person questioning their own existence and selfhood in a time of (post)modernity. The existential quest of meaning is not absent

here, neither symbolically nor existentially as if these are opposed. The doll is both like and unlike the one who imagines what it is like to be a doll. The idea of life is not given through imagination. Rather, it is something other, a gift. The creator formulates, pretends, and surreptitiously overtakes the potential consciousness of the other. This is not only the symbolism of evil, the philosophical anthropology of the self, the ethics of the other, but also an ontology. This triple aporia, then, disables the space of self, other, and place. As with E.C.'s body, home, and country, reading Elizabeth Costello's trauma backwards into Elizabeth Curren resurrects a narrative identity of the real of fictional spaces by means of ascribing memory, identity, and place to this fragile and liminal topography. Whereas in certain traumas, "how in times of violence differences (boundaries, termini) are erased,"<sup>63</sup> the difficulty of reality consists in taking up the drudgery and moving on in and through boundaries. Thus, it seems here as if we are caught somewhere between dolls and angels in a place of refuge where "mandragora" (AOI 179) grows and "one must only know how to listen" (AOI 187).

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63 Coetzee, *Giving Offense*, 101.