Reading between Life and Work: Reflections on 'J.M. Coetzee'

Submission for *Textual Practice (revised)*

Elleke Boehmer

Professor of World Literature in English
English Faculty
University of Oxford
St Cross Building, Manor Road
Oxford OX1 3UL
00 44 788 162 3840
elleke.boehmer@ell.ox.ac.uk

Abstract:

JM Coetzee has remarked that all autobiography is story-telling and also that all writing is a kind of autobiography. Exploring this link between (auto)biography, and fiction as 'writing', this essay will offer critical reflections on J.M. Coetzee's longstanding life-writing or 'autre-fictional' project as it intersects with two recent biographical studies, John Kannemeyer's J.M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing *(2012), and David Attwell's* J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face to Face with Time *(2015). I will consider the links that are drawn between the author's life and his writing in the Kannemeyer biography and in Attwell's book historical study, and will set these against the interplay between self-masking and self-retrospection that marks Coetzee's oeuvre, not least the* Scenes from Provincial Life *trilogy. This reading will shed light on the tireless oscillation in*

Coetzee's work between the 'expressive function' of language on the one hand, and the concealment that metaphor and symbolization allow on the other.

Keywords

J.M. Coetzee

life-writing

autobiography

story-telling

self-masking

John Kannemeyer

David Attwell

Coetzee and life-writing

The work of J.M. Coetzee—the novels, taken together with the memoirs and the critical essays—offers rich and provocative material for an exploration of the borderlines or sutures between fiction and non-fiction, between life and work, representation and reality. Coetzee is perhaps one of the first novelists who in our time has openly interrogated, while also strategically blurring, this divide—which is why he has long represented a fascinating but difficult subject for considerations of both his fiction and his life-writing.

This difficulty reached particular pertinence in the past several years, first with the completion of his 2011 memoir trilogy *Scenes from Provincial Life* (bringing together *Boyhood* (1997), *Youth* (2002), and *Summertime* (2009)), and then with the appearance in 2012 and 2015 of two important yet interestingly contrasting books. There is the first biography of the author ever to be published, by John Kannemeyer, which finds biographical evidence in the fiction; and this was followed by, more recently, critic David Attwell's *J.M. Coetzee and A Life of Writing: Face to Face with Time*, the first book-length study to trace the alchemy of the author's life-into-art transformations through his meticulous and detailed notebooks. Whereas Kannemeyer in his book was relatively new to Coetzee as a literary subject, and had considerable ground to cover by way of background research, Attwell's work by contrast represented a return to the subject of Coetzee, yet in a different guise. His reading shifted away from the earlier post-structuralist engagement with his former teacher in *Doubling the Point*, to a more empirical if also genetic focus on his 'writing life', shaped by his encounter with the Coetzee archives at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas.

As has been clear from the early 1980s, when he devoted his inaugural lecture at the University of Cape Town to the topic 'Truth in Autobiography', Coetzee has taken very seriously, as if as an instruction for both life and art, the Derridean observation that there is nothing prior to writing. He proceeds very much as if our identities, our sense of self, are constructed, and hence can be scrutinized through the operations of written language, and, later in his career, the manipulations of narrative form. This conviction has allowed him to explore in-depth, in ways that would be painful were they not so coded, the fine connections between writing a life, life-writing, and writing fiction; between Jakobson's

expressive function of language, as against his symbolic function.[1] This conviction also marks the overall aspect of the Coetzee collection of papers held at the Harry Ransom Center Library at the University of Texas at Austin, as even the most cursory overview of the over 140 boxes or 58.33 linear feet of documentation (drafts, proofs, notebooks) reveals. Each one of Coetzee's novels emerges from a tortuous process of writing and rewriting, reading and rereading, something that Tim Parks also observes in his review of Attwell's book.[2] Throughout, Coetzee's work ponders the autobiographical energies that run across all narrative fiction and are transformed in the process of being written up and written over. Memorably, in an interview with David Attwell collected in *Doubling the Point* (importantly, a *written* interview), Coetzee observed that 'everything that you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it.' And from this it follows, one may as well add, that all writing is autobiographical. Or, as Coetzee has put it, in words also cited prominently by Kannemeyer: 'All autobiography is storytelling, all writing is autobiography'; it is a 'massive autobiographical writing-enterprise that fills a life'.[3] Tim Parks summarises: 'Coetzee does not do autobiography but, looked at another way, he doesn't' do anything but.'[4]

In *Elizabeth Costello* Coetzee continues and develops this train of thought. Early on, the eponymous Australian author reflects: 'Of course we draw upon our own lives all the time – they are our main resource, in a sense our only resource.' However, she then goes on: 'But no, *Fire and Ice* [a novel about a painter in the 1930s, that sounds not unlike Patrick White's *Vivisectionist*] isn't autobiography. It is a work of fiction. I made it up'.[5] By implication, therefore, even seemingly autobiographical material, even for a realist writer like Costello, is made up. Relatedly, right the way across Coetzee's oeuvre,

Attwell several times observes, Coetzee is involved in using representational codes to carve out, or indeed make up, a place for himself in the work. And this making up, Elizabeth further remarks, one's own making up, must compete with the making up of others; indeed, all realities are constructed, and in rivalry with other such constructions. Invention, she then continues, invites the writer 'to build something of their own'. Invention is what is owned, what is of oneself. Yet invention must find expression through conventional modes or genres such as realism, which is defined by Coetzee as embeddedness: 'It is the embeddedness that is important, not the life itself'.[6] For Coetzee, therefore, the process of invention is usually more interesting than what is invented; or the story-telling practice than the story told.

Enlarging on these meta-textual reflections in his own writing, Coetzee has produced his trilogy of novelistic memoirs, *Boyhood* (1997), *Youth* (2002) and *Summertime* (2009), which all three speak of the writer John Coetzee in the objectified third person, and repeatedly circle around the question: what is the self? Or, what is the truth of the self? None does so more so than *Summertime*, the third book of the *Scenes from Provincial Life* trilogy, which is cast as a biographer's posthumous investigation of the writer in a series of interviews with people who knew him, and so pre-empts the approach of any future biographer, as Kannemeyer was well aware. Coetzee has himself coined the term 'autre-biography' to describe this mode of third-person fictional-yet-part-autobiographical writing that he has helped develop, and that writers like Paul Auster have more recently contributed to—in Auster's case in the second person.[7] Such autre-biographical writing punningly recognizes the slippery nature of all narratives of self, given that to tell of the self we must cast it as other or *autre*. Or, as Laura Marcus neatly

puts it in her *Auto-biographical Discourses*: 'Autobiography imports alterity into the self by the act of objectification which engenders it'.[8] From which it follows that narratives concerning others, and narratives of the self, are bound up in a complicated relationship, especially given that in autobiography the other—or another objectified character—is almost inevitably used as a device through which to hold up various distorting and yet clarifying mirrors to the self.[9]

In recent years such problems and paradoxes—which of course go far wider than Coetzee's work—have preoccupied and reinvigorated the genres of biography and autobiography; collectively, life-writing (Virginia Woolf's term). Indeed, the consolidation of the new critical field of life-writing is in part an outcome of such postmodern reflexivity about meaning and the constructed quality of any life or self. Recognizably informed by post-structuralist thinking on meaning-making, the field contributes key questions about how any life might be cast in narrative form: questions, for example, about the truth-value of memoir and the quality of persona; about what constitutes subjectivity and how to weigh realistic similitude against literary truth. So Max Saunders defines what he calls autobiografiction (embracing Coetzee's spectrum of semi-autobiographical as well as fictionalized autobiographical writing): 'work that cannot be called formal autobiography, but in which something autobiographical is nonetheless happening: work in which autobiography is happening by fictional means'.[10] David Shields in his widely cited book *Reality Hunger* has put useful emphasis on the inevitably fictional effects of the memory work from which such writing emerges, observing: 'Anything processed by memory is fiction'; and also, the 'images stored in our memories [are] what our minds turn them into'.[11]

For a writer, evidently, the process of producing *autre*-biography, that is, the process of self-construction through written language—which pertains to all creatures with language—is expanded and enhanced. From which it follows that everything a writer produces—their essays and interviews as well as their fiction and criticism—can come across as some form of addendum or hypertext to their autobiography, a-biography or bio-fiction—this was part of Coetzee's point in the earlier quotation from *Doubling the Point*. These observations pertain in particular perhaps to a prose writer or a writer of fictions, given that subjectivity is not only an effect of language, as Derrida, De Man and others have contended, but also, more specifically, a function of narrative, or a narrative product, as theorists and philosophers like Philip Lejeune or Alistair MacIntyre would have it.[12] Or, as Peter Brooks wrote in *Reading for the Plot*: 'The question of identity can be thought only in narrative terms, in the effort to tell a whole life, to plot its meaning by going back on it to record its perpetual flight forward, its slippage from the fixity of definition'.[13]

The critical question of identity-through-narrative is one that Coetzee's work has raised almost from the beginning, concerned as he has been, ever since *Dusklands* (1974), and now again in *The Good Story* (2015), to measure and assess the constantly varying distance between the narrating self and the objectified self that is couched in any life-narrative. In his dialogue with his readers he ceaselessly interrogates what Lejeune has called the autobiographical pact—the agreement as to the relative balance of authenticity against invention that exists between the author and the reader of any autobiographical work; their understanding that the work is a piece of 'retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his [or her] own existence'.[14] This then is the particular

salience of Attwell's work to this study: namely, his tracing of Coetzee's ever-vigilant interest in locating the truth of the self within or in relation to his work. Attwell shows how Coetzee the writer at one and the same time stakes a claim within the work, but also repeatedly erases his tracks. An intertextual comparison with Kannemeyer's more conventional work of biography, as we will see, usefully backlights this restless process of simultaneous self-making and self-masking. Against Kannemeyer's efforts to produce a respectful and even monumental study, though within a relatively short space of time, we see Attwell write a concise history that critically reviews a whole lifetime of authorial self-interrogation. His account shows how Coetzee, preoccupied with 'the codes through which realism is at once established and undermined' (in Derek Attridge's words), is also preoccupied with the codes through which the self is simultaneously made up and yet deconstructed.[15] As Attwell writes, Coetzee has always been interested in 'the autobiographical investments that are hidden in realist stories'.[16]

Indeed, the palpable enmeshing of life and work in Coetzee has been such that for me the particular insight brought by setting David Attwell's life-study alongside Kannemeyer's life, is not how much has been extinguished of the self or the life-experience, as how much remains. Kannemeyer to an extent assumes this: he finds in the memoirs an invitation to read the life as life, by and large straightforwardly, sometimes reductively. For example, he mines *Scenes from Provincial Life*, in particular *Boyhood*, as evidence for, amongst other things, Coetzee's ambivalent feelings towards his father, his love for the Coetzee family farm Voëlfontein, and the closeness of his relationship with his mother.[17] Attwell, by contrast, lays the published work alongside the drafts and notebooks to show how in many ways the work (taken as the sum total of everything

Coetzee has written, both published and unpublished), represents the hollowing out or even inversion of the life, yet a hollowing out that continues to bear the unmistakable imprint of that life.

The transposition of life-into-narrative that both Attwell and Kannemeyer from their different vantage points scrutinise is a tangible yet still elusive feature of the Coetzee oeuvre that I propose to call 'Coetzee effects', something that emerges from the embeddedness of the always-coded writing in the life. Here one thinks not only of the remote yet recognizable ('life'-like) portraits of *Youth*, but also, for example, of the anxieties about complicity with a political system expressed in *Waiting for the Barbarians* or *Life and Times of Michael K*, or of the intense and bitter mourning over a lost son in *The Master of St Petersburg* (which Attwell convincingly links to the period in Coetzee's life following the death of Nicolas his son).[18] As chapter after chapter of Attwell's study recognizes, J.M. Coetzee's heart is very much on the sleeve of his fiction. He is not interested in historical fiction; not interested in scene-setting, in description, or even in character. These disclaimers are reiterated across the notebooks. What he is interested in includes suffering, violence, truth, and identity, as filtered through the circumstances of his own life. Therefore, though his work is not autobiographical in any clear or straightforward way, it is everywhere identifiable as writing of the self; a life in writing that is paradoxically at once cryptic and candid.

Kannemeyer and Attwell: Lives and Writings

In this second section I consider how Kannemeyer and Attwell differentially address Coetzee's writerly life alongside his written-up life; how they approach questions of the truth of the self in the oeuvre of a writer who has himself confronted the question in depth. Setting methodological instances from the biography and Attwell's 'life of writing' alongside one another, highlights the complex nature of Coetzee's writing as (auto)biography, and of the fictional forms that such autobiography takes. Throughout, I will want to suggest that reading the two very different treatments of the life's work, and the life-work, in conjunction, illuminates something of that conjunction of life and work in Coetzee, and adds a further intertextual resonance to how these issues are already approached in the oeuvre. To adapt Brooks, the challenge any biographer of Coetzee faces is how to 'go back on a life [in and of writing]', yet without losing the sense that their subject retains a real-life dimension; that a life-in-writing remains a real life. For Kannemeyer, the challenge is confronted in the manner of a historian: his self-appointed task is not only to produce a biographical narrative about his subject but also to enlist that subject in a national history. For Attwell, the biographer remains in the end a literary critic and theorist. Yet, at the same time, the 2012 opening of the Coetzee papers at the Harry Ransom Center has led him to a more historical and bibliographical engagement with his subject than he might have imagined possible hitherto. His task (by his own admission) facilitated and enriched, but also complicated, by the quantity, detail, generic range, and careful organization of the papers, he has found his approach to Coetzee necessarily and correspondingly changed and re-inflected, entwined into the material reality of the author's relentless rewritings and re-readings.

John Kannemeyer's *J.M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing* was published in 2012 in South Africa, Australia and the European mainland, and in 2013 in Britain. The author had completed the book in the year before, and died on Christmas Day, seemingly at the point of finally completing the work. Others therefore, both editors and publishers, in consultation with critics including Attwell, prepared the book for publication, yet, though these preparations apparently included many cuts, the biography that emerged remains very much the work of John Kannemeyer: his temperate, steady if sometimes over-insistent voice is recognizable throughout. From the beginning, it is important to say, the subject John Coetzee complied with the project (as he did with Attwell's), to the extent of answering written questions and making his papers available to the biographer. He clearly did not disagree with the project of the biography as such, or with the fact of this particular literary historian undertaking it. The agreement is significant, given that Kannemeyer, an academic, prolific critic and biographer, had made his name with biographies of leading Afrikaans writers including Louis Leipoldt, Uys Krige and Jan Rabie.

Kannemeyer's *J.M. Coetzee* makes clear the tradition to which it subscribes from its very first pages—as indeed many biographies do. Its approach, it announces in so many words, will be chronological, genealogical and nationalist, sometimes even hagiographical—certainly not postmodern. For example, the entire opening chapter, entitled '"The labyrinth of my history": ancestry and roots', is devoted to detailing the family-tree of the Coetzees in South Africa, going back to the first families bearing this or an equivalent surname who emigrated from the Netherlands to the Cape in the 1600s. The task is explicitly first to consolidate the stature of John Coetzee as a great South

African, one who descends from the long Dutch colonial tradition in the country, and, secondly, to underwrite his status as a South African writer of Afrikaans background. Kannemeyer quite openly seeks to raise Coetzee up alongside the other Afrikaner and South African literary greats that he has so far addressed in his career. Yet to do this, of course, the biographer must to a considerable extent bracket or suspend much of what he knows of Coetzee's penetrating self-reflexivity, that would always seek to interrogate singular definitions and uni-linear histories such as these. Indicatively, throughout the first chapter on the genealogy and family background, the autre-biography, elsewhere so heavily relied upon as corroborating evidence, is left untouched.

For the purposes of this discussion of 'going back' on Coetzee 'in' and 'of writing', there are two predominant aspects of the Kannemeyer biography I want briefly to highlight, both of which underscore his privileging of fact over writing, or of the life as writing. First, I will consider the monumentalist quality of the biography, by which I mean those efforts throughout, but especially at first, to raise Coetzee up on a national pedestal (despite or perhaps because of the irksome fact of his relocation to Australia). The second aspect, also anticipated, relates to Kannemeyer's use of Coetzee's own memoir fiction or autre-biography as historical or biographical material, and his relative disregard, both in his discussion of the *Scenes from Provincial Life*, and of the work more generally, of the literariness of the writing—and this in respect of a writer as self-consciously literary as Coetzee.

In defence of Kannemeyer's monumentalist approach, it is the case that a large sub-section of literary biography involves setting writers up as national figures, whether writers come from smaller or minority nations (Ireland is a prominent example), and are

seen as speaking for the nation, or for facets of the national psyche (Yeats, Joyce), or whether writers come from nations with strong, binding national myth-traditions, such as America, but also Britain. For all that we live in transnational times literary biography encourages both its authors and its readers to think in national terms: writers, like leaders, are regarded as embodying the nation, emblematizing a national condition. The fact that several literary writers in Britain—Ian McEwan for example—felt moved to comment on the death in 2013 of Margaret Thatcher, reflects such assumptions. In South Africa, too, a significant number of literary writers have woven Nelson Mandela or Winnie Madikizela-Mandela into their work as motifs, bit-part actors or central characters (consider Lewis Nkosi's *Mandela's Ego*, Njabulo Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit*).[19]

In Kannemeyer, the project to write J.M. Coetzee into a national story is unambiguous, even ostentatious. Different overlapping genealogies of family, tribe and nation are presented in such a way as to include Coetzee at different points. By laying out an extended history of Dutch settlement at the Cape, and of the part played by some of Coetzee's ancestors in that history, the biography attempts to consolidate his Afrikaans pedigree—and so establish that he is a worthy writer in the Afrikaans tradition. To give only one representative example:

> Among the Dutch who settled in the Cape as early as the seventeenth century, was Dirk Couché, who later wrote his family name as Coetsé. Couché established the farm Coetzenburg on the banks of the Eerste River in Stellenbosch and later also acquired Assegai Bosch in the adjacent Jonkershoek. On the original title deed of Coetzenburg, dating from the decade 1682-1692, Johannes Mulder, the town's first *landdrost* (magistrate) and surveyor [is named].[20]

In literary biography, detailed genealogical work such as this is intended to produce national enlistment and reification on the levels of both family and community. The Coetzees are portrayed as landed, literate, respectable, and increasingly influential. Needless to say, such an account goes up against the *Relaas* or 'Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' in the second half of *Dusklands*, which gives the eponymous 18th century Coetzee a benighted role in the dark and brutish early colonial history of the Cape.

Are Kannemeyer's efforts to write John Coetzee into a national story convincing? In Coetzee's specific case, the task of national biography admittedly sets interesting challenges. From the time of his first two novels, *Dusklands* and *In the Heart of the Country*, through *Life and Times of Michael K*, up to his departure for Australia at the millennium, Coetzee has fostered a highly ambiguous, conflicted relationship with the nation of his birth. Sometimes he has erased the name South Africa from his work, or disguised it; at other times he has adapted and heavily allegorized the South African material he has used, as Attwell fascinatingly demonstrates in respect of, for instance, *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Across much of his career, he has tended to write at a distance from region and vernacular, and certainly from any form of national affiliation, an ambivalence that has everything to do with his conflicted relationship to his family and 'tribe', growing up English-speaking within an extended Cape Afrikaans family (who themselves experienced difficult relations with the Afrikaner nationalism that propelled the apartheid government into power in 1948).[21] It is such ambivalence—deepening with the emigration to Australia—that Kannemeyer emphatically seeks to overwrite. And it is this that then produces the unmistakable dissonance running through the biography, however well-founded its genealogy may be, as it attempts to enlist Coetzee

uncomplicatedly for South African letters. So it is telling that the chapter on Coetzee's Australian period bears the title, 'The "Australian" fiction', in which the scare quotes as it were claw the writer out of his adopted country, and thrust him back into the domain of South African national biography.[22] Predictably, the cursory discussions of *Slow Man* and *Diary of a Bad Year* in the chapter pay little to no attention to the Australian location and context of either work.

This mention of Kannemeyer's perfunctory critical reading turns me to the second aspect of the biography I wish to highlight, that is, what might most accurately (and perhaps contradictorily) be called its empirical and even unliterary approach; the uncomplicated relation that it assumes exists between fact and fiction or narrative. From the biography's first pages, it is immediately obvious that though the author has great respect for Coetzee as a literary craftsman, he does not himself feel qualified to offer critical commentary on the work. The novels are approached for their content, especially where the content coincides with evidence relating to the writer's life (in another example, a bicycle accident Coetzee experienced in Chicago is connected to Paul Rayment's fall from his bicycle in *Slow Man*). As Kannemeyer writes in the Preface, strong links exist between certain facts of Coetzee's life and events in his work, in particular in *Boyhood* and *Youth*, and these warrant his approaching the autobiographical writing as material. Following interviews with members of Coetzee's family, he goes on to say, he has in his 'account of Coetzee's childhood … allowed myself a certain liberty in regarding *Boyhood*, particularly, as based for the most part on verifiable facts'. Expanding, he then offers the following qualified self-justification, prompted by the reflexivity of *Summertime*:

> Any biographer of Coetzee would have to take careful account of this uncommon relation between fact and fiction, and of his relativising and elusive narrative strategies. He would have to consider the writer's evident shying away from authorial responsibility, and be wary of appropriating *Summertime*, in particular, to his project.[23]

It is a smokescreen caveat, however, that clears the way for Kannemeyer's appropriation of *Boyhood* and *Youth* by way of evidence—an extensive appropriation, not just the citation of a fact or two. Especially across Kannemeyer's chapters dealing with Coetzee's childhood and youth, though the references to the memoir fictions are habitually accompanied by some form of qualification, this is almost at once suspended or rescinded in how the memoir's evidence is used. For example: 'When reading a memoir, one bears in mind that it transcribes impressions and memories differing in time from the actual experience; **even so**, this burgeoning feeling is very evocatively expressed in *Boyhood* [my emphasis]'.[24] In short, Kannemeyer's chief interest is in literal 'Coetzee effects' in so far as these can read off from the fiction. Aesthetic and stylistic aspects of the writer's work, including questions of *ars poetica*, literary development and influence, are addressed exclusively through the medium of critics' reviews and commentaries, which at certain points are quoted at length. As for the emergence of Coetzee's literary ambitions, this is to be inferred mainly from the fact that he contributed sports journalism to the St Joseph's College magazine and read T.S. Eliot as a university student. The topic of his wider reading (for which there is ample evidence in the papers), or of the writers he chose as models in these early years, is left well-nigh unaddressed.

Kannemeyer's avoidance of the subject of literariness is perhaps never more obvious than when he resorts to critical determinism in respect of Coetzee's aesthetic or use of language, such as in his claim that Coetzee's spare style is moulded by the sere

environment of the Karoo: 'Here, in the allure of a naked, barren earth, without adornment or embellishment, may perhaps be found one inspiration for the mature Coetzee's sparse prose style with its sparing use of words'.[25] By contrast, Coetzee critics like Jarad Zimbler read his sere style as a product of a deliberate process of reduction, forged in stages from novel to novel.[26] Indeed, the degree to which Kannemeyer as biographer subscribes to a severe, even minimalist portrayal of the writer raises the speculation that the self-protective Coetzee may have felt drawn to Kannemeyer as his first biographer precisely because he was aware that by doing so he might keep his writerly persona *and* his personal privacy relatively intact (with the added advantage of being reclaimed for his birth-nation at a time when he was widely perceived to have abandoned it). Therefore, though it may be the case, in the words of Ann Jefferson, that one of the main tasks of the biographer is 'to ensure that his subject can no longer be regarded as an unknown quantity', this is an undertaking that Kannemeyer resolved ultimately to sidestep.[27] The irony that follows from this is that his knowing autre-fictional subject always keeps in some sense one step ahead of the biographical narrative, as is most obviously the case at those points—those many points—where the biographer leans on the subject's own self-aware life-narrative.

Kannemeyer's approach frequently walks him into one of the biographer's pitfalls described by David Foster Wallace, namely, prospecting 'for personal stuff encoded in the writer's art'.[28] In David Attwell's account of Coetzee's life 'in writing', the situation goes the other way about: for him, the writer's art encodes the negative of the personal stuff, the mould or imprint but not the substance. Also by contrast with Kannemeyer, Attwell is concerned with oblique Coetzee effects over Coetzee facts, in so far as these

reflect the life wrought and re-wrought in writing. Yet he does not, as this suggests, entirely let go of the role of biographer; rather, as he describes in his preface, he tries to be an empiricist and a meta-textual analyst at the same time. Faced with the serried materials that comprise the Coetzee archive, he recognizes that he has perforce to make an empirical turn, while still approaching his task in a self-reflexive and formalist way. His focus is on the life, *and* on how the art encodes the life, no matter how obliquely; on how the self is woven into, and then out of, the work. To interpret these encodings, he approaches each of Coetzee's published fictions armed with a set of working hypotheses, like provisional road maps or navigational devices (such as that *Life & Times of Michael K* reworks Heinrich von Kleist's *Michael Koolhaas*). Yet, though each one of these road maps is necessarily partial (as in, other readings, too, might be posited), they are nonetheless derived from references gleaned from the material archives, the notebooks themselves.

As Attwell observes in his preface, he is interested in Coetzee's life (and in his archive) in so far as it has bearing on his authorship: his concern with 'the life of the writing' could equally be taken as a study of 'the life *in* the writing' (as opposed to Kannemeyer's 'life of writing'): a life, importantly, shaped by 'history *in extremis*', deformed by apartheid.[29] Writing brings understanding of that deformation, yet also to some extent extinguishes the understanding. In his notes for *The Master of Petersburg* Coetzee observes, in words that Attwell cites: 'A story is like a road. What do we hope to find at the end of the road. Oneself. One's death'.[30] The finding of the self and its obliteration are equated. Writing in an earlier chapter about the making of *Life & Times of Michael K*, Attwell further notices how this most self-reflexive and metafictional of Coetzee's

writings is in fact full of self: 'for Coetzee metafiction has an autobiographical implication in so far as it is about the book's being written. … self-consciousness in the narration marks the place where the need to define oneself is most acute'.[31]

To pinpoint this complex interplay of self-representation and self-evacuation in Coetzee, we might consider some of his observations on the Karoo, that Cape Afrikaner heartland, formative place of memory, substratum of his creativity. As Attwell notes, the shifts in the distance maintained between the writer Coetzee and Coetzee himself, or 'J.M. Coetzee' and J.M. Coetzee, in his evocations of the Karoo, chart the contours of his bedrock identity. Even as the space is constantly being overwritten, erased or distorted by history, it is also where his work 'really attains its full significance'.[32] Narrative clarity for Coetzee comes where his self-consciousness is at once nakedly exposed, yet most deeply encoded. Whereas Kannemeyer's concern was (counter-intuitively perhaps) with the literal of Coetzee's 'life in writing' (and love of landscape), for Attwell his fiction involves a stripping away of the literal to the end of finding himself: 'beginning with the ordinary, it involves a determined process of deliteralization'. Yet that process and that writing remains throughout seamed through with the self.[33] Small wonder then that Coetzee was taken early on by Eliot's idea of the artist's impersonality, his sense that the work that goes into producing an art-work involves a process of self-extinction, or, perhaps more precisely, a self-revealing writing out of the self.

Conclusion: Coetzee's life-writing

Coetzee's life-writers to date, John Kannemeyer and David Attwell, dance a complex counterpoint around the dynamics of authorship in his work. Always mindful of retaining the novelist's cooperation with their project, they observe from their different standpoints both Coetzee's writerly and his life-writerly effects, his Coetzee effects. Though Attwell more obviously than Kannemeyer, they both approach the question of how the autre-fiction, or 'everything [the author] writes', has written him. Kannemeyer would not so faithfully pursue the mirroring of life and work if he did not sign up to this understanding to some extent. Mr Vincent the fictionalized biographer in *Summertime* repeatedly comes up against the ways in which the facts relating to his subject, such as he gleans from his five interviews, obscure and resist the deeper truths of his subject's selfhood, and yet represent the sum-total of the material he has to work with. Therefore all life-writing is 'a mode of reading as much as it is a type of writing', in the words once again of Philippe Lejeune.[34] As Vincent makes repeated attempts to go back on the life of the dead writer Coetzee, in a Sisyphus-like struggle to fix its slippery, permanently unfixing definitions, his narrative turns the mirrors of interrogation back from the writer to the biographer, and asks difficult questions about how we approach and read the life encased within the work. Does the writer have a life beyond the work? What does it mean for the life to be represented as objectified narrative, considering that narrative was the life's work?

As these questions suggest, Coetzee is never unaware of the paradox that to construct a life, including a life in writing, writing and language are the only tools the writer has to hand. It is an awareness he shares with his biographers, both the nationalist historian and the now-bibliographic post-structuralist. The 'real self' must be created through contrivance; truth becomes a product of story. Indeed, as Coetzee has shown in novel

after novel, from *Foe* to *Age of Iron*, from *Michael K* to *Slow Man*, it is where we are most fictional, most given to producing fibs, fakes and forgeries, that we can most fully explore and expose the truths of the self.

Yet, ultimately, neither the life in nor of writing can capture, or not as precisely as can critical reading, the tireless concern with stylistic precision that Coetzee practices and thematizes throughout his writing—a precision to the end of capturing life-truths that must always in the end elude him. To close, I cite an illuminating passage from *Boyhood* that neither of Coetzee's life-writers above considers, even though it presents as a self-reflexive allegory on self-reflexive craft, and as such sheds light on Coetzee's two life-long passions, cricket and writing: 'the truth of life' and how to get to it.[35] I refer to the short passage where 'John' describes a bowling contrivance he invents so that he is able to play cricket in the backyard by himself, and, effectively, with himself, as his brother is too young and his mother too clumsy to participate.

> He cuts a jam-tin in half and nails the bottom half to a two-foot wooden arm. He mounts the arm on an axle through the walls of a packing-case weighed down with bricks. The arm is drawn forward by a strip of inner-tube rubber, drawn back by a rope that runs through a hook on the packing-case. He puts a ball in the tin cup, retreats ten yards, pulls on the rope till the rubber is taut, anchors the rope under his heel, takes up his batting position, and releases the rope. Sometimes the ball shoots up into the sky, sometimes straight at his head; but every now and again it flies within reach and he is able to hit it. With this he is satisfied: he has bowed and batted all by himself, he has triumphed, nothing is impossible.[36]

If John Coetzee's ingenious cricket machine can be read as an object lesson for how he views the work of literature, then it is clear that he regards as an achievement the ability to play at the truth of life by himself, and by contrivance. It is as clear a sign as can be

found in the oeuvre that the essence of identity (as well as of pleasure) can only be attained through cunning and invention.[37]

---

[1] David Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face to Face with Time* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2015), p. 225.

[2] Tim Parks, 'In some sense true', *London Review of Books* 38.2 (21 January 2016), pp. 25-8.

[3] David Attwell, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 17-18; also p. 63. See also J.C. Kannemeyer, *J.M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2012), pp. 7-8. For this article I have also consulted the Dutch translation: *J.M Coetzee: Een Schrijversleven*, trans. Joost Poort (Amsterdam: Cossee, 2012), pp. 10-11.

[4] Parks, 'In some sense true', *London Review of Books*, p. 28.

[5] J.M Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (London: Harvill Secker, 2003), pp. 12-13.

[6] Coetzee (2002), p. 32.

[7] Judith Lutge Coullie, *Selves in Question: Interviews on South African Auto/biography* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006). See Paul Auster, *Winter Journal* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2012).

[8] Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses* (Manchester: MUP, 1994), p. 203.

[9] Coetzee's *The Good Story: Exchanges on Truth, Fiction and Psychotherapy* (London: Secker, 2015), his dialogues with the psychotherapist Arabella Kurtz, once again explores questions as to how the truth of the self might paradoxically be found through and by means of something as untrue as narrative or story.

[10] Max Saunders, *Self-impression: life-writing, autobiografiction, and the forms of modern literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010), p. 179. A closely related genre is that of biofiction or biographical fiction, defined as literature that names its protagonist after an actual biographical figure. See Michael Lackey, *Truthful Fictions: Conversations with American Biographical Novelists* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

[11] David Shields, *Reality Hunger* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), pp. 57, 59.

[12] See Alasdair Macintyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1985).

[13] Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1984), p. 33; Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses,* p. 197.

[14] Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, trans. Katherine Lackey (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 4. Quoting Lejeune in connection with Coetzee's memoirs, Margaret Lenta, 'Autrebiography: J. M. Coetzee's *Boyhood* and *Youth*', *English in Africa* 30.1 (May 2003), pp. 157-169, observes that the work of 'autrebiography' leads the writer to experiment with genre, and invites the reader to an ambiguous reading (p. 160).

[15] Derek Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 102.

[16] Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing*, p. 150.

[17] Kannemeyer, *J.M. Coetzee*, p. 43, for example.

[18] See Attwell*, J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing*, pp. 187-210, for a persuasive though understandably reticent discussion of *The Master of Petersburg* as a working through of Coetzee's grief following the loss of his son Nicolas in 1989. From my own research at the Harry Ransom Center in January 2016, the sense of bereavement that runs through the early MSS versions of *The Master of Petersburg* (for example: Coetzee papers, Box 33, file 8) is palpable, deeply saddening and sometimes uncontrolled.

[19] Lewis Nkosi, *Mandela's Ego* (Cape Town: Umuzi, 2006), Njabulo Ndebele, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2003), Achmat Dangor, *Bitter Fruit* (London: Atlantic, 2003).

[20] Kannemeyer, *J.M. Coetzee*, p. 18, but see also, for instance, pp. 17 and 22.

[21] J.M. Coetzee , *White Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), explores many of these national ambivalences in literary and mythopoeic terms. See, for example, pp. 7-8. In the early versions of *Youth* held in the Coetzee papers at the Harry Ransom Center (Box 31), the young Coetzee's discomfort with being a white South African in London, and hence being both provincial and politically marked, is perhaps more palpable even than in the published version of the memoir.

[22] Kannemeyer, *J.M. Coetzee*, p. 575.

[23] Kannemeyer, *J.M. Coetzee*, p. 9.

[24] Kannemeyer, *J.M. Coetzee*, p. 39. For another example, see also p. 27.

[25] Kannemeyer, *J.M. Coetzee*, p. 46, 66.

[26] Jarad Zimbler, *J.M. Coetzee and the Politics of Style* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2014).

[27] Ann Jefferson, 'Thought Life', *TLS* 5737 (15 March 2013), pp. 9-10.

[28] Thomas Meaney, 'Planet Trillaphon' (Review on David Foster Wallace), *TLS* 5737 (5 March 2013), pp. 3-5.

[29] Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee*, pp. 17-18, 28.

[30] Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee*, p. 31.

[31] Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee*, p. 139.

[32] Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee*, pp. 64-78, 95.

[33] Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee*, p. 147.

[34] Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, p. 30.

[35] J.M. Coetzee, *Boyhood* (London: Secker, 1997), p. 54.

[36] Coetzee, *Boyhood*, pp. 29-30.

[37] This idea of identity as contrivance is central also to Coetzee's most recent fiction, *The Childhood of Jesus* (London: Secker, 2013).